

The Story of Noah and Other Flood Narratives

The biblical story of Noah and the Great Flood (see Genesis 6:5—8:22) offers one of the best biblical examples of modern scholarly analysis put to use. Because many other ancient Middle East cultures had flood stories, scholars can easily use source criticism to evaluate the similarities and differences of the biblical Flood story with the flood stories of Israel's neighbors. And because the biblical Flood story has clear signs of the redacting (combining) of the Yahwist (J) and Priestly (P) sources, scholars can use redaction criticism to separate these two sources and learn about the peculiarities of each original source and the motives of the Israelite editor who combined them.

The Biblical Flood Story Versus Other Ancient Flood Stories

The two flood stories of the ancient Middle East that most resemble the biblical Flood story are the Babylonian flood myth, *Atrahasis*, and the Sumerian flood myth on Tablet XI of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In *Atrahasis*, the flood is the result of a quarrel among the gods. This leads to the god Enlil proposing to destroy all humans with a flood (because they were too noisy). The god Enki arranges for the man Atrahasis to overhear him talk about the flood, so Atrahasis builds an ark and escapes the flood with his family and animals. The gods are later sorry they destroyed humanity, because they lost their source of free labor!

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is similar to the flood story in *Atrahasis*, probably because the two stories have a common ancestry. In this story the gods, led again by Enlil, agree to rid the earth of an overabundant humanity. But the human Utnapishtim is warned by the god Ea in a dream. Utnapishtim builds a large boat and fills it with his family, the craftsmen who helped him, and all the animals the boat could carry. They survive the flood, and Utnapishtim sends out a dove, a raven, and a sparrow to tell when it is safe to leave the ark. He makes a sacrifice that is pleasing to the gods, and because of this, Utnapishtim and his wife are given immortality—although the gods inflict other humans with disease and barrenness to prevent their future overpopulation.

Similarities of the Middle Eastern Flood Stories

- Most ancient cultures told of a great flood.
- The gods have been offended by human behavior.
- The flood was a method of removing previous transgression and moving toward a period of renewal; water is a symbolic purifying force.
- A god warns a man to build a large boat to save himself, his family, and the animals of the earth from the flood.
- Following the flood, relationships are renewed and lessons are learned.

The Uniqueness of the Biblical Flood Story

- There is only one God, not a pantheon of gods.
- It is the moral evil of humanity, not mere noise or overpopulation that moves God to wipe out the race.



- God's choice of Noah is not a random choice but is based on Noah's righteousness. God practices justice and fairness; he does not act on whim or out of desperation.
- God is not dependent on human beings for labor or anything else. Rather, God seeks to be in a loving relationship, not a master-slave relationship.

The Flood Story and the J and P Traditions

Facts are repeated enough times with different details in the biblical Flood story that scholars can separate out two different sources, or traditions. See the Web site ccat.sas.upenn.edu/rs/2/Judaism/jp-flood.html for a side-by-side comparison of the two sources. Here is a short summary of their differences.

Yahwist Source (J)

- Uses *Yahweh* (LORD) as the name for God
- Makes distinction between clean and unclean animals
- Flood lasts for forty days and nights
- Emphasizes Noah's sacrificial ritual that is pleasing to God

Priestly Source (P)

- Uses *Elohim* (God) as the name for God
- Sees all creation as good, no distinction between clean and unclean animals
- Flood lasts for one hundred fifty days
- Emphasizes the covenant that God makes with Noah

Further Background Material

Books

Barton, John, and John Muddiman, eds. *Oxford Bible Commentary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. See "(6:5—8:2) The Story of the Flood," pages 46–47.

Brown, Raymond E., et al. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1990 or 1999. See "The Flood and the Renewed Blessing (6:9—9:29)," pages 15–17.

Web Sites

ccat.sas.upenn.edu/rs/2/Judaism/jp-flood.html. Web site on JEDP and the Flood narrative.

www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/tab11.htm. This is a translation of the eleventh tablet from the Epic of Gilgamesh.

www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/210512/flood-myth. Britannica article on "Flood Myth."

www.talkorigins.org/faqs/flood-myths.html. Compilation and summary of flood myths from all around the world.

