



May 2014

# A Literary Analysis of the Flood Story as a Semitic Type-Scene

Jared Pfost

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua>

 Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#), [Classics Commons](#), [History Commons](#), and the [Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons](#)

## BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Pfost, Jared. "A Literary Analysis of the Flood Story as a Semitic Type-Scene." *Studia Antiqua* 13, no. 1 (2014).  
<https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/studiaantiqua/vol13/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the All Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Studia Antiqua* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact [scholarsarchive@byu.edu](mailto:scholarsarchive@byu.edu), [ellen\\_amatangelo@byu.edu](mailto:ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu).

## A LITERARY ANALYSIS OF THE FLOOD STORY AS A SEMITIC TYPE-SCENE

JARED PFOST

*Jared Pfof* is a student at Brigham Young University studying ancient Near Eastern studies who will begin a PhD program at Brandeis this fall. This essay won first place in the annual ancient Near Eastern studies essay contest.

Mesopotamian texts provide more direct comparative evidence for the Hebrew flood story in Gen 6–9 than they do for any other part of the Hebrew canon. The similarities and differences have been analyzed extensively ever since the discovery of the Mesopotamian texts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The question of the historicity of the biblical flood and its relationship to its Mesopotamian forerunners is often at the heart of the discussion: is the biblical version a historical report or simply a reworking of earlier deluge accounts?<sup>1</sup> In this paper I will compare the flood stories

---

1. The literature on the relationship of the biblical flood story to the Mesopotamian flood stories is voluminous. See Alexander Heidel, *The Epic of Gilgamesh and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949), 224–69; W. G. Lambert, “New Light on the Babylonian Flood,” *JSS* 5 (1960): 113–23; Lambert, “A New Look at the Babylonian Background of Genesis,” *JTS* 16 (1965): 287–300; A. R. Millard, “New Babylonian Genesis Story,” *TynBul* 18 (1967): 3–18; Eugene Fisher, “Gilgamesh and Genesis: The Flood Story in Context,” *CBQ* 32 (1970): 392–403; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “The Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for Our Understanding of Genesis 1–9,” *BA* 40 (1977): 147–55; Frymer-Kensky, “What the Babylonian Flood Stories Can and Cannot Tell Us about the Genesis Flood,” *BAR* 4 (1978): 32–41; Robert A. Oden, “Divine Aspirations in Atrahasis and in Genesis 1–11,” *ZAW* 93 (1981): 197–216; Oden, “Transformations in Near Eastern Myths: Genesis and the Old Babylonian Epic of Atrahasis,” *Religion* 11 (1981): 21–37; William Shea, “A Comparison of Narrative Elements in Ancient Mesopotamian Creation-Flood Stories with Genesis 1–9,” *Origins* 11 (1984): 9–29; Jeffrey H. Tigay, “The Image of God and the Flood: Some New Developments” in *Studies in Jewish Education in Honor of Louis Newman* (ed. Alexander M. Shapiro and Burton I. Cohen; New York: KTAV Publishing House, 1984), 169–82; David Toshio Tsumura, “Genesis and Ancient Near Eastern Stories of Creation and Flood: An Introduction,” in *“I studied inscriptions before the flood”: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11* (ed. Richard Hess and David Toshio Tsumura; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 27–57; Edward Noort, “The Stories of the Great Flood: Notes on Gen. 6:5–9:17 in its Context of the Ancient Near East,” in *Interpretations of the Flood* (ed. Florentino Garcia Martinez and Gerard P. Luttikhuisen; Leiden: Brill, 1998), 1–38; Richard M. Davidson, “The Genesis Flood Narrative: Crucial Issues in the Current Debate,” *AUSS* 42 (2004): 49–77; Gary A. Rendsburg, “The Biblical

in Tablet III of the Old Babylonian *Atrahasis Epic*, Tablet XI of the Standard Version of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the Genesis account.<sup>2</sup> However, rather than examining the relationship between the Mesopotamian and biblical versions by seeking to determine the historicity of the flood story, I will instead focus primarily on the literary form and features of each flood account. Each of these texts plays off of what I will call a Semitic flood type-scene<sup>3</sup> where the author(s) of each successive text reworked the existing Semitic flood tradition for specific literary, cultural, and theological purposes. This paradigm naturally assumes that there was an urtext (or oral tradition) that was adapted by each successive text, an assumption that is confirmed by literary analysis. This methodological framework will be used for two primary purposes: (1) to analyze the characters, literary techniques, and theme of the texts to reveal the significant ways in which each text has employed, altered, or omitted the various elements of the type-scene; and (2) as a result of the first purpose, to demonstrate that much (but not all) of the Genesis account was written as polemic against its Mesopotamian predecessors.

## Methodology

The scholarly consensus, especially since the appearance of Tigay's *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*,<sup>4</sup> is that the three flood myths are literarily

---

Flood Story in the Light of the Gilgames Flood Account," in *Gilgames and the World of Assyria* (ed. Joseph Azize and Noel Weeks; Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2007), 115–27; R. Todd Stanton, "Asking Questions of the Divine Announcement in the Flood Stories from Ancient Mesopotamia and Israel," in *Gilgames and the World of Assyria* (ed. Joseph Azize and Noel Weeks; Leuven, Belgium: Peeters, 2007), 147–72; Hermann-Josef Stipp, "Who is Responsible for the Deluge? Changing Outlooks in the Ancient Near East and the Bible," in "From Ebla to Stellenbosch": *Syro-Palestinian Religions in the Bible* (ed. Izak Cornelius and Louis C. Jonker; Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrassowitz, 2008), 141–53; Christine Dykgraaf, "The Mesopotamian Flood Epic in the Earliest Texts, the Bible, and the Qur'an," in *Sacred Tropes: Tanakh, New Testament, and Qur'an as Literature and Culture* (ed. Roberta Sterman Sabbath; Leiden: Brill, 2009): 233–42; and Hans Ulrich Steyman, "Gilgamesh und Genesis 1–9," *BZ* 54 (2010): 201–28.

2. A fourth text, the fragmentary so-called *Eridu Genesis* (Sumerian Flood Story), has relevant comparative value to the present topic and will be cited occasionally but is not a primary focus of this essay. For translations of this text, see Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Eridu Genesis," *JBL* 100/4 (1981): 513–29; Samuel Noah Kramer, "The Sumerian Deluge Myth: Reviewed and Revised," *AnSt* 33 (1983): 115–21; and Miguel Civil, "The Sumerian Flood Story," in Lambert and Millard, *Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood*, 138–45, 167–72.

3. I have chosen this term because I am only analyzing the Akkadian and Hebrew flood stories. The Sumerian flood story and other Sumerian references to the flood (such as the *Sumerian King List*) are closely related to the Akkadian versions but will not be a primary focus of this essay.

4. Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Wauconda, Ill.: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2002). Tigay conclusively demonstrated that the flood scene from *Gilgamesh* is largely derived from *Atrahasis* and has been modified to fit its new context. See

related. *Atrahasis*<sup>5</sup> came first (most likely before the *Eridu Genesis*)<sup>6</sup>, followed by *Gilgamesh*<sup>7</sup> and finally the Genesis<sup>8</sup> account.<sup>9</sup> In analyzing these (sometimes complex) literary relationships, this essay will utilize a combination of literary and form criticism, especially the kind employed by Robert Alter, to elucidate the meaningful ways in which the texts interact with each other. This is a synchronic approach, and thus source criticism will not play a role here, despite the fact that the flood pericope in Genesis is held up by some as the standard exemplar of the sources (in this case, P and J)<sup>10</sup> associated with the

---

especially pages 216–17 for a summary of the evidence for this conclusion. This occurred at a late period in the overall development of the epic, probably in the last half or quarter of the second millennium.

