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The Function of Myth within Noah's and Utanapishtim's Stories: A Comparative Analysis of the Deluge in *Genesis 6-9* and *the Epic of Gilgamesh Tablet XI*

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ABSTRACT

Ancient stories which depict similarities in their details of the narrative can be found in various cultures and civilization. Two stories that look similar to each other are the ancient text of The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Biblical book of Genesis. The deluge, observed in both stories, seems to have an impact towards the ever-famous discussion of which story is more authentic. This article gives a comparative analysis of both stories. The aim of this study does not concern with such discussions, rather arguing how both stories, after investigating the similarities and differences, generates a myth—which may come from a factual history—for their respective people and culture, preserving cultural history, rational conducts, and religious rituals of each culture concerned.

Keywords: *Genesis, Epic of Gilgamesh, Noah, Utanapishtim, Ancient Text, Mythology*

INTRODUCTION

It is fascinating to explore how many of the same stories, mostly ancient ones, can be found in different cultures and languages. A story that has its similarities in many cultures is the legend of great flood. In fact, Mark Isaak has an extensive list of flood legends across the continents (Isaak, 2002). Two of the prominent and ancient flood stories familiar in our ears are the stories from the epic of Gilgamesh and the biblical story of Noah and his ark. Many studies have argued that the epic of Gilgamesh resembles the Bible's story of Noah's Ark, or vice versa.

The epic of Gilgamesh originates from twelve fire-hardened mud tablets which was written in cuneiform, based on the Mesopotamian culture around 2.500 BCE. This epic poem is regarded as the earliest surviving great work of literature. In summary, this epic can be divided into two halves. The first half mainly discusses the great king of Uruk, Gilgamesh, and his adventures with Enkidu, an enemy that eventually befriended Gilgamesh. The second half of the epic tells the story of Gilgamesh after the loss of Enkidu, his dearly departed friend. Gilgamesh is distressed about his own death and undertook a perilous journey for discovering eternal life. Eventually, he meets an immortal Utanapishtim, who tells his own journey about a great flood and his story of becoming eternal living with the gods.

In the biblical story, Noah is one of the prominent characters in the book of Genesis. He is the representation of the patriarch, who was chosen by God, to confront the human race and their

wickedness by means of great flood. God instructed Noah to build an ark and took with him species of the world's animals to replenish the earth. The traditions of great apocalyptic flood run deep in the characters of Utanapishtim and Noah. Utanapishtim is introduced in the Tablet XI of the Gilgamesh epic who, like Noah, survived a deluge by following the divine instructions to build an ark. In this essay, I compare the two stories where hints of the commonalities and crucial differences of flood are evident.

NOAH VS. UTANAPISHTIM

The story of Noah is found in the Book of Genesis. This is the first book in the Hebrew Bible and the first book in the Christian Old Testament (Hamilton, 1990: 1). It is the Judaism's account concerning the world creation and the origins of its people (Sweeney, 2012: 657). The flood is depicted specifically in the chapters 6-9. Throughout these chapters we have the textual biblical basis of the flood narrative. In these chapters, Noah is portrayed as a righteous man, and is faithful to the supreme deity in Judaism, Yahweh. Yahweh sees the corruption of the human race, whose hearts and deeds are filled with violence. Yahweh instructed Noah to build an ark so that he and his family, along with the male and female of all living animals, would be saved from the deluge.

As with Utanapishtim, this character is found in the second half of the Gilgamesh epic when Gilgamesh, the protagonist, is riddled and burdened in dealing with death. Tablet XI is the primary source concerning Utanapishtim and the deluge. In the effort to escape death and search for immortality, Gilgamesh's journey found its way to the doorsteps of Utanapishtim. Gilgamesh is given the secrets and knowledge pertaining to eternal life. Based of the story written in Tablet XI, Utanapishtim is the survivor of the deluge in the Babylonian epic. He was the only person to escape death, and preserved the human race and animal life in the great boat he built. By these deeds, he is blessed by Enlil and is granted immortality.

Of these biblical narrative and Gilgamesh epic, there are found similarities and differences. (The biblical text referred to in this study is the New International Version; the narrative of Utanapishtim is the translations of Maureen Gallery Kovacs and his simple but accurate translation of Tablet XI [Kovaks, 1998]).

The flood

In Tablet XI, the first mention of the flood is in the 15th line, "The hearts of the Great Gods moved them to inflict the Flood". This is the secret that Utanapishtim shares to Gilgamesh and Utanapishtim received such warning by Ea. "Ea, the Clever Prince(?), was under oath with them [the councils of the gods] so he repeated their talk to the reed house" (line 20). Ea told Utanapishtim through a reed wall of a reed house. The coming of the flood is clearly shown in the tablet. In Genesis, by contrast, Noah was warned by Yahweh, "I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both of them and the earth. So make yourself an ark" (6:13-14). The mention of the flood is implicit where Yahweh is going to end mankind and gives Noah the order to make an ark. From both texts, here we can see the similarities about the coming of the flood and its warning from the respective gods.

