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## The Bible Vs. Gilgamesh In The Flood

The story of the flood in Genesis 6-9 in the Old Testament is familiar to the readers of the Bible, but the record of such a flood first appears much earlier in ca. 2,500 B.C. on the eleventh tablet of the Mesopotamian epic of *Gilgamesh*. Although thousands of years stand in between the Bible and *Gilgamesh*, the story of the flood prevails; the authors of the Bible mirror the flood of *Gilgamesh* in Genesis. The flood is significant to the Bible and makes an appearance in Genesis because it carries values of human life and piety, and messages about the relationship between God and mankind. The Biblical flood follows closely to the *Gilgamesh* flood, but the two are not identical. Comparing and contrasting the two stories of the flood, the authors of the Bible mimic much of the mythical flood, but also change and innovate certain pieces of the plot. Both similarities and differences between the flood in *Gilgamesh* and the flood in Genesis matter because they tell us what values and messages of the flood the authors of the Bible wanted to preserve from the Mesopotamian epic and communicate to the readers of the Bible, and what values and messages the authors of the Bible wanted to change about the Mesopotamian epic, why, and what these changes mean.

The story of the flood in the epic of *Gilgamesh* and Noah's flood in Genesis share a series of similarities. First, the flood is a result of godly anger and/or disappointment with mankind. In *Gilgamesh*, Enlil is disturbed by man's clamor and uproar. In Genesis, God repents his creation because it has become wicked and evil. Second, two men, Utnapishtim of the epic of *Gilgamesh* and Noah of Genesis, are chosen to be saved from the flood and given instruction on how to survive. In *Gilgamesh*, Ea tells Utnapishtim to "tear down his house and build a boat, abandon possessions and look for life." In Genesis, God finds grace in Noah and tells him to "make thee an ark." Third, Utnapishtim and Noah save their relatives and samples of species of land animals. In both stories the instruction is to bring "two of every sort [of living thing of flesh] into the ark." And finally, after the flood subsides there is a sacrifice where the Babylonian gods and the Biblical God feel sorry about and/or regret the flood. In *Gilgamesh*, Ishtar cries "I commanded wars to destroy the people, but are they not my people, for I brought them forth? Now like the spawn of fish they float in the ocean," and later with Ea chastises Enlil for "senselessly bringing the flood without reflection...and consigning [Ishtar's people] to destruction. In Genesis, God promises "never to curse the ground for man's sake and smite every living thing again...day and night shall not cease."

The similarities between the *Gilgamesh* flood and the Biblical flood show the values and messages the authors of the Bible preserve from the Mesopotamian era and pass on to the readers of the Bible. First, much like the mythical Mesopotamian flood, the Biblical flood presents a world where mankind angers the god(s) that created it, and where disobedience is

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met with dire results. Mankind is corrupted and intolerable, and evil beyond reproach, and the divinity is set to exterminate it. This demonstrates not only the fact that men are capable of sin and that they should keep pious, that is, they should never abuse their God and drive him to his limit, but also that God ultimately holds the power over men and can do with men what is suitable or even what he pleases. This reveals that the authors of the Bible wanted to preserve an image of a strong and powerful God, one who can exhibit his power and punish his people when the situation calls for it. Second, in both flood stories the divinity chooses a man to save himself, his family, and a number of land animals. Though both the gods of *Gilgamesh* and the Biblical God send the flood to wipe out all life, there is a clear message; men must die, but humanity is meant to survive and continue, animals are meant to multiply, and earth is meant to be fruitful again. This part of the flood story communicates a very important value, that there are second chances, because no matter how mankind has angered its god(s), the god(s) still finds it within himself to give humanity another chance. This second chance demonstrates that though men will do bad and they will be punished for it, God is not all vengeful, he is loving enough to forgive and start over again. Finally, like in the flood of *Gilgamesh*, in the Biblical flood God feels sorry for sending the flood and regrets it. This puts the divinity in a better light with men; god(s) is caring and compassionate after all, and most of all admits to his own misdoings. The gods in *Gilgamesh* regret the flood almost immediately and “when Utnapishtim prepares a sacrifice the [gods] gather like flies” because they depend on humans to eat. The God in the Bible especially is portrayed to lament his actions because though he exterminated evildoers, these evildoers were still his people. The authors of the Bible wanted to show that God, just like men, is responsible for his actions, and he must also think of the consequences of his actions. When god(s) feels sorry for the flood in the end, the conclusion is meant to teach a lesson not only to mankind, but also to God, and the message is to foster a new, better relationship between men and their god(s), one where both parties respect one another. The similarities that lay in common between the flood of *Gilgamesh* and the flood of Genesis shows that the authors of the Bible saw an important lesson they wanted to preserve and teach to the readers of the Bible; men should respect their God and God will respect them, and men need God as much as God needs men. It predates the Bible and Genesis, but it is the staple of Christian theology to this day.