5. The standard critical edition is W.G. Lambert and A.R. Millard, *Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969). Other English translations include Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 1–38; and Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (3rd ed.; Bethesda, Md.: CDL Press, 2005), 227–80.

6. There is some debate as to whether *Atrahasis* preceded *The Eridu Genesis* or vice-versa. Hallo has argued that the earliest mentions of a flood in Sumerian literature are figurative and describe semi-nomadic Semitic invaders. See William W. Hallo, “The Limits of Skepticism,” *JAOS* 110 (1990): 194–9. Chen’s more recent analysis largely concurs as he claims that the flood is not used in the sense of a primeval event in either Sumerian or Akkadian literature until the Old Babylonian Period (2000–1600 BCE) at the earliest. See Y. S. Chen, “The Flood Motif as a Stylistic and Temporal Device in Sumerian Literary Traditions,” *JANE* 12 (2012): 160–2. If true, this would indicate that the Babylonians misappropriated the flood symbolism as literal in *Atrahasis* (ca. 1700 BCE) and that *The Eridu Genesis* (ca. 1600 BCE) followed its lead. This view, however, has not gone unquestioned; see Richard E. Averbeck, “The Sumerian Historiographic Tradition and Its Implications for Genesis 1–11” in *Faith, Tradition, and History: Old Testament Historiography in Its Near Eastern Context* (ed. A. R. Millard, James K. Hoffmeier, and David W. Baker; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 85, note 16.

7. The standard critical edition in English is A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* (2 Volumes; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003). Other English translations are “Epic of Gilgamesh,” translated by E.A. Speiser (*ANET*, 72–98); Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 39–135; and Benjamin R. Foster, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2001).

8. There are numerous similarities between the accounts in Genesis and *Gilgamesh*. For a dated but in-depth discussion of these parallels, see Heidel, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 224–69. It is likely that the author(s) of the Genesis flood story knew of the *Gilgamesh* version because the literary similarities are too striking to deny. Rendsburg has demonstrated that the biblical account follows *Gilgamesh* point for point in the flood story, even when variation certainly could have been introduced. See Rendsburg, “The Biblical Flood Story,” 115–27; especially the chart on p. 126. Also Gordon J. Wenham, “The Coherence of the Flood Narrative,” *VT* 28 (1978): 345–7.

9. All translations from the Hebrew Bible are my own. Also, all biblical references are from Genesis unless otherwise noted. My extremely limited knowledge of Akkadian necessitates reliance on professional scholars for translation and interpretation of those texts.

10. Some source critics insist on analyzing the P and J flood accounts separately when discussing ancient Near Eastern flood narratives. See Noort, “The Stories of the Great Flood,” 5–6.

Documentary Hypothesis.<sup>11</sup> In any case, the dating of the different strands does not affect my thesis because the biblical writers could have had contact with Mesopotamian flood traditions at any number of times, including before, during, and after the exile.<sup>12</sup>

I take the main idea for my thesis from Alter's discussion of biblical type-scenes.<sup>13</sup> His primary example of this in the Bible is the scene of the betrothal by a well,<sup>14</sup> a scene that occurs three times in narrating the betrothals of Isaac,

---

11. Wenham has defended the flood pericope against the source critics in Wenham, "The Coherence of the Flood Narrative," 336–48; likewise Rendsburg, "The Biblical Flood Story," 115–27. Emerton has refuted such arguments in J. A. Emerton, "An Examination of Some Attempts to Defend the Unity of the Flood Narrative in Genesis: Part I," *VT* 37 (1987): 401–20, and Emerton, "An Examination of Some Attempts to Defend the Unity of the Flood Narrative in Genesis: Part II," *VT* 38 (1988): 1–21.

12. While the exact dates are much debated, the J source is generally thought to be pre-exilic while P is exilic or post-exilic. Many scholars have argued that the author(s) of P redacted the J flood story to fit more with the Mesopotamian traditions that it was then familiar with. For example, see Frank Moore Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 303. This may very well be the case, but Israelites almost certainly knew of Mesopotamian flood traditions long before then. Fragments of *Gilgamesh* have been recovered from Megiddo and a fourteenth century Akkadian fragment of *Atrahasis* which mentions the flood has been found at Ras Shamra (for text and translation of the Ras Shamra fragment, see Lambert and Millard, *Atrahasis*, 131–133). See also note 20 below. Because the analysis below will demonstrate Israelite polemics against the Mesopotamian flood stories that are found in both the P and the J strands, it is not necessary to distinguish between them for the purposes of this paper. The history of ancient Israel has shown that Israelites had ample reasons to polemicize against Mesopotamian ideas and traditions both before and after the exile.

13. See Robert Alter, "Biblical Type-Scenes and the Uses of Convention," *Critical Inquiry* 5 (1978): 355–68. Several studies on biblical type-scenes have been published since Alter's initial work. See James G. Williams, "The Beautiful and the Barren: Conventions in Biblical Type-Scenes," *JSOT* 17 (1980): 107–19; Robert Alter, "How Convention Helps Us Read: The Case of the Bible's Annunciation Type-Scene," *Prooftexts* 3 (1983): 115–30; Esther Fuchs, "Structure and Patriarchal Functions in the Biblical Betrothal Type-Scene: Some Preliminary Notes," *JFSR* 3 (1987): 7–13; Robert H. O'Connell, "Proverbs VII 16–17: A Case of Fatal Deception in a 'Woman and the Window' Type-Scene," *VT* 41 (1991): 235–41; Joel A. Linsider, "Pursuing and Overtaking as a Type-Scene," *Arc* 29 (2001): 71–80; Brian Britt, "Prophetic Concealment in a Biblical Type Scene," *CBQ* 64 (2002): 37–58; George Savran, "Theophany as Type Scene," *Prooftexts* 23 (2003): 119–49; Min Suc Kee, "The Heavenly Council and Its Type-Scene," *JSOT* 31 (2007): 259–73; Benjamin J. M. Johnson, "What Type of Son is Samson? Reading Judges 13 as a Biblical Type-Scene," *JETS* 53 (June 2010): 269–86; and Jonathan Kruschwitz, "The Type-Scene Connection between Genesis 38 and the Joseph Story," *JSOT* 36 (2012): 383–410.

14. Other examples of biblical type-scenes that Alter has identified include "the announcement...of the birth of the hero to his barren mother;...the epiphany in the field; the initiatory trial; danger in the desert and the discovery of a well or other source of sustenance; the testament of the dying hero." Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New and Rev. Ed.; New York: Basic Books, 2011), 60. Alter borrowed and adapted the idea of type-scenes from scholarship on Homeric literature.

Jacob, and Moses (Gen 24:10–61; Gen 29:1–20; Exod 2:15–21).<sup>15</sup> Alter suggests that the mind of the ancient audience would have immediately understood the gist of what would occur in such a betrothal scene: “The contemporary audiences of these tales, being perfectly familiar with the convention, took particular pleasure in seeing how in each instance the convention could be, through the narrator’s art, both faithfully followed and renewed for the specific needs of the hero under consideration.”<sup>16</sup> Indeed, meaning is to be found in “the inventive freshness with which formulas are recast and redeployed in each new instance.”<sup>17</sup>

With this in mind, perhaps it will be easier to see how the three flood stories under consideration can be viewed as a Semitic flood type-scene.<sup>18</sup> As has been recognized by many commentators, each version has essentially the same basic plot.<sup>19</sup> The meaning and function of each individual story is thus revealed by the difference in details and overall purpose, and analyzing these is how we determine what the author(s) of each text was/were trying to convey by using the flood story as an integral component of the story.

