

TREASURES FROM THE ROYAL TOMBS OF UR

WOOLLEY AND THE GREAT FLOOD

THE MESOPOTAMIAN TRADITION OF THE FLOOD

The story of a devastating flood is a key element in a number of Mesopotamian compositions. In the literary-historical work popularly known as the Sumerian King List, which probably dates in its original form to the early second millennium BC, a flood separates antediluvian dynasties ruling from the cities of Eridu, Babtibira, Sippar, Larak, and Shuruppak, all of whose kings had reigns of fantastic length, from a longer list of dynasties ruling from nine different cities, the first after the flood being Kish. After Kish, kingship was transferred to Uruk and the later kings of the dynasty include Enmerkar, Lugalband, and Gilgamesh, figures well known from Mesopotamian literature.

The epic of Atrahasis, written in Akkadian, can be dated by colophon (scribal identification) to the reign of Hammurabi's great grandson, Ammi-saduga (1646-1626 BC), and it continued to be copied into the first millennium. In the epic, Enlil, the senior deity of the pantheon, plots to reduce the number of humans, whose noisy vitality was such that Enlil could not sleep. When his plans to wipe out the human race using various plagues are thwarted, Enlil decides on a flood. Enki, the god of fresh water, known for wisdom, as he had in the case of the plagues, betrays Enlil's plan to Atrahasis, the king. Atrahasis, his family, and his possessions, as well as animals and birds, ride out the flood that lasted seven days and seven nights in a reed boat coated with bitumen. On disembarking, Atrahasis makes offerings. The mother goddess condemned the chief gods Anu and Enlil for the destruction and tried to exclude them from the offerings. Enlil is furious when he discovered that even a few humans had survived and he blamed Enki. Enlil eventually gave way and permitted the human race to continue, but he required that Enki and the mother goddess organize them better, probably to spare him the noise.

The Sumerian flood story is preserved on a six-columned tablet from Nippur (B 10637), only the lower third of which is preserved. The complete original would probably have had 260 lines. The tablet can be dated by its script to the late 17th century BC. The story inscribed on the tablet deals with the creation of humans and animals, the antediluvian cities and their rulers, and the flood. This clay tablet, now known as the Nippur Tablet, is displayed in the exhibition.



NIPPUR TABLET.

(80K)

In the episodes preserved, Enki reveals the gods' plan to destroy the human race with a flood to Ziusudra and urges him to heed his advice. The wind and storms come and with them the flood, which lasts for seven days and seven nights before the sun returns. Ziusudra emerges from his boat and offers sacrifices. Enki mollifies the gods, and An and Enlil grant Ziusudra life like a god's.

The story of the flood in the Gilgamesh Epic (Tablet XI), known from first millennium copies, is probably derived from Atrahasis. In seeking to learn the secrets of eternal life, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, seeks out Utnapishtim, the only human to have lived forever. In telling Gilgamesh how he achieved eternal life, Utnapishtim relates a secret story of the flood. The story opens in Shuruppak, where the great gods decide to wipe out the human race with a flood, but Ea (Akkadian name of the Sumerian god Enki) reveals the plans to Utnapishtim, and tells him to build a great boat. Utnapishtim does as he is told and loads all his possessions, including silver and gold, his family, domesticated and wild animals, and craftsmen onto the boat. The storm comes; the gods cower and weep at its destructive force. The storm rages for six days and six nights; on the seventh day it subsides. The seas calm and, as Utnapishtim observed, all mankind had returned to clay and the landscape was leveled. Eventually, mountains appear and Utnapishtim's boat comes to rest on Mount Nisir, where it holds fast for six days. On the seventh day, Utnapishtim comes out and sends

out a dove and then a swallow, both of which return, having found no place to rest. On the third day, he sends out a raven, which does not return. Utnapishtim then offers sacrifices, which attract the gods, but when Enlil sees the boat he becomes furious that a human had survived. Ea calms him, and Enlil then boards the boat and makes Utnapishtim and his wife like the gods, living forever.

The Biblical flood story (Genesis 5: 28 - 9:17) was likely derived, directly or indirectly, from the Gilgamesh version. And the story of the flood was carried down in later Jewish, Christian, and even Muslim traditions, where it occurs in the Koran (Sura 11: 25-48).

