

**READING ATRAHASIS TABLET 3 AND GILGAMESH TABLET XI ALONGSIDE
THE GENESIS FLOOD STORY IS A VALUABLE EXERCISE IN THE STUDY OF
GENRE, METHODOLOGY AND BIBLICAL THEOLOGY. COMMENT**

Name: E Philip Davis

Tutor: Dr D Sheriffs

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1 Introduction

One of the most striking findings of modern archaeology has been the unearthing and deciphering of Mesopotamian tablets, found to record stories akin to those of Genesis, notably the flood story. This in turn raises the issue of the interrelation between these materials. If the Bible authors used or were at least aware of the Mesopotamian material, a comparison could be a helpful exercise in assessing the genre of the Biblical flood story and devising methodology for investigating it. It could also help understanding of the Biblical theology of the Genesis story. We evaluate these points successively.

2 Content and precedence of the texts

Genesis is congruent with the Babylonian stories, with 17 common elements¹ such as the divine warning, preparing the vessel, saving of animals and a sacrifice. This gives a basic justification for comparison. On the other hand, unlike Genesis, Gilgamesh and Atrahasis tablets share whole sections of text verbatim, suggesting they are much more closely related than Genesis is to either.

A further primary issue is whether the Bible story was prepared later than the Atrahasis and Gilgamesh materials. If the latter were derived from the former, the interest in studying them would be much diminished. The Atrahasis tablet is dated 1700 BC,² but the material is thought to date from much earlier. The Gilgamesh story was thought to be first written down in 2150 BC but relates to a character in Uruk in 2700 BC, although Wenham³ suggests that

¹ Wenham, Coherence, p446

² Dalley, Myths, p3

³ Wenham, Genesis, p159

the flood only entered the epic in 1650 BC, copied from Atrahasis, and the version of Gilgamesh used today dates from 650 BC.

On the other hand, even the tradition that Genesis was written down by Moses would suggest a dating not much earlier than 1200 BC, while suggestions that Genesis dates from the monarchy would put it around 1000 BC. Furthermore, there is evidence that the Flood story was known in Palestine in pre-Israelite times (a fragment of Gilgamesh from Megiddo dating from the 14th Century BC), and some scholars suggest “the traditions that lie behind the primeval history...were brought from Mesopotamia by migrating groups in the first half of the second millennium”.⁴ Since Genesis was formalised later than Atrahasis or Gilgamesh, and may rest on their traditions, there is a stronger basis for comparison.

One cannot be definitive about direct dependence. Dalley suggests that “the possibility of several independent origins cannot be dismissed”.⁵ The texts could link to reports of a single flood in ancient Mesopotamia around 3500 BC, reaching Israel via the oral records of Abraham and his successors, and not indirectly via Atrahasis or Gilgamesh. An intermediate possibility is that the details of the Mesopotamian material were used to embroider a pre-existing flood story in the Israelite tradition. Millard⁶, however, suggests that this is unlikely beyond possibly the historical framework since “large scale revision, alteration and reinterpretation...cannot be substantiated for any other composition from the Ancient Near East or in any other Hebrew writing”.

⁴ Bright, Israel, p89

⁵ Dalley, Myths, p7

⁶ Millard, Babylonian, p127

On balance, we support the common source view but consider it likely the final editors of Genesis were aware of versions of the Mesopotamian texts⁷, which renders a cautious “reading the texts alongside” a useful exercise in principle.

3 Assessing the genre of Genesis

In form criticism, a key question is whether Genesis is a myth, and if not, what type of material it is. Drane⁸ defines myth as first, a story about gods and goddesses acting as if human; second, describing what takes place during a religious rite, and third, expressing a truth about human life not adequately described by science or history. Comparison shows the genre of the Genesis flood much more clearly than evaluation of a sole text.