Some caution is necessary when positing a type-scene for texts which were composed hundreds of years apart and separated by numerous geographical and cultural differences. This comparison could easily be accused of breaking the laws of propinquity.<sup>20</sup> Even from a purely literary perspective, Alter notes the differences between Hebrew prose style and Mesopotamian epic style,<sup>21</sup>

---

15. For more on the specific mechanisms and implications of this particular type scene, see Alter’s discussion in *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 61–74; also Robert C. Culley, *Studies in the Structure of Hebrew Narrative* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1976), 41–3, and Michael W. Martin, “Betrothal Journey Narratives,” *CBQ* 70 (2008): 505–23.

16. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 69.

17. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 61.

18. This is a very similar concept to what some scholars have already done with biblical and Ugaritic literature. See especially Koowon Kim, *Incubation as a Type-Scene in the Aqhatu, Kirta, and Hannah Stories: A Form-Critical and Narratological Study of KTU 1.14 I–1.15 III, 1.17 I–II, and 1 Samuel 1:1–2:11* (Leiden: Brill, 2011).

19. See John B. Gabel, et al., *The Bible as Literature: An Introduction* (5th ed.; New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 49.

20. However, Hoskisson has demonstrated that a city such as Emar in Syria could conceivably have served as a mediating point between the Mesopotamian cuneiform tradition and Iron Age Israel. See his discussion in Paul Y. Hoskisson, “Emar as an Empirical Model of the Transmission of Canon” in *The Biblical Canon in Comparative Perspectives: Scripture in Context IV* (ed. K. Lawson Younger Jr., William W. Hallo, and Bernard F. Batto; Lewiston, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1991), 21–32.

21. The fact that the Mesopotamian texts are written in epic poetic form while the Genesis account is in narrative prose is significant because the two forms have to be interpreted differently. Some have posited an original poetic form underlying the current prose account of the biblical flood. Both 8:22 and 9:6 are clearly in verse while 7:11, 9:5, and 9:7, also display poetic features. See John S. Kselman, “A Note on Gen. 7:11,” *CBQ* 35 (1973): 491–93; Lloyd M. Barre, “The Poetic Structure of Genesis 9:5,” *ZAW* 96:1 (1984): 101–4;

suggesting that the Hebrew writer(s) worked “not only with very different theological assumptions but also with a radically different sense of literary form” than the Mesopotamian writers.<sup>22</sup> While what I am suggesting is not an exact parallel to Alter’s biblical type-scene, I submit that a modified idea of this concept is appropriate for studying the flood narratives under consideration. The reasons for this will become obvious in the analysis below.

### The Proposed Semitic Flood Type-Scene

Few scholars doubt that there is a literary connection between the Mesopotamian flood texts and the biblical flood account—the debate is more about the degree and even the direction of influence. It is thus important to lay out the assumptions of this essay regarding these issues. The account in *Gilgamesh* has the most similarity to the biblical account in details but *Atrahasis* has much more in common with Genesis in theme and structure. *Atrahasis* (as well as the *Eridu Genesis*) and Gen 1–9 share the same tripartite structure: creation, antediluvian life, and the flood.<sup>23</sup> This suggests that the author(s) of the Genesis flood narrative may have used this tripartite structure<sup>24</sup> as a model with which to create the narrative of the primeval history<sup>25</sup> and then used the *Gilgamesh* version to craft many of the details of the flood story itself. As I will demonstrate below, the nature of the biblical polemics strongly suggest that it was heavily borrowing from the traditions, if not the actual texts, of both *Atrahasis* and *Gilgamesh*.

---

and Bezalel Porten and Uriel Rappaport, “Poetic Structure in Genesis IX 7,” *VT* 21 (1971): 363–69. Ultimately, however, it is not currently possible to determine if there was ever an independent poetic account.

22. Alter, *Biblical Narrative*, 33. Following the suggestions of other scholars, Alter also posits that the Hebrew use of prose instead of epic verse is a polemic against Mesopotamian myth (p. 27–30).

23. See Shea, “A Comparison,” 9–29. Shea uses this observation to argue for an earlier date of the composition of the Genesis primeval history (fifteenth through thirteenth centuries) because of the literary comparison to *Atrahasis* and the *Eridu Genesis*. In my view a date in the first Millennium is still much more preferable.

24. This similarity in structure also provides similarity in major theme: that of creation, un-creation, and re-creation. The gods/God create(s) the earth and humanity only to witness things go awry with their/his creation. They/he then un-create(s) humanity with the flood and re-create it by saving one family that then re-populates the earth. For a summary of how the re-creation in Genesis almost exactly parallels the original creation, see Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2001), 128–9. Also see Noort, “The Stories of the Great Flood,” 21–3; and Ruth Simoons-Vermeer, “The Mesopotamian Floodstories: A Comparison and Interpretation,” *Numen* 21 (1974): 30–4.

25. “Anyone living in Israel who told a story about the primordial age was bound by traditions of the Ancient Near East to such a degree that he could not leave the Flood out of his account.” Noort, “The Stories of the Great Flood,” 8.

The Semitic flood type-scene has certain conventions that govern the basic plot sequence of the story. Recognizing these conventions and the ways in which they are altered is the key to understanding how each text adapted the flood motif to its own “national interests and different literary settings.”<sup>26</sup> The conventions are naturally generalizations because the deviations from, or even the absence of, part of the convention convey meaning and purpose. Here is the reconstructed type-scene:<sup>27</sup>

1. The gods/God decide(s) to destroy humanity with a flood.
2. However, one deity warns the flood hero about the impending deluge and commands him to build a boat in which the storm can be weathered.
3. The flood is described in detail and the result of it is that all living things are wiped off the earth.
4. The flood hero offers sacrifice upon exiting the boat and the gods/God smell(s) the scent of it.
5. The flood hero is given a divine blessing.

### **Literary Analysis of the Type-Scene: Characters**

#### *The Flood Hero*

The flood hero in each story is essentially the only main character aside from deities. The name of each flood hero foreshadows an important aspect of his role in the myth. The name Utnapishtim means “he found life,” similar to Ziusudra (the flood hero of the *Eridu Genesis*) which means “life of long days.” Both of these names make a great deal of sense in their literary context because both flood heroes are given immortality by the gods after surviving the flood. The name Atrahasis means “extra-wise,” a name that could apply to any of the flood heroes but that specifically makes sense for Atrahasis as he fulfills the functions of a typical wise man in the ancient Near East and finds ways throughout the epic to convince Enki to subvert Enlil’s attempts to destroy humanity.<sup>28</sup> Noah’s name means “rest,” and the biblical narrative uses several wordplays as well as thematic connections to intimately tie this name to the entire plot of the flood story. This aspect deserves a closer look.

---

26. Dalley, *Myths From Mesopotamia*, 6.

27. I have been greatly aided in the reconstruction of this type-scene by the chart in Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco, Tex.: Word Incorporated, 1987), 163–64.

28. Enlil had attempted to limit humanity with a plague and two droughts before finally deciding on the flood. See Lambert and Millard, *Atrahasis*, 9–11.

Noah is first introduced in Gen 5:29 by his father Lamech. Notice the Hebrew lexical roots in the translation: “And Lamech called his name Noah saying, ‘This one will relieve (נחם) us from our work (מעשה) and the pain (עצבון) of our hands from the ground which Yahweh has cursed.’” The same three Hebrew roots appear in the same order in 6:6: “And Yahweh regretted (נחם) that he had made (עשה) man in the earth, and he was pained (עצב) to his heart.” This is an ironic wordplay showing that Lamech’s “hopes for consolation by Noah correspond to the creator’s disappointment with his creation.”<sup>29</sup> Certainly this pun is not accidental, for we later learn that the flood which Noah survived would, at least for a time, bring “rest”<sup>30</sup> from the curse which Yahweh had mentioned in 5:29.<sup>31</sup>

Further, an even more intricate and extended wordplay on Noah’s name is pervasive throughout the account. The name “Noah” (נֹחַ) comes from the verbal root נוּחַ “to rest.” In Gen 8:4, the same verbal root (נָחָה) is used to describe how the ark came to “rest” on the mountains of Ararat. In 8:9, the dove could not find a מְנוּחָה (“resting-place”). And finally, in 8:21, Yahweh smelled a נְנוּחָה (“restful”)<sup>32</sup> scent of sacrifice. This punning emphasizes again and again the unique role of the character of Noah in helping to bring “rest” to the earth that had been filled with what God referred to as violence (סִדְּוָה) and wickedness (רָעָה). This idea of exactly how Noah brought rest to the earth will be discussed in more detail below.