The differences between the two texts, however, are also evident. In Tablet XI, the reason why the gods sent flood is absent, while in the Bible the reason is given. In the former, as many, on the basis of various sources and translations, argue, the reason of the flood is that of excessive human noisiness that troubles the gods to sleep (but such depiction is not mentioned specifically in Tablet XI). In the latter, Genesis mentions that Yahweh "saw how great man's wickedness on the earth was… God was grieved that he had made man on the

earth" (6:5-6), so God "will wipe mankind … from the face of the earth" (6:7). In relation to this coming calamity, a further question can be raised with regard to the reason of why, of all the people living in their respective time, Noah and Utanapishtim were the "chosen ones". In the tablet, the details on the worthiness of such information about Utanapishtim seems absent. In Genesis, by contrast, it is written that "Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God" (6:9). This reason of Noah's rightousness and blamelessness are in contrast with the wickedness of his contemporaries (6:11-12). Due to his righteousness, Noah is deemed worthy to carry out the divine plans.

As the flood was revealed, the characters' response to such news for his neighbors and contemporaries can then be learned. In Genesis, however, such an account is absent, although there are hints that Noah, the "preacher of righteousness", warned his neighbors of the upcoming calamity (as is in the New Testament: 2 Ptr. 2:4-5). In Tablet XI, by contrast, Utanapishtim was told by Ea to deceive his neighbors so that they may continue to help him finish his boat. The calamity brought forth from the flood was to be told as a good omen or blessing for the people.

Ea spoke, commanding me, his servant:

'You, well then, this is what you must say to them: "It appears that Enlil is rejecting me so I cannot reside in your city (?), nor set foot on Enlil's earth.
I will go down to the Apsu to live with my lord, Ea, and upon you he will rain down abundance, a profusion of fowl, myriad(!) fishes.
He will bring to you a harvest of wealth,
in the morning he will let loaves of bread shower down, and in the evening a rain of wheat!'" (line 37-47)

One profound way of how the flood covered the earth was by the pouring storm and rain. Both stories tell about a storm, but the account of rain covering the land differs in details, especially in the terms of duration. The tablet mentions, "When the seventh day arrived, the storm was pounding … The sea calmed, fell still, the whirlwind (and) flood stopped up" (line 135 and 137). In the Gilgamesh epic, the rain causing the flood lasted for seven days. In contrast, Genesis tells a different duration, "And rain fell on the earth for forty days and forty nights" (7:12). The whole flood duration is also different. The tablet mentions, "When the seventh day arrived I sent forth a dove and released it" (line 156-157) (after the pouring rain for seven days). So, the whole duration of the Babylonian flood was 14 days. Meanwhile, Genesis mentions "In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, on the seventeenth day of the second month—on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened" (7:11). By this, we learn that Noah's flood lasted for 370 days.

Clearly, both texts mention flood as a doom device for human race, but further explorations of the details show differences in terms of: 1) the reason the gods sent the flood, 2) the absence of reasoning why Utanapishtim was the one given the flood revelation, 3) the absence of Noah's response for his contemporaries after the flood information was revealed, 4) the differences in the length of days the storm and rain impacted the flood, and 5) the whole flood duration.

The Ark

The next similarity the two stories have in common pertains to the ark or boat as a means of salvation. In the tablet, after revealing the information of the upcoming flood to Utanapishtim, Ea directly gave him instructions to "Tear down the house and build a boat!" (line 24). In Noah's account, the same instruction was given after Yahweh gave his reason for destroying mankind, "I am surely going to destroy both of them and the earth. So make yourself an

ark" (6:13-14). The logic of both stories is well in check where the means to survive a deluge was in the making of an ark. The ark holds a significant role in both stories and now we continue to search the differences of the ark within each story.

The first difference is concerned with its size. Both stories mention the length, the width, and the height of it. In the tablet, "its walls were 10 times 12 cubits in height, the sides of its top were of equal length, 10 times its cubits each" (line 57-58). It is also mentioned that "its dimensions must measure equal to each other: its length must correspond to its width" (line 29 and 30). In Genesis, the size of the ark is stated, "the ark is to be 450 feet long, 75 feet wide and 45 feet high". In the description of the size, the shape is seen differently; Noah's ark is more of a rectangular-shaped boat, while Utanapishtim's is much more of a square or cube. Within each ark, decks are created for compartments and spaces. In Genesis, the description of the decks reads, "Put a door in the side of the ark and make lower, middle, and upper decks" (6:16). In the tablet, Utanapishtim himself "provided it with six decks" (line 60). So, the number of decks is different, a comparison of 3 and 6 decks. The character who closes the ark's door is also different. In Genesis, "the animals going in were male and female of every living thing", as God had commanded Noah. In the tablet, the LORD "shut him in" (7:16) where Shamash told Utanapishtim to "go inside the boat, [and] seal the entry" (line 93).