WOOLLEY AND THE FLOOD

The excavation of the Royal Cemetery provided a large area cleared to a depth of 10-13 meters below the surface of the ruin mound and compelled Woolley to investigate Ur's earlier occupation levels. As he wrote, "... the treasures recovered from its graves illustrated a civilization of astonishingly high order and it was therefore all the more important to trace the steps by which man had reached that level of art and culture."

Woolley began digging into Ur's earlier levels already in 1928-29, with several small soundings below the floors of excavated burials. One such sounding, located near the "Great Death Pit" (PG 1237), yielded a dramatic discovery: a 3.70 meter (ca. 12 feet) thick layer of water-laid clay that sealed strata containing painted pottery of the Ubaid period, the earliest known phase of occupation in southern Mesopotamia. His other soundings had yielded similar, if shallower, deposits and Woolley quickly associated the strata with the flood known from the Sumerian King List, the Akkadian Epic of Atrahasis, the Sumerian flood story (the only known copy of which is on display here), and the Epic of Gilgamesh, the likely source for the Biblical flood narrative. Woolley announced his discovery quietly to the Directors of the British Museum and the University of Pennsylvania Museum at the end of January 1929, and made a public splash with a story in the London Times on March 16, 1929, shortly after the excavations had ended for the year.

Woolley's flood, sensational as it may have been, had to compete for public attention with evidence of another flood (more accurately, floods) discovered at Kish, in the

northern portion of the floodplain. The upper Kish flood was later in date than Woolley's discovery, in fact roughly contemporary with Woolley's royal tombs. The Kish flood strata had apparently been discovered before Woolley had discovered his flood, and the Kish excavators felt that Woolley had cheated them of credit for the discovery of the flood. In a letter to the Director of the Field Museum dated March 20, 1929, Stephen Langdon, Director of the Field Museum-Oxford University Joint Expedition to Kish, pointed out that Woolley had been at Kish on January 26-27 and Charles Watlin, Field Director of the Kish excavations, had shown him the alluvial deposits. When Woolley returned to Ur, he discovered his own alluvial deposit and claimed credit for the discovery of the flood in the popular press without mention of Kish.

In reassessing the evidence for the flood, Max Mallowan, Woolley's assistant at Ur, who married Agatha Christie, argued that neither the Ur flood, dating as it did to a remote prehistoric period, nor the upper Kish flood, so late in time, could be the source of the Mesopotamian narratives. Instead, he suggested that a flood layer discovered at Fara (ancient Shuruppak) in the University of Pennsylvania Museum's 1931 excavations might lie behind the Mesopotamian legends. Mallowan cited literary traditions linking Shuruppak and the flood, as well as the likely identification of Ziusudra, king of Shuruppak, with Ziusudra, hero of the Sumerian flood story. Other archaeologists have noted that the date of the Fara flood, late Early Dynastic I (ca. 2750 BC), corresponds closely with the dating of the archaeological levels that have yielded the oldest inscription of an historically attested king.

Today, archaeologists and language specialists alike doubt that the Ur, Kish, or even Fara floods could be the source of the Mesopotamian flood narratives, and prefer to take them merely as evidence for the endemic hazard posed by floods in the flat alluvial plain of southern Mesopotamia.

WOOLLEY IN HIS OWN WORDS

Starting then below the level at which the graves had been found we sank a little shaft, no more than five feet square at the outset, into the underlying soil and went down through the mixed rubbish that is characteristic of old inhabited sites a mixture of decomposed mud brick, ashes, and broken pottery,

very much like that in which the graves had been dug. This went on for about three feet and then, suddenly, it all stopped; there were no more potsherds, no ashes, only clean water-laid mud, and the Arab workmen at the bottom of the shaft told me that he had reached virgin soil; there was nothing more to be found, and he had better go elsewhere. I got down and looked at the evidence and agreed with him, but then I took my levels and discovered that 'virgin soil' was not nearly so deep down as I had expected, for I had assumed that the original Ur was built not on a hill but on a low mound rising only just above the surrounding swampy land; and because I do not like having my theories upset by anything less than proof I told the man to get back and go on digging. Most unwillingly he did so, again turning up nothing but clean soil that yielded no sign of human activity; he dug through eight feet of it in all and then, suddenly, there appeared flint implements and fragments of painted al'Ubaid pottery vessels. I got into the pit once more, examined the sides, and by the time I had written up my notes was quite convinced of what it all meant; but I wanted to see whether others would come to the same conclusion. So I brought up two of my staff and, after pointing out the facts, asked for their interpretation. They did not know what to say. My wife came along and looked and asked the same question, and she turned away remarking casually, "Well, of course, it's the Flood." That was the right answer.