Next, why was each flood hero chosen to be the one to perpetuate humanity on the earth after the flood? In Noah’s case it seems fairly obvious: “And Noah found grace in the eyes of Yahweh” (6:8)<sup>33</sup> because he “was a completely righteous man in his generations” and he “walked with God” (6:9).<sup>34</sup>

29. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 144.

30. The author of the account makes somewhat of a stretch here by relating the etymology of Noah’s name to the verb נחם (“to be sorry, comfort, relieve, have compassion, repent”) instead of נוּחַ, thus causing some scholars to amend the verb to נוח in 5:29 to create a better pun. However, the way נחם is used in 6:6 probably explains why that verb was chosen. For an analysis of the complex and sometimes contradictory relationship of these two verbs, see Ellen Van Wolde, “A Text-Semantic Study of the Hebrew Bible, Illustrated with Noah and Job,” *JBL* 113 (1994): 23–6.

31. The curse mentioned may be the curse from 3:17 after Adam and Eve had partaken of the fruit of the tree. See W. M. Clark, “The Flood and the Structure of the Pre-Patriarchal History,” *ZAW* 83 (1971): 207. The curse may also refer to 4:11–12, where God curses the ground for Cain’s sake.

32. Most translators will render this word as “pleasing, soothing, tranquilizing,” or the like. However, the translation “restful” seems reasonable here not only to emphasize the theme of “rest,” but also because it is a natural synonym to the usual translations.

33. This verse contains another wordplay with Noah (נֹחַ) finding “grace” (חֵן). See Jack Sasson, “Word Play in Gen. 6:8–9,” *CBQ* 37 (1975): 165.

34. 7:1 also states that Noah was “righteous” (יָשָׁר).

Unfortunately, we are not given any information about how Noah came to be favored<sup>35</sup> or why he had such high standing with Yahweh,<sup>36</sup> but we do know that he promptly obeyed the deity's commands (Gen 6:22; 7:5).<sup>37</sup> An important detail about Noah is omitted, however. Who was he? Was he powerful or popular? Did he have high standing in society? The text does not say. This point takes on extra significance when it is compared with the Mesopotamian flood heroes who *did* have high social status.<sup>38</sup> It is explicitly stated in the *Eridu Genesis* that Ziusudra was a king and a priest, and while *Gilgamesh* does not directly claim that Utnapishtim was a king, his father (Ubar-Tutu) and his city (Shurruapak) both tie him to royal tradition.<sup>39</sup> The *Atrahasis* narrative implies<sup>40</sup> that Atrahasis was a priest, while the fragment of *Atrahasis* from Ras Shamra clearly states that Atrahasis lived in the temple of Ea, a detail that almost certainly means he was a priest.<sup>41</sup> All of this may be contrasted with Noah. Other than the reference to Noah's sacrifice after the flood (Gen 8:21), nothing in the text suggests that Noah was royal or priestly in any way. It could be argued that the sacrifice in Gen 8:21 means that Noah was a priest of some sort, but "priest" here is defined as a cultic functionary who worked on the behalf of a community. That is clearly not the case, as Noah is never connected with any group of people other than his immediate family. In fact, the depiction of Noah's sacrifice is directly in line with the how sacrifices were performed

35. Perhaps the author(s) did not have any narrative material about earlier events in Noah's life. Cf. Stipp, "Who is Responsible," 148. This would be expected if Noah was simply a literary adaptation of earlier flood heroes.

36. Barnard argues that Noah represents the typical man rather than the exceptional one and states that the text is wholly unclear about why Noah had received such favor. See A. N. Barnard, "Was Noah a Righteous Man?" *Theology* 74 (1971): 311–14. Later Jewish and Christian tradition clearly came to see Noah as a very pious man who was saved because of his righteousness. See Ezekiel 14:14, 20; Hebrews 11:7; and 2 Peter 2:5. Also Jack P. Lewis, "Noah and the Flood in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Tradition," *BA* 47 (1984): 224–39.

37. Clark argues that the Mesopotamian flood traditions and P presuppose the prior righteousness of the flood hero as a condition of his salvation. J, however, views Noah's righteousness as a condition of his election. See W. M. Clark, "The Righteousness of Noah," *VT* 21 (1971): 262. The fact that God set up his covenant (ברית) exclusively with Noah before the flood (Gen 6:18) probably confirms that Noah occupied a special relationship with God. See Sabine van den Eynde, "The Missing Link: BRYT in the Flood Narrative: Meaning and Peculiarities of a Hebrew Key Word" in *Studies in the Book of Genesis: Literature, Redaction, and History* (ed. Andre Wenin; Leuven, Belgium: University Press, 2001), 467–78.

38. The earliest evidence suggests that the Mesopotamian flood hero may not always have been considered to have royal or priestly status, but the later versions make it clear that he did. The later versions are the ones that Israel is most likely to have had knowledge of.

39. James R. Davila, "The Flood Hero as King and Priest," *JNES* 54 (1995): 206.

40. Oden claims that we can infer the "piety, sagacity, and lofty position within society" of Atrahasis "from his name 'Very Wise,' his position of authority with respect to the city elders, and his intimacy with Ea." Oden, "Divine Aspirations," 203.

41. Davila, "The Flood Hero," 204–6.

in Genesis. No one in Genesis (with the possible exception of Melchizedek in Gen 14:18–20) is presented as a cultic priest, a fact that can be seen in the case of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who also built altars and made sacrifices but did so in a private rather than a community context. Thus, this is a biblical polemic against Mesopotamian thought as embodied in the flood story. Noah was not a socially great or powerful man but rather simply God's agent, his qualifications apparently being only his personal righteousness and his favor with Yahweh.

The manner in which each flood hero was warned of the coming of the great deluge is a part of the type-scene that is present in each text and is even found in *The Eridu Genesis* and the fragment from Ras Shamra. Every version except the biblical account includes the curious detail of Enki (Ea) whispering to the flood hero through a reed wall (or fence) to warn him. In the *Eridu Genesis*, the communication comes either through an ecstatic vision<sup>42</sup> or through a dream<sup>43</sup> (through, just as the others, the intermediary of the reed wall). In *Atrahasis* and *Gilgamesh*, the flood heroes are definitely said to have learned of the impending deluge in a dream: "Atra-hasis opened his mouth and addressed his lord, 'Teach me the meaning [of the dream] . . . that I may seek its outcome'" (III:I:11–14).<sup>44</sup> "I let Atrahasis see a dream, and he perceived the secret of the gods" (XI:197).<sup>45</sup> Concerning the biblical account, it is likely that the detail of a deity warning the hero through a wall is simply unnecessary. The Israelite deity had no need to hide his warning because he was not worried about any other gods hearing it. This detail was thus left out to create a polemic where the biblical author(s) mock(s) the Mesopotamian concept of multiple, competing deities. It also demonstrates the distinctiveness of Israel's God, for he "reveals his plans freely with his people and does not need to hide in a 'dream' nor be conjured up in some 'ecstatic vision.'"<sup>46</sup>

42. Jacobsen and Civil have both interpreted the communication as being not a dream but rather an ecstatic vision. Jacobsen, "The Eridu Genesis," 523; Civil, "The Sumerian Flood Story," 171.