Gilgamesh appears to be a mythical tale of gods on the first definition. However, Ut-napishtim only tells facts he knows or that fit his storytelling needs. All cosmic and anthropological significance under the third definition is omitted from the story as a consequence. Meanwhile Atrahasis is a more theological, but still mythical text which seeks to explain the nature of the world, the role of the gods and the fate of humankind. It thus fits both first and third definitions. Note that besides myth per se, the Mesopotamian stories have characteristics of epic heroic tales, with their strong focus on the principal human character and on the catastrophic events of the flood. Cassuto⁹ suggests that Atrahasis was a “kind of incantation for easing women’s birth pains”.

⁷ In this context, “eating and drinking” of the doomed before the flood is not in Genesis but is in Atrahasis and Gilgamesh. Intriguingly, in Matthew 24:38, Jesus states “people were eating and drinking... up to the day Noah entered the ark”. Did Jesus deduce this, or were the Mesopotamian myths still available in folklore as late as 30 AD?

⁸ Drane, *Old Testament*, p262

⁹ Cassuto, *Genesis*, p12

The Genesis story, while closer to the Atrahasis material in terms of wider context, appears rather different in genre. It seeks to present what are seen as historical events in a more factual narrative manner with, as discussed in Section 4, less figures of speech and less anthropomorphic material. It has much more detailed dating than the Mesopotamian stories, and seeks to clarify cause and effect. Some differences offer greater scientific realism such as rain for 40 and not 7 days to generate a catastrophic flood. Hence, it removes many features of myth, and also those of an epic heroic tale – as Noah’s role is completely downplayed.

There remain common aspects of genre – the texts are pre-scientific, for example in terms of seaworthiness of the vessel. There are shared elements of symbolism – perhaps including the saving of animals and birds, and in Genesis in the rainbow as a symbol of the covenant.

Drawing on the above comparisons, we would suggest that Genesis is a “phenomenological theological account” that illustrates theological truth in the context of a genuine event, albeit with some symbolism and important poetic elements aimed at theological emphasis, as discussed in Section 4 below. Equivalently, as Wenham suggests, Genesis can be seen as a “proto-historical narrative”,¹⁰ while Birch suggests a “story of the past”¹¹ linking an ordinary and familiar world with God’s actions.

4 Methodology for investigation

The assessment of genre above is a first step in devising an appropriate methodology to investigate the documents to draw conclusions. Given our assessment of genre, we focus on structural, literary and historical aspects.

¹⁰ Wenham, Genesis, p166

¹¹ Birch, Theological, p39

One method is a structural comparison of the stories to seek parallels as detailed in Section 2. There, having found that there are sufficient parallels for valid comparison, we found it worthwhile to undertake a further historical study to eliminate the possibility that the Mesopotamian materials depend on Genesis.

Comparison of structure can go further than seeking simple parallels, to include a comparison of the balance between different elements in the story, giving us clues about the theme. Here we can observe that Genesis takes less time describing the flood and the human drama (sorrow of the hero, bodies floating) while much more scope is given to the reason for the flood and, particularly, to the outcome (blessing and covenant). Both are omitted from Gilgamesh, and are brief in Atrahasis. Hence we detect by such comparison that the overall theme of the Genesis story is the cause and consequence more than the event.

The amount of speech given to the hero relative to the divinity is another telling aspect. In Genesis, Noah does not speak at all, whereas there is extensive quotation from Atrahasis and Ur-napishitim. This highlights that God is the focus of the Biblical text, while the Mesopotamian tales are more about humankind in a way we might miss in focus on Genesis alone.

Comparison of dramatic details also highlight this contrast of human- versus god-centred narrative and also give insight into motives and character. For Mesopotamian heroes, shutting the door of the vessel themselves, deceiving the citizens about the flood and being proud of achievements in building the Ark all show self-driven motives. They show emotion at the devastation. In Genesis it is God who closes the door on Noah. The unmoved Noah makes no

comments on the situation whatsoever, nor does he need to deceive his counterparts but follows God's orders. Obedience to God is clearly the key motive.

Comparing meanings of names gives further insight – the self reliant Atrahasis (exceedingly wise) and Ut-napishtim (finder of eternal life) are opposed to the passive Noah (rest). In Genesis one God is referred to by two names, as *YHWH* the personal God and *Elohim* the universal creator.¹² The polytheistic Mesopotamian stories have many names for gods.

