

The Flood: Two Accounts

One of the oldest stories in the world tells of a great flood that decimated the lands and peoples of the earth, an event that can be traced to the warming of the earth's climate at the end of the last Ice Age. Many ancient cultures told versions of this story, and two of these are excerpted below. The first, included in the Epic of Gilgamesh, was written down during the first half of the third millennium B.C.E., making it at least 1,500 years older than the similar account in the Hebrew Bible. But both are probably the products of much older storytelling traditions. The hero of the Sumerian story is Utnapishtim. The Hebrew story's hero is Noah.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

tnapishtim spoke to Gilgamesh, saying: "I will reveal to you, Gilgamesh... a secret of the gods... The hearts of the Great Gods moved them to inflict the Flood. Their Father Anu uttered the oath (of secrecy)... [But the god] Ea... repeated their talk [to me, saying]: 'O' man of Shuruppak, son of Ubartutu: Tear down the house and build a boat!... Spurn possessions and keep alive living beings! Make all living beings go up into the boat. The boat which you are to build, its dimensions must measure equal to each other: its length must correspond to its width. Roof it over like the Apsu.' I understood and spoke to my lord, Ea: 'My lord, thus is the command which you have uttered. I will heed and will do it.'... On the fifth day I laid out her exterior. It was a field in area, its walls were

each 10 times 12 cubits in height... I provided it with six decks, thus dividing it into seven (levels)... Whatever I had I loaded on it... All the living beings that I had I loaded on it. I had all my kith and kin go up into the boat, all the beasts and animals of the field and the draftsmen I had go up.

"I watched the appearance of the weather—the weather was frightful to behold! I went into the boat and sealed the entry... All day long the South Wind blew..., submerging the mountain in water, overwhelming the people like an attack... Six days and seven nights came the wind and flood, the storm flattening the land. When the seventh day arrived... [t]he sea calmed, fell still, the whirlwind and flood stopped up... When a seventh day arrived, I sent forth a dove and released it. The dove

went off, but came back to me, no perch was visible so it circled back to me. I sent forth a swallow and released it. The swallow went off, but came back to me, no perch was visible so it circled back to me. I sent forth a raven and released it. The raven went off, and saw the waters slither back. It eats, it scratches, it bobs, but does not circle back to me. Then I sent out everything in all directions and sacrificed (a sheep). I offered incense in front of the mountain-ziggurat...

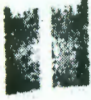
"The gods smelled the savor... and collected like flies over a sacrifice... Just then Enlil arrived. He saw the boat and became furious... 'Where did a living being escape? No man was to survive the annihilation!' Ea spoke to Valiant Enlil, saying... 'How, how could you bring about a Flood without consideration? Charge the violation to the violence

cor, charge the offense to the offender, but be compassionate lest (mankind) be cut off, be patient lest they be killed' Enlil went up inside the boat and, grasp-

ing my hand, made me go up. He had my wife go up and kneel by my side. He touched our forehead and, standing between us, he blessed us.

Source: Maureen Gallery Kurvas, trans., *The Epic of Gilgamesh: Tablet XI* (Stanford, CA: 1985, 1989), pp. 97-103.

The Book of Genesis

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth and ... said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created ... for I am sorry I have made them." But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord. ... God saw that the earth was corrupt and ... said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end to all flesh. ... Make yourself an ark of cypress wood, make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch. ... Make a roof for the ark, and put the door of the ark in its side. ... For my part I am going to bring a flood on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh. ... But I will establish a covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you. ... Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten." ... All the foun-

tains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened. ... The waters gradually receded from the earth. ... At the end of forty days, Noah opened a window of the ark ... and sent out the raven, and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground, but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned. ... He waited another seven days, and again sent out the dove [which] came back to him. ... and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf, so Noah knew the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he ... sent out the dove, and it did not return to him anymore. ... Noah built an altar to the Lord ... and offered burnt offerings. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind ... nor

will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done." ... God blessed Noah and his sons.

Source: Genesis 6:5-9:1, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford: 1994).

Questions for Analysis

1. What are the similarities and differences between these two accounts?
2. What do these differences or similarities reveal about the two societies that told these stories? Does one seem to derive from the other? Why or why not?
3. How is the geography and climate of Mesopotamia reflected in the Sumerian version of the story?