43. Kramer, "The Sumerian Deluge Myth," 119.

44. Lambert and Millard, *Atrahasis*, 89.

45. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 717. It is curious to note that the text does not indicate that Utnapishtim received a dream during the actual scene where he was warned (XI:19–31). It may also be of note that line 197, where Ea says that he revealed the flood in a dream, is one of only two places (the other is line 49) where Utnapishtim is called Atrahasis. This may simply further reflect the fact that the *Gilgamesh* flood story is derived essentially from *Atrahasis*.

46. Stanton, "Asking Questions," 155. Stanton tries in his essay to determine the manner in which God revealed himself to Noah, finally suggesting a "theophany" (p. 165), but I find no explicit evidence for this in the text itself. The exact manner in which God spoke to Noah is unknown, but for the purposes of this essay it is sufficient to note that it seems to have been a direct communication of some sort with no need to go through an intermediary.

Another telling feature of these narratives is the direct discourse (or lack thereof) of the flood heroes. This feature hints at the role and significance of the character in the narrative. Both Atrahasis and Utnapishtim have quoted speech attributed to them, while Noah does not speak a word in the entire flood pericope. Let us begin with the direct discourse attributed to Atrahasis. As previously mentioned, Atrahasis is a very proactive character who successfully pleads several times with Enki for relief from the plagues and droughts sent by Enlil. Despite the fragmentary nature of the text, Tablet 3 (the flood tablet) preserves two speeches by Atrahasis, one to Enki and one to the elders of his people. He is assertive in both, first requesting that Enki reveal to him the meaning of his dream and then boldly warning the elders about Enki's message (a bad omen for the elders, considering that they worship Enlil instead of Enki). Yet again this detail accords with the characterization of Atrahasis as a wise man because he actively seeks knowledge from a deity and then communicates that information to his community. None of the other flood heroes seem to actively seek out the knowledge as Atrahasis does.

Concerning the direct discourse attributed to Utnapishtim, it is important to note that Utnapishtim's narrative is framed as a first-person account recounted by him to Gilgamesh. This format radically expands our knowledge of the persona of this flood hero and provides a glimpse into his thoughts and feelings. This is something that does not occur with any of the other flood heroes, because the other flood stories are all told from a third-person point of view.<sup>47</sup> The author of the *Gilgamesh* flood account adapted *Atrahasis* in this way to fit the flood story into the context of Gilgamesh's quest for receiving the immortality that Utnapishtim had obtained.<sup>48</sup> Like Atrahasis, Utnapishtim directly conversed with a deity (Ea), but he did not converse with anyone else. Overall, the effect of this first-person narration is to make the story more personal and dramatic. For example, after the flood Utnapishtim looked out over the earth: "All the people had turned to clay . . . I opened a vent and sunlight fell on the side of my face. I fell to my knees and sat there weeping, the tears streaming down the side of my face" (XI:135, 137-139).<sup>49</sup> Utnapishtim's emotional pain at seeing the destruction of humanity humanizes this character in a way that the other flood heroes never come close to. Considering that the flood story is a late addition to *Gilgamesh*, this first-person narrative of the flood story may have served a number of purposes, one possibility being

---

47. However, the Ras Shamra fragment is told by Atrahasis in first person, perhaps providing a precedent for this use in *Gilgamesh*.

48. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, 230.

49. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 712-3.

that it could have served as a digression before Gilgamesh received his answer about the possibility of eternal life, thus heightening the suspense before Utnapishtim's disappointing response.<sup>50</sup>

In contrast, the lack of any direct discourse by a character may reveal a good deal about that character. The fact that Noah is not assigned any dialogue in the flood pericope speaks volumes. Alter notes that biblical narrative often introduces the speech of one character and then, after the recorded speech, notes that the same character speaks again without allowing the other character to participate in the dialogue.<sup>51</sup> An example of this is in Gen 9:1–17.<sup>52</sup> The entire unit consists of God speaking to Noah, yet the text introduces God's direct speech three times (v. 1, 12, 17). This narrative technique is often used because the silent character is either confused or astonished, and "dozens of such instances offer persuasive evidence that this was a clearly recognized convention."<sup>53</sup> Curiously, it appears that this is not the case with Noah. He never seems confused or baffled; he immediately does exactly as his deity commands. There are certainly plenty of opportunities for the author(s) to allow him a response, but such never occurs. Why should the convention be altered here? Why should Noah be denied any direct dialogue? I suggest that the author(s) deliberately refused Noah any direct speech to make a point: God is in charge, not humans. Atrahasis and Utnapishtim both asked direct questions of their deity, but Noah did not. Perhaps part of God's rationale for choosing Noah to survive is because of his submissive obedience. In fact, it is not until things go wrong, when Noah gets drunk and Ham uncovers his nakedness in 9:21–25, that Noah finally says something. Noah's silence throughout the flood pericope can thus be seen as a confirmation of Israel's theology and a polemic against Mesopotamian thought: Israel's God is the one in charge of directing history, and he utilizes a silent, submissive servant to accomplish his directives.<sup>54</sup>

---

50. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, 239–40. For other suggestions of the literary purpose of Utnapishtim's retelling of the flood story in *Gilgamesh*, see Edward L. Greenstein, "The Retelling of the Flood Story in the Gilgamesh Epic," in *Hesed Ve-emet: Studies in Honor of Ernest F. Frerichs* (ed. Jodi Magness and Seymour Gitin; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 197–204.

51. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 98.

52. Robert Alter, *Genesis: Translation and Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1996), 39.

53. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, 98.

54. This same idea of a silent servant is found in Isa 53:7.

*The Gods/God*

The nature and actions of the divine characters is another area where there is a distinct difference between Mesopotamian and Israelite thought. The flood type-scene vividly illustrates how divergent the two perceptions of deity are. When comparing Mesopotamian gods to Israel's deity, many commentators make similar cases to the following for the superiority of the theology of Genesis's flood story: "In the Mesopotamian stories the petty gods bring the flood to control overpopulation and/or get rid of the annoying noise of people. Once the flood comes, they are frightened by it, and afterward they hungrily gather around the sacrifice. In contrast, God sovereignly brings the Flood because of human wickedness, and in response to Noah's sacrifice, he pledges never again to destroy the earth."<sup>55</sup> A literary reading cannot take such theological statements at face value but must examine the extent of their merit.

*Atrahasis* and *Gilgamesh*, contrary to some incorrect notions, do give reasons for the gods' motivation in sending the flood, although these reasons are ambiguous and difficult to interpret. At the beginning of the *Gilgamesh* flood pericope, Utnapishtim simply states that "the great gods decided to cause the Deluge" (XI: 14)<sup>56</sup> without offering any reason for this decision. Many commentators stop at this and declare that no apparent moral motivation is given for the deluge. Firstly, one can hardly expect a reason to be given, because the story is told from Utnapishtim's point of view. He does not say why the gods had decided to send the flood because he does not know. Secondly, a reason *is* offered in a speech by Enki to the angry Enlil after the flood: "You, the sage of the gods, the hero, how could you lack counsel and cause the deluge? On him who commits a sin, inflict his crime! On him who does wrong, inflict [his] wrong-doing!" (XI: 183–186).<sup>57</sup> Enki goes on to list a number of ways that Enlil could have punished the human offenders rather than sending the deluge, but the important implication of this speech is that not all of humankind was guilty of whatever prompted the gods to pour out such an all-encompassing punishment. Only the transgressors, Enki argued, should be punished. Unfortunately, it is unclear exactly what transgressions had been perpetrated

55. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary*, 132. Similar statements can be found in many of the commentaries. See for example Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1972), 124; Victor Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1990), 274; E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 55; and Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, xlix. Clines also argues that Genesis polemicizes against the seeming lack of a moral component for the gods' motivation in sending the flood in the Mesopotamian versions. See David Clines, "Noah's Flood I: The Theology of the Flood Narrative," *Faith and Thought* 100 (1972–73): 128–42.

56. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 705.

57. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 715.

to elicit the unleashing of such a catastrophe. Because *Gilgamesh* uses the flood story out of its original context (and because the *Gilgamesh* flood scene is dependent on *Atrahasis*), it is most fruitful to turn to *Atrahasis* for the answer to what motivated the gods to send the flood.

The most frequent explanations for Enlil's frustration with humankind in *Atrahasis* are the *rigmu* ("noise") and *huburu* ("tumult") that entered Enlil's ears. Both terms are ambiguous in context. The predominant view takes them to mean that humans were becoming too populous and thus had to be thinned out to reduce noise levels. In this view, humans cannot be blamed for the actions of the gods, because population increase is natural. Rather, humans "constantly appear as the victims of divine inadequacy."<sup>58</sup> An alternative view is that *rigmu* and *huburu* can refer to scheming, impious acts. This prompted Oden, following the lead of Pettinato<sup>59</sup> and von Soden,<sup>60</sup> to conclude that "the crime for which humanity is punished in the *Atrahasis* Epic is the crime of rebellion; and the source of this rebellion is the human tendency to over-reach its limits and to encroach upon divine territory."<sup>61</sup> As attractive as this idea is,<sup>62</sup> especially in light of parallel rebellious acts found in the Genesis primeval history,<sup>63</sup> more recent scholarship has generally rejected it,<sup>64</sup> seeing the simpler interpretation of loud noise as the preferable cause. Ultimately, while at least some segment of humanity certainly did something to anger the gods, it seems most plausible to conclude that the catalyst for annihilation in both *Gilgamesh* and *Atrahasis* is something that was out of humankind's control. Blame for the disastrous results of the flood can be pinned on the lack of foresight of the gods rather than some conscious act of wickedness or rebellion by humankind. It is divine, not human, morality that is at issue here. We can conclude this, in part,

58. Stipp, "Who is Responsible," 145.

59. Giovanni Pettinato, "Die Bestrafung des Menschengeschlechts durch die Sintflut," *Or* 37 (1968): 165–200.

60. Wolfram von Soden, "Der Mensch bescheidet sich nicht: Überlegungen zu Schöpfungserzählungen in Babylonien und Israel," in *Symbolae Biblicae et Mesopotamicae: Francisco Mario Theodoro de Liagre Bohll Dedicatae* (ed. Martinus Adrianus Beek; Leiden: Brill, 1973), 349–58.

61. Oden, "Divine Aspirations," 208. See pages 204–10 for a detailed explanation of the meanings of the words *rigmu* and *huburu*.

62. The arguments for and against each position are laid out in William Moran, "Some Considerations of Form and Interpretation in *Atrahasis*," in *Language, Literature, and History: Philological and Historical Studies Presented to Erica Reimer* (ed. Francesca Rochberg-Halton; New Haven, Conn.: American Oriental Society, 1987), 251–5.

63. See note 70.

64. "In the past, this common outlay has been interpreted as a crime-and-punishment narrative. The *din* occasioned by the humans was taken as a clamour of revolt, voicing the presumptuous desire to obliterate the divide between the gods and mankind. Nonetheless, the evidence to the contrary is so compelling that this position has been effectively abandoned." Stipp, "Who is Responsible," 144–45.

because of the insulting way that the authors of *Atrahasis* and *Gilgamesh* refer to the Mesopotamian deities.<sup>65</sup>

The question must now be posed: what exactly, then, is God's motivation for punishing humanity in Genesis? Just as the terms describing human "transgression" in *Atrahasis* are ambiguous, the terms used to describe humankind's transgression in the Genesis flood story, עָרָא (6:5) and חַטָּאת (6:11, 13) are also ambiguous. What kind of activities do these terms refer to? The term עָרָא, which is used pervasively throughout the Hebrew Bible, is usually translated as "evil, wicked, bad," or the like. The term חַטָּאת has, however, been defined in a multitude of ways. Speiser translates it to "lawlessness" and says that it "is a technical legal term which should not be automatically reproduced as 'violence.'"<sup>66</sup> Wenham states that it "denotes any antisocial, unneighborly activity."<sup>67</sup> Frymer-Kensky notes that it "has a wide range of meanings" and "encompasses almost the entire spectrum of evil."<sup>68</sup> Although an aspect of morality is clearly at issue, the exact nature of humanity's crimes is not directly stated in the flood story itself, which is surprising, considering that other parts of the Hebrew Bible do not hesitate to specify the sins that the accused have committed.<sup>69</sup> However, clues from context offer some possibilities.

Contextually, the most likely candidate for God's displeasure is the episode directly preceding the flood: the marriages of the sons of God/the gods (usually interpreted as lesser divine beings) with the daughters of men in 6:1-4.<sup>70</sup> There are far more opinions about these four verses than I have space to detail here.<sup>71</sup> The most important thing to recognize is that such mixing of the divine

65. See below, especially note 76.

66. Speiser, *Genesis*, 51. Alter also interprets this word to imply "lawless behavior." Alter, *Genesis*, 28.

67. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, 171.

68. Frymer-Kensky, "The Atrahasis Epic," 153.

69. See, for example, Deut 32:15-18.

70. Although this episode is textually the closest to the flood, all of Genesis 1-11 can be described as a pattern of crime and punishment. Adam and Eve sought the knowledge of the gods and ate the forbidden fruit (3:5-6), prompting Yahweh to curse them (3:16-19) and ban them from the tree of life (3:24). Cain killed his brother and was cursed (4:8-12), Lamech committed murder (4:23-24), Ham uncovered his father's nakedness (9:21-25), and the divine aspirations of people at the time of the Tower of Babel prompted Yahweh to confound their language (11:1-9).

71. The literature on the subject is voluminous. For the most recent views, see Helga S. Kvanvig, "Gen 6,1-4 as an Antediluvian Event," *SJOT* 16 (2002): 79-112; R. Gilboa, "Who 'Fell Down' to Our Earth? A Different Light on Genesis 6:1-4," *BN* 11 (2002): 66-75; Horst Seebass, "Die Gottessöhne und das Menschliche Mass: Gen 6, 1-4," *BN* 134 (2007): 5-22; Sven Fockner, "Reopening the Discussion: Another Contextual Look at the Sons of God," *JSOT* 32 (2008): 435-56; Walter Buhner, "Gottessöhne und Menschentochter: Gen 6,1-4 als innerbiblische Schriftauslegung," *ZAW* 123 (2011): 495-515; and John Day, "The Sons of God and Daughters of Men and the Giants: Disputed Points in the Interpretation of Genesis

with the human violated God's method of creation of having everything reproduce "according to its own kind" (Gen 1:11–12, 21, 24–25). The likelihood that this is at least part of the reason for God's displeasure with humankind is bolstered by the fact that the verse immediately following states, "Yahweh saw that great was the wickedness (רַע) of humankind in the earth" (Gen 6:5). It is thus possible that one of the evils of humankind (perhaps the primary evil) that caused God such anger in Noah's day was the unsanctioned union of the human with the divine.<sup>72</sup> If this is the case, it presents another polemic against Mesopotamian thought, specifically against Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh was said to be part mortal and part divine, so the association of such beings in Genesis with God's motivation for sending the flood shows just how unsavory the biblical author found the concept of such mixed race unions to be.