We can usefully compare the studies in terms of the anthropomorphic approach to the divinities. God is shown to have emotions as a human, such as grieving and remembering, and actions such as smelling. This is in line with but much more limited than the Mesopotamian material, where the gods swear oaths to each other, have personal parts in all forces of nature active in the flood (rumbling and marching) and human reactions (weeping and anger with one another). Limited anthropomorphism emphasises God as personal but not sharing humanity's weaknesses. It may also suggest a desire to use anthropomorphism to "explain as to a child" rather than being an indicator of pantheism/polytheism and myth.

Furthermore, using linguistic comparison we see many more figures of speech in the Mesopotamian stories (gods cowering like dogs, gathering like flies, a storm like a woman in labour) while the Genesis account seeks to be factual (rain fell on the earth, the flood kept coming, the waters rose). Poetry enters rather in terms of devices making theological points, such as repetition for emphasis, e.g. of God's judgement, and parallel writing emphasising God's change of mind and his grace (the inclination of man's heart is the same in 6 and 8 but the resolve to kill is reversed). There is also the Palistrophe structure¹³ of the whole text with

¹² Cassuto, Genesis, pp35-36

¹³ Wenham, Coherence, p438

“God remembered Noah” as the hinge between the waters rising and departing, highlighting how it is God’s intervention that saves Noah. This highlights that the Genesis story sets out to be proto-historical narrative expressing theological truth rather than being mythical and epic.

A historical methodology in textual comparisons gives us pointers to find what actual events lay behind the Genesis story. The discovery of evidence of a flood in Mesopotamia in 3500 BC, together with the provenance of Atrahasis and Gilgamesh (Section 2), gives grounds to see Genesis as based on historical events, but which involved a local rather than global flood. Indeed, Gilgamesh talks of the “flood plain” as though the flood described is explicitly local. It also solidifies the view that the accounts have some interrelation.

Besides helping with theological insights discussed below, the comparative methods suggest that in source-criticism the traditional documentary hypothesis of Genesis may be incorrect for the Flood.¹⁴ Notably, why should the overall text have 17 similarities with Mesopotamian stories and the “subcomponents” P and J have much less?¹⁵

5 Insights into theology

The comparison of the texts in the light of genre, and using elements of the above methodology, shows a strongly differing theological background, and helps to illuminate the theological intention of the Israelite author in a way that would be less clear were the Genesis text viewed alone.

¹⁴ See also Cassuto, Genesis, p34-45

¹⁵ We have also argued that repetition taken to indicate separate sources is for poetic effect, while the Palistropic structure suggests unity, and name-references to YHWH and Elohim seen traditionally as from separate texts are carefully chosen in each case to refer to aspects of God (personal God versus creator).

Genesis is clearly a polemic in favour of monotheism. Whereas the Biblical description has a single all-powerful God who creates the Flood, the other material involves pantheons of gods, who all contribute to the story, decide by committee to make a flood and disagree among themselves. This would be less noticeable if Genesis were viewed separately.

In Genesis, God does not depend on humanity, they are totally dependent on him. He can choose to wipe humankind from the face of the earth without any harm to himself; he transcends creation. He smells but does not consume the sacrifice (Noah's sole independent act). Noah is commended for simple obedience, and it saves his life. We see this by contrast with the dependence of the Mesopotamian gods on humankind for work and sacrifices – they become famished when no sacrifices are made. The self reliance of humans in the Mesopotamian stories is typified as Ut-napishtim's vessel requiring a boatman to navigate it while the Genesis ark is under God's guidance.