- C. Leonard Woolley: *Excavations at Ur*.
New York: Apollo Editions, 1965, p. 27

EXCERPTS FROM MESOPOTAMIAN AND BIBLICAL FLOOD STORIES

NIPPUR TABLET

...a flood will sweep over the cult centers;
To destroy the seed of mankind...
Is the decision, the word of the assembly of the gods.
By the word commanded by An and Enlil...

All the windstorms, exceedingly powerful, attacked as one,

At the same time, the flood sweeps over the cult centers.

**After, for seven days and seven nights,
The flood had swept over the land,
And the huge boat had been tossed about by the
windstorms on the great waters,
Utu came forth, who sheds light on heaven and earth,
Ziusudra opened a window on the huge boat,
The hero Utu brought his rays into the giant boat.**

- Sumerian clay tablet, late 17th century BC

THE STORY OF ATRAHASIS

**Enki made his voice heard...
Dismantle the house, build a boat
Reject possessions, and save living things.
The boat that you build...
Make upper and lower decks.
The tackle must be very strong,
The bitumen strong, to give it strength
I shall make rain fall on you here.**

**The Flood roared like a bull,
Like a wild ass screaming the winds
The darkness was total, there was no sun...
For seven days and seven nights
The torrent, storm and flood came on..**

- Akkadian, ca. 1640 BC

EPIC OF GILGAMESH

**For six days and seven nights
The wind blew, flood and tempest overwhelmed the land;
When the seventh day arrived the tempest, flood and
onslaught
Which had struggled like a woman in labor, blew
themselves out.
The sea became calm, the imhullu-wind grew quiet, the
flood held back.
I looked at the weather; silence reigned,
For all mankind had returned to clay...**

**I opened a porthole and light fell upon my cheeks..
Areas of land were emerging everywhere**

The boat had come to rest on Mount Nimush.

- Assyrian version, 7th century BC

HOLY BIBLE

CHAPTER 6

- 6:5** And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.
- 6:6** And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.
- 6:7** And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.
- 6:8** But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD.
- 6:13** And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth.
- 6:14** Make thee an ark of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch.
- 6:17** And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die.
- 6:18** But with thee will I establish my covenant; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons' wives with thee.
- 6:19** And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou bring into the ark, to keep them alive with thee; they shall be male and female.
- 6:20** Of fowls after their kind, and of cattle after their kind, of every creeping thing of the earth after his kind, two of every sort shall come unto thee, to keep them alive.
- 6:21** And take thou unto thee of all food that is eaten, and thou shalt gather it to thee; and it shall be for

food for thee, and for them.

6:22 Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he.

CHAPTER 7

7:17 And the flood was forty days upon the earth; and the waters increased, and bare up the ark, and it was lift up above the earth.

7:23 And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark.

7:24 And the waters prevailed upon the earth an hundred and fifty days.

CHAPTER 8

8:4 And the ark rested in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, upon the mountains of Ararat.

8:5 And the waters decreased continually until the tenth month: in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, were the tops of the mountains seen.

8:6 And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made:

8:7 And he sent forth a raven, which went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth.

8:8 Also he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground;

8:9 But the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him into the ark, for the waters were on the face of the whole earth: then he put forth his hand, and took her, and pulled her in unto him into the ark.

8:10 And he stayed yet other seven days; and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark;

8:11 And the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf plucked off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth.

- 8:12** And he stayed yet other seven days; and sent forth the dove; which returned not again unto him any more.
- 8:15** And God spake unto Noah, saying,
- 8:16** Go forth of the ark, thou, and thy wife, and thy sons, and thy sons' wives with thee.
- 8:17** Bring forth with thee every living thing that is with thee, of all flesh, both of fowl, and of cattle, and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth; that they may breed abundantly in the earth,
and be fruitful, and multiply upon the earth.
- 8:18** And Noah went forth, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him:
- 8:19** Every beast, every creeping thing, and every fowl, and whatsoever creepeth upon the earth, after their kinds, went forth out of the ark.

- Book of Genesis (King James Version)