This, however, cannot be the conclusion of the matter. It is difficult to interpret 6:1–4 to mean that everyone on earth had been involved in the "sons of God" issue. God saw in 6:12 that "*all flesh* had corrupted its way on the earth" (emphasis added). Everyone on earth (with the apparent exception of Noah and his family) had displeased God to the point that he felt compelled to "destroy them" (6:13) from the earth. A linguistic clue provides insight into why humankind had become so odious to its creator. When God created Adam in 2:7 he "formed [יצר] the man from the dirt of the ground." The verb יצר here means "to form or fashion," as a potter would mold the items of his creation.<sup>73</sup> Compare this to 6:5 where Yahweh observes of man that "every imagination [יִצְרָ] of the thoughts of his heart were only evil continually." The word יִצְרָ is a noun form from the verb יצר and could be literally rendered as "something formed or fashioned." The picture of God carefully forming Adam (i.e. humanity) compared with the picture of humankind forming nothing but evil things all of the time is striking. It is no surprise that God was so angry; his

---

6:1–4," *HeBAI* 1 (2012): 427–47. For summaries of the main points of argument, see the commentaries, especially Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary* (trans. John J. Scullion; Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1984), 363–83.

72. However, contrast the opinion of Schmid, who connects the passage with Deut 34:7. This verse relates that Moses died at age 120, the age that is identified as humankind's maximum lifespan in 6:3. Deut 34:7, unlike other passages, does not identify a particular offense as the reason for Moses' not being able to enter the land. Therefore, "Moses' death has nothing to do with personal guilt but, rather, with fate," thus implying that "we can at least state that the heavenly interference of divine sons with human daughters in its current literary position offers an (additional) reason for the Flood: the Flood solves the problem created by the mixing of the divine and human sphere, which was not caused by human guilt but by transcendent fate." Konrad Schmid, "The Late Persian Formation of the Torah: Observations on Deuteronomy 34" in *Judah and Judeans in the Fourth Century B.C.E.* (ed. Oded Lipschitz, Gary N. Knoppers, and Rainier Albertz; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2007), 249–50.

73. Cf. Isa 29:16 and Jer 18:4 for this idea.

forming of humanity had backfired and he now had to deal with the problems that his creations had themselves created. From God's own perspective, there was certainly plenty of justification for wiping out his creations and starting anew.

But how does the Genesis text itself evaluate the legitimacy of God's decision to send the deluge? As we saw in the Akkadian versions of the flood story, the gods seem to be the ones at fault, not humankind. It is the opposite here. The author(s) in fact remove(s) God from the narrative at exactly the points one might think he would be most prominent. The following chiasm demonstrates the structure of the flood story in regards to who is, for the most part,<sup>74</sup> at the focus of the narrative:

- A. 6:5–7:4 God (inner thoughts decry human wickedness, instructions to Noah)
  - B. 7:5–7:24 Noah, the earth, and its inhabitants (preparations for flood, flood destroys)
    - C. 8:1 God briefly returns (remembers Noah, recalls the floodwaters)
  - B'. 8:2–14 Noah, the earth, and its inhabitants (flood abates, earth becomes inhabitable)
- A'. 8:15–9:17 God (assuaged by Noah's sacrifice, rules out future floods, details the covenant)

By using this structure where God is conspicuously absent from parts 2 and 4, the narrative demonstrates that despite being justified in wiping out all of humanity, God still dissociated himself from the destruction. God easily could have been made the subject of all of the verbs describing the sending forth of the flood waters, but such is not the case.<sup>75</sup> This suggests that God did not want to destroy all of his creations, creations that he had referred to as being "very good" (1:31), but their wickedness and degeneracy forced his hand. The Mesopotamian gods, conversely, were definitely present during the

74. The one exception is 7:16 where "Yahweh closed him (Noah) in" to the ark. This action has nothing to do with the actual unleashing of the flood but rather with ensuring Noah's survival. This detail may also be significant for another reason. In *Gilgamesh*, Utnapishtim's shipwright Puzur-Enlil (XI: 94–95; see George's translation) sealed the boat before the flood. This may be another polemic where Genesis depicts God thoroughly sealing in the precious cargo of the ark while *Gilgamesh's* flood hero had to be sealed in by a mortal (and one whom Utnapishtim likely tricked into performing the seal in exchange for a palace and goods that would soon be submerged in floodwater). See David Marcus, "God Shut Noah In (Genesis 7:16), But Who Shut Utnapishtim In?" *Maarav* 9 (2002): 59.

75. The text uses several *niphal* (passive) verbs to de-emphasize a specific instigator. For example, 7:11 states that "all the headwaters of the great deep were broken up [נִבְרַקְעוּ] and the windows of the heavens were opened [נִפְתְּחוּ]."

sending of the flood, but not in a positive way: “Even the gods took fright at the Deluge . . . the gods were curled up like dogs” (XI:114, 116);<sup>76</sup> “Their lips were feverishly athirst, they were suffering from cramp of hunger” (III:IV:21–22).<sup>77</sup> The Mesopotamian gods were frightened by their own flood and even realized that they *needed* humanity to provide food and drink for them. The biblical account, following its Mesopotamian predecessors, adopted the anthropomorphic imagery of God smelling and being pleased with the animal sacrifice of Noah after the conclusion of the flood (8:21). However, the crucial difference is that Israel’s deity did not need to eat the sacrifice to survive.<sup>78</sup> The biblical author(s) is/are clearly polemicizing against the weakness and lack of forethought of the Mesopotamian gods. God in Genesis does not need humans to provide food for him as the Mesopotamian gods do, but he does want humanity to survive, just not in the wicked state it had formed for itself. Ultimately, the call for ethical behavior falls on humans in Genesis, whereas it falls on the gods in the other versions.<sup>79</sup>

In summary, there is a distinct difference between having many gods who often disagree with each other and having one God<sup>80</sup> who makes all of the decisions. Israel’s God is portrayed as choosing to preserve the human race despite its wickedness, whereas humanity survived in the Mesopotamian versions despite the foolishness of its deities. Although the structure of the type-scene required Israel’s God to make the morally questionable decision to wipe out almost all of humanity, the biblical narrative’s subtle changes to its Mesopotamian predecessors readily demonstrate the Bible’s conception of its God being morally and intellectually superior to Mesopotamian deities.

### Literary Analysis of the Type-Scene: Themes

An analysis of the characters in the flood stories has yielded much information about how the type-scene has been altered and perpetuated in Semitic flood literature and how gods and humans are portrayed in each. Another

---

76. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 711. Later, when Utnapishtim had offered sacrifice, the gods are also said to have hovered around the food like flies. This cynical simile further degrades the Mesopotamian gods and shows that the Mesopotamian authors recognized the weaknesses of their gods (see George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 518).

77. Lambert and Millard, *Atrahasis*, 97.

78. Alter, *Genesis*, 36.

79. Stipp, “Who is Responsible,” 147.

80. Shaviv argues that the two divine names in the flood pericope, Yahweh and Elohim, are actually two different deities. In his view, the Israelites originally received the flood story from their Canaanite neighbors and replaced Baal with Yahweh and El with Elohim. He sees Yahweh as the God who wants to destroy humankind and Elohim as the God who wants to save it. See Samuel Shaviv, “The Polytheistic Origins of the Biblical Flood Narrative,” *VT* 54 (2004): 527–48.

important area of difference is the fact that each flood text has at least one unique theme. The flood always fundamentally changes something important about the history of the earth and humanity, but the primary theme of each flood story differs from the other accounts. I will now discuss what that change is in each of the flood texts.

### *The Atrahasis Epic*

As mentioned above, many scholars see overpopulation as an important theme of the *Atrahasis Epic*. The final readable lines in *Atrahasis* talk about the divine bestowal of several social institutions that serve to limit human population. These include the inability of some women to bear children, the setting apart of some women as cultic functionaries who would not bear children, and a high infant mortality rate. The author(s) of the epic used the flood as the catalyst for the gods' (etiological) bestowal of this set of new social conditions.