The story of the flood in the epic of *Gilgamesh* and Noah's flood in Genesis also differ. These differences show the values and messages the authors of the Bible change about the Mesopotamian epic. First, the gods of *Gilgamesh* send the flood without a reasonable cause, whereas the Biblical God sends the flood as a punishment. The Babylonian gods, though they form the decision in a counsel, are never in consensus about the flood. Ishtar says that she will “remember these days as she remembers the jewels on her throat, that these last days she will not forget.” Ea, and all the rest of the gods except Enlil seem to have never agreed with the flood as a suitable punishment; Ea proclaims, if man has sinned, punish him, but punish him a little or he will perish...a lion, a wolf, famine, pestilence would have ravaged mankind rather than

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the flood,” in other words the punishment does not fit the crime. Enlil is left alone to blame, and his decision to send the flood is ultimately a mere impulse. In Genesis, God brings the flood as a form of a punishment, there is a reason for the flood, and the object of the punishment is plain. God makes a rational verdict because he is motivated by an ethical reason; he punishes the corrupt, but saves the righteous. The authors of the Bible see in the Mesopotamian epic gods who are dangerous to mortals, who play by their own rules, and act as emotionally and irrationally as children, sending the flood to kill all of mankind on a mere caprice. Genesis has one God, he is neither dangerous nor childlike. God is a rational, an ethical, and a thinking god, who is not only what is most powerful, but also what is morally best. And most importantly God sends the flood not because men are too noisy, but because he “repents his creation...and it grieves him at his heart.” Another difference on the topic of divinity is certain actions of the gods in and around the flood. One difference is how the Babylonian gods behave during the flood; “the gods are terrified at the flood, they flee to the highest heavens, crouch against the walls, and cower like curs...Ishtar cries like a woman in travail.” The *Gilgamesh* gods are fearful and weak, whereas God is strong and determined, he is not made to fear his own flood and look weak or vulnerable. Another difference or rather omission in this case that the authors of the Bible make is when Utnapishtim asks god Ea how to answer the people and the city when he will perform Ea's commands. Ea directs Utnapishtim to tell the city this: “Enlil is wrathful against me and I will no longer live in his land, so I will go down to the Gulf of dwell my lord Ea ... but to you Ea will rain down abundance of rare fish, wild fowl, rich harvest ... and wheat’.” This of course is false, and Ea is the one who promotes the lie. What makes this even worse is the irony of the situation, that is, Utnapishtim promises his city an abundance of fish and fowl and rich harvest where really all the city is going to get is the flood. Genesis omits this part of the story, God is not made to promote falsehood, and Noah simply builds the ark and boards it. But there is a better explanation for this, and it is the difference between Utnapishtim and Noah.

A third important difference lies between Utnapishtim and Noah. Utnapishtim is not selected to survive the flood based on any virtue, he merely owes his survival to Ea's cleverness. The gods do not distinguish men who are worthy to be punished from men who are not, reverence and piety have no effect on who lives and who dies and why Utnapishtim is chosen to survive. Noah, on the other hand, is selected by his grace, God chooses him because of how good of a man Noah is compared to the rest of mankind. His righteousness and piety matter. Utnapishtim also loads all of his gold into his boat. The authors of the Bible make no reference to gold in Genesis to avoid placing any emphasis on gold, because the focus of the Biblical flood is the survival of life, and life alone, not wealth.

The final difference between the flood in *Gilgamesh* and the flood in Genesis is the ending scene of the story, the last interaction between the survivor and his God(s). The gods in *Gilgamesh* make an error sending the flood to exterminate mankind and try to atone for it by making Utnapishtim and his wife immortal so that humanity is never in danger of extinction

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again. The immortality aspect of the story demonstrates not only that gods fear they are harmful to humanity because they cannot control their actions, but also that something like the flood may reoccur, so immortality is the safest way mankind survives its gods. God in Genesis, in contrast, makes a covenant with his people, they are to behave and be good and God will be good in return according to the covenant. Thus, God is a partner in a covenant and a strict but loving parent. He does not need to make Noah immortal to make sure humanity survives, but instead simply builds mutual trust between man and himself, and that is enough for mankind to coexist with God and live on.

When composing the story of the flood in Genesis, the authors of the Bible mimic much of the earlier mythical flood in *Gilgamesh*. In fact, the two stories are so similar that it becomes significant to see exactly what values and messages, that the story of the flood carries, Genesis borrows from the epic, and in turn preserves from the ancient Babylonian era. And that is, god(s) are powerful and vengeful, but also caring and loving, and men should respect their god(s) and god(s) will respect them. However, as similar as the two stories of the flood are, there are differences, and these differences are peculiar because they tell us what the authors of the Bible wished to omit, innovate, or change about the original. It is with the differences, that we see that the two stories of the flood, though again similar in plot, happen to promote two very different moral dimensions. While the lesson in the *Gilgamesh* flood is that though human life is brief and men die, humanity continues and gods are a reminder of a man's place in the large scheme of things, the lesson in the Biblical flood is that there is a powerful but caring God who fosters a relationship with men in which he rewards the good and punishes the bad.

—References—

The Epic of Gilgamesh. The Flood.

The Bible. The Great Flood.

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