The character and potency of God also comes out more clearly by contrast. The Mesopotamian gods deceive one another as Ea/Enki betrays the secret of the flood to Ut-napishtim/Atrahasis. Ea encourages Ut-napishtim to lie to his townsmen. Equally, the Mesopotamian pantheon of gods is shown as frail and inadequate as the flood becomes too powerful for them to control, "cowering against the wall like dogs". They are "fearful, ignorant, greedy and jealous"¹⁶ as well as partial and irritable, like humankind. In contrast God, although also personal, is consistent, just and merciful. He reflects before acting. He confirms his omnipotent strength and mastery over what he has created in his ability to

¹⁶ Wenham, Genesis, p165

unleash and control the flood – his breath being sufficient for the waters to fall, echoing Genesis 1:2.¹⁷

The ethical justification for the Flood is illuminated by comparison. In Atrahasis this relates to overpopulation and selfish divine irritation, with no words to justify it (in Gilgamesh no reason at all). In contrast, in the Biblical account it links to sin, and in particular the blood guilt arising from murder. God is sorry and grieves he made humanity but is not angry. As suggested by Frymer-Kensky¹⁸, the spilling of blood on the earth led to its cursing and barrenness, and need of cleansing. This is underlined by the sanctity of life in the Noahic covenant. In Gilgamesh and Atrahasis the “conclusion” is rather that lifetimes are to be shortened and some women infertile, i.e. it seeks to account for some features of reality rather than teaching ethical lessons. One man is arbitrarily made immortal, blurring the distinction of human and divine. The renewed command in Genesis to be fruitful and multiply is a direct rejection of the idea that overpopulation was the original issue.

In this context, the wider message of the Genesis text is God’s justice; that humanity’s self-will leads to sin and separation from God, that only God’s initiative can heal. God makes a rational judicial decision based on evidence (6:11-13); the creation has ruined itself, so the punishment is to be total ruin – the punishment fitting the crime. Noah is saved for his righteousness; others are seen as all guilty and deserving their death in the flood. This is highlighted by contrast again. In Gilgamesh the hero, who shows no particular virtue, rescues his money as well as his family, animals and “all kinds of craftsmen”; he is saved by chance because he worships the right god. As Ea accuses Enlil, there is no justice since his flood

¹⁷ Further discussion of the link of flood to creation, while highly theologically relevant, involves looking beyond the material in the title to other tablets of Gilgamesh and Atrahasis and the whole of Genesis. Crucially the comparison shows that the Flood is not an addition to a pre-existing creation story (Millard, *Babylonian*, p15) and hence it is valid to look at them as part of a cycle.

¹⁸ Frymer-Kensky, *Atrahasis*, pp152-153

failed to distinguish the sinner from the righteous. In Atrahasis there is again no particular link to justice or sin, with the gods acting on “capricious and unpredictable self interest” with a disproportionate punishment for “noise”,¹⁹ perhaps to resolve inter divine rivalries. Sarna²⁰ notes that it was revolutionary for people to be judged for socio-moral offences as in Genesis and not idolatrous or cultic ones – a contrast brought out by the comparison of the three texts also.

Despite God's anger with humankind's sin, he provides grace and salvation in Genesis. The ark and the rainbow after the flood symbolise God's love and willingness to forgive. His people, unreformed, deserved to die in the waters of judgement and chaos, yet his mercy and commitment to humanity could not be changed. God makes his peace available to all people – as well as the rest of his creation - along with his salvation and grace by his covenant with Noah. There is no clear promise not to repeat the flood in the Mesopotamian tales, nor could a guarantee be reached in a polytheistic system. God's forgiveness contrasts sharply with the anger of the god Ellil that any humans had survived his flood. The blessing in Gilgamesh – Ut-napishtim's eternal life – is “devoid of universal significance,....message of comfort for mankind or promise for the future”²¹.

6 Conclusion

We have argued that the texts were based on a common source, and the Old Testament authors were probably aware of versions of Atrahasis or Gilgamesh. We have found comparison a helpful exercise, in that the contrasts with the Mesopotamian tales give us clues as to the genre of Genesis and help us in selecting a methodology of investigation. Most

¹⁹ Drane, Old Testament, p265

²⁰ Sarna, Understanding, p53

²¹ Sarna, Understanding, p57

importantly, the comparison highlights the main foci of the Genesis material – humankind’s sin, one omnipotent God, his justice and his grace – by their absence from the other material.

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