This realization provides excellent information about the unique meaning of the *Atrahasis Epic*. Although it is fragmentary, "scholars now agree that damaged text near the end of the Epic refers to the gods' decision to institute death as a normal end to human life."<sup>81</sup> If humans did not die naturally, it is no wonder that Enlil had such a difficult time controlling the humans with his plagues and droughts. The post-flood social regulations actually explain how natural death entered the world and why limiting the number of births actually benefitted humanity. It is interesting to note that Genesis, in opposition to *Atrahasis*, does not consider overpopulation to be an issue. In 9:1 God commands Noah and his sons to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth." Thus it is logical to conclude that when "viewed in this light, Gen 9,1 ff. looks like a conscious rejection of the *Atrahasis Epic*."<sup>82</sup> Here is yet another Genesis polemic against Mesopotamian thought. In sum, the question of what changes as a result of the flood in *Atrahasis* clearly lies in the new social and mortal conditions instituted by the gods.

### *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Much of the *Gilgamesh Epic* deals with Gilgamesh's ill-fated attempts to obtain immortality. As has long been recognized, this is in fact the central theme of the epic as a whole. Utnapishtim's primary purpose in recounting the details of the flood to Gilgamesh was to explain why he (Utnapishtim) was the

81. Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia*, 8.

82. William L. Moran, "Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood," *Bib* 52 (1971): 61. See also A.D. Kilmer, "The Mesopotamian Concept of Overpopulation and Its Solution as Reflected in the Mythology," *Or* 41 (1972): 160-77; and Frymer-Kensky, "The Atrahasis Epic," 152.

last mortal to receive the gift of immortality from the gods. Thus it is not difficult to deduce that both the theme and the purpose of the flood in *Gilgamesh* is to demonstrate (etiologically) why humans cannot become immortal. In agreement with this sentiment, Genesis also explicitly denies that humans can become immortal (3:24). However, unlike the Mesopotamian versions, Genesis denies immortality even to its flood hero.<sup>83</sup> This is a polemic: humans cannot become immortal now, nor have they ever been able to do so.

### *Genesis 6–9*

This leads to the question about what changed in Genesis after the flood. Here there is a puzzling contradiction. After the flood, Yahweh says, “I will never again curse the earth for the sake of humankind, for the inclination [רָעָה] of the heart of humankind is evil [רָע] from his youth, and I shall never again smite every living thing according as I have done” (8:21). This seems odd because it was the evil (רָע) inclination (רָעָה) of humankind that prompted Yahweh to send the flood in the first place (6:5). Yahweh promises that he will never send a flood again despite the continued wickedness of humankind. If people’s hearts are still evil, what has actually changed?<sup>84</sup>

The answer may come from chapter 9, where God makes a new covenant with Noah and his posterity. As part of this covenant God institutes laws for humankind, an act comparable in context to the gods in *Atrahasis* instituting new social institutions for population control. These new laws (and the associated covenant) seem to be the difference between the antediluvian and postdiluvian world. After all, “God must do something if he does not want to destroy the earth repeatedly. This something is to create laws for mankind, laws to ensure that matters do not again reach such a state that the world must be destroyed.”<sup>85</sup> This would make sense, considering that חִמְּוָה, one of the reasons for the flood, can be translated as “lawlessness.” Giving laws could theoretically help remedy the issue. But this explanation is not quite complete. Couldn’t God have just given laws to humankind without destroying the earth by flood?

83. Fisher suggests that “the right to kill and eat certain animals functions in the Hebrew version as a substitute for the original (or at least earlier) gift of immortality to man as a gift of a portion of divinity itself.” Fisher, “*Gilgamesh* and Genesis,” 394.

84. There are numerous ways to explain this. Petersen has addressed this dilemma by suggesting that the author of J saw Yahweh’s attempt to destroy man as ineffectual. This, in his view, is why the redactor(s) interwove P with J to temper the cynicism of J. See David L. Petersen, “The Yahwist on the Flood,” *VT* 26 (1976): 438–46. Van Wolde believes that Noah’s sacrifice is what convinced Yahweh to withdraw his anger. See Ellen van Wolde, *Words Become Worlds: Semantic Studies of Genesis 1–11* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 82–3.

85. Frymer-Kensky, “The Atrahasis Epic,” 151.

The text of 9:6 provides a clue: “He who sheds [שפך] the blood of man, by man his blood shall be shed [שפך], for in the image of God he made humankind.” Here God emphasizes the sanctity of human life, the reason being that he created humankind in his own image. As 9:5 also states, any person or animal that killed a human must also be killed. By beginning and ending 9:6 with the same verb (שפך), the text drives home the point that anyone who begins by shedding blood will, in the end, have his blood shed.<sup>86</sup> Capital punishment was a fundamental law in ancient Israel. However, the law of capital punishment was clearly not in effect before the flood. This is obvious from the situations of Cain (4:1–15) and Lemech (4:19–24), who both committed murder but were not slain in response. The blood of the slain polluted the earth in some way as God told Cain that “the voice of the blood of your brother cries to me from the ground. And now, cursed are you from the ground which has opened its mouth to receive the blood of your brother from your hand” (4:10–11). Further, 9:2–6 authorizes the eating of animal flesh but does not legitimize the consumption of blood, thus showing that the shedding of blood (and consequent pollution of the ground) was a major factor in the decision to send the deluge.<sup>87</sup> That the polluted ground needed to be cleansed is made clear by the explanation of Noah’s name, “This [Noah] shall comfort us from our work and from the toil of our hands, from the ground which Yahweh has cursed” (5:29). Noah, portrayed as a second Adam who would bring rest to the earth after the curses of Adam, Cain, and Lemech,<sup>88</sup> helped alleviate this pollution by being the agent through which humankind could continue in an unpolluted world after the flood. More generally, the institution of capital punishment meant that guilty blood would no longer remain un-atoned for, thus eliminating the need to send another deluge.

In sum, this theme of the Genesis flood story is a great example of how its author(s) reused the conventions in the type-scene “to illuminate fundamental Israelite ideas, i.e., the biblical ideals that law and the ‘sanctity of human life’ are the prerequisites of human existence upon the earth.”<sup>89</sup> The theme of the flood being sent to wash away pollution (and serving as the impetus for God to institute new laws for humans to enforce)<sup>90</sup> is also unique to this flood peri-

86. J. P. Fokkelman, *Narrative Art in Genesis: Specimens of Stylistic and Structural Analysis* (Eugene, Ore.: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004), 34–5.

87. See Stipp, “Who is Responsible,” 151.

88. Robert W. E. Forrest, “Paradise Lost Again: Violence and Obedience in the Flood Narrative,” *JSOT* 19 (1994): 10.

89. Frymer-Kensky, “The Atrahasis Epic,” 154.

90. In regards to humankind’s creation in the image of God and God’s expectation that humankind should act in accordance with law, Tigay comments that “the flood story

cope. The other flood stories do not put emphasis on the value of human life, keeping divine law, or ridding the earth of defilement, again demonstrating a large difference in theology between the Israelite and Mesopotamian flood stories.

### **Conclusion**

The above analysis of the Semitic flood type-scene is far from exhaustive, but it does provide a starting point for further review of both the overarching themes and the minute details of the flood story. It has been amply demonstrated that the conventional flood motif has been both employed and altered by each text for its own particular literary, cultural, and theological purposes. The fact that the Hebrew account used the existing Semitic flood type-scene as its basis suggests not only that the author(s) knew of the Mesopotamian texts/tradition but also that *one* specific purpose of writing the flood story was to create polemics against Mesopotamian thought. The obvious similarities between Noah's flood story and the Mesopotamian versions betray a clear literary dependency, but it is the differences, the purposeful alteration of the type-scene, that betray the polemical intention of the biblical author.

---

testifies that man's failure to perform his Godlike role upon himself is what most disturbs God about man." Tigay, "The Image of God," 178.