The different description of who or what enters the ark is also noticeable. As with the humans entering the ark, Genesis records, "But I will establish my covenant with you, and you will enter the ark—you and your sons and your wife and your sons' wives with you" (6:18). In the tablet, Utanapishtim "had all my kith and kin go up into the boat … and the craftsmen I had go up" (line 87-89). In the Noah story, the people who entered the ark were exclusive, only limited to Noah and his direct family, such as his wife, sons, and daughters-in-law. In the Gilgamesh epic, more people entered the boat, not just eight, meaning that it is not only exclusively his own family and kin, but also the craftsmen of the ark as well. In terms of what possessions that entered the ark, both accounts mentioned the preservation of animals to bring them into it. Genesis 6:19 affirms this, "You are to bring into the ark two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you." In the tablet, we see the preservation of animals as it reads, "all the beasts and animal of the field" shall enter the boat. In addition to humans and animals, the tablet also mentions that Utanapishtim's wealth was to be brought in the boat as well. "Whatever I had I loaded on it: whatever silver I had I loaded on it, whatever gold I had I loaded on it." In Genesis, such mentioning of material wealth is absent, but the possibility of Noah's loading his wealth into the ark as Utanapishtim did might also make sense.

Both texts mention the ark or boat as a means of salvation. Differences in details appear with respect to: 1) the size and the shape of the ark or boat, 2) the sum of the decks inside, 3) the character who closes the ark's door, 4) the sum of people entering the ark, and 5) the material wealth preserved by Utanapishtim and the absence of such preservation by Noah.

The Aftermath

Eventually, the flood receded and both accounts tell this in each narrative. The important means of telling the decline of the flood waters is the sending of the birds. This is quite interesting in details. While both texts do claim the role of birds in telling the decline of the waters, differences in detail persist. In the tablet, here is the account of Utanapishtim:

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. (line 156-165) In Genesis, the account of sending off the birds is mentioned in Ch. 8:6-12:

Noah opened the window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth. Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded from the surface of the ground. But the dove could not find no place to set its feet because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He reached out his hand and took the dove and brought it back to himself in the ark. He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove from the ark. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf! Then Noah knew that the water had receded form the earth. He waited seven more days and sent the dove out again, but this time it did not return to him.

The most unique feature of similarities of both accounts probably lies in the release of birds to detect the receding waters. Some significant differences are apparent between the two, however. In the tablet, the first bird sent by Utanapishtim is a dove, whereas in Genesis, Noah sent out a raven first. The second bird sent in the Gilgamesh epic is a swallow, while in Genesis it is a dove. The third bird sent out by Utanapishtim is a raven, while in Genesis it is the dove, which is sent out again, the return of which brings along with it an olive leaf. In Genesis, the dove is sent out the third time and it does not return.

Both stories also conclude with an offering after the flood. After the recession of the waters, "Noah built an altar to the LORD and, taking some of all the clean animals and clean birds, he sacrificed burnt offerings on it" (8:20). In the Gilgamesh, Utanapishtim "sent out everything in all directions and sacrificed (a sheep). I offered incense in front of the mountain-ziggurat. Seven and seven cult vessels I put in place, and (into the fire) underneath (or: into their bowls), I poured reeds, cedar, and myrtle" (line 166-171). The details of the offerings were also different. The Gilgamesh epic describes the offering of sheep and wines. Meanwhile, in Genesis, Noah gives burnt offerings of all the clean animals on the ark, but no drink offering. Although it may seem unusual thing to do, the cultures of offering at the time would be deemed as an act of appreciation (thanksgiving).

One possible explanation for the multiple ancient passed on across generations of different cultures and preserved in the form of myths. Myth is a story from ancient times, especially one which narrates supernatural events or describes early history of a people. It is a story about supernatural characters (gods, goddesses, or spirits) used to validate their belief system, understanding of the world, or practical religious observance in life (Maduka, 2000: 52). The story in Genesis and the Gilgamesh epic "serves to explain (in terms of the intentions and actions of deities, other supernatural beings, and heroes) why the world is as it is and things happen as they do to provide a rationale for social customs and observances and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives" (Abrams, 2005: 206).

CONCLUSION

We have flood accounts is that the flood was a real event in the history of mankind, and was examined the similarities and differences between the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Genesis account of flood in the Bible. There are a number of similarities and differences between the two. Differences and similarities pertaining to the details would also be found in many

more ancient flood accounts by locality around the Middle East.

Passed on from one generation to the next, both accounts can be conveniently preserved as myths. In this frame, similarities found in the story of Noah and that of Gilgamesh may confer similar roots of history and geographical location. In terms of differences, each story provides a rationale of conduct and rules for how people live and how religious beliefs are constructed—one in the social construct of Judaism and the other in an old Babylon society. The realization of myth as a means of providing basis of cultural history (the flood story), creating rational conduct and rules (the making of the ark), and religious practices and beliefs (the aftermath of flood by giving sacrifices and offerings) will result a more fruitful and beneficial discussion of ancient stories. It outweighs the discussion or debates about which version of the story is the most authentic or famous, or from which a similar version might be merely copied.

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