

The Flood: Fact or Fiction?

Clifford Wilson

Dr. Clifford Wilson was an Area Supervisor at Gezer, Israel, in 1969 and former director of the Australian Institute of Archaeology. He is also the author of *Crash Go the Chariots*, written in answer to Erich von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods*. The present article is taken from the author's *That Incredible Book . . . The Bible, Word of Truth*, Melbourne, 1973.

In a discussion on archaeology and the early chapters of Genesis it is not possible to completely separate the stories of creation and the flood and we have already glanced at one Babylonian record touching on the flood. We have also referred to the Kish King List which mentioned the kings who reigned "before the flood". Now we shall look at some of the archaeological data bearing specifically on the event itself. Once again, theological and other considerations are not elaborately investigated in this survey.

The Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh

The best known Babylonian record of the flood is in the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Gilgamesh himself was the legendary ruler of the ancient city-state of Uruk, and he was supposed to be two-thirds god and one-third man.

The story of the flood is told on the eleventh of the twelve tablets making up the Epic. Utnapishtim was the Babylonian Noah, and with his boatman Puzur-Amurri he went through seven days of terrible flood. Enkidu, the very good friend of Gilgamesh, had died at the decree of the gods and Gilgamesh realized that he, too, must eventually die. He hears of one who has escaped death and sets off to find him so that he can learn the secret of immortality. Alongside a great sea he meets Siduri the Ale-wife who provides the beer needed for travellers on the sea. After crossing the sea, known as the "waters of death", he at last finds Utnapishtim, the only man who had ever found everlasting life.

Utnapishtim speaks to Gilgamesh, and learns of his sadness at the death of his friend Enkidu, and of his sorrow as he wandered up and down pondering the great mystery of life and death. He asks Utnapishtim how he had come to stand in the assembly of the gods and find everlasting life. Utnapishtim then tells the story of how one of the gods

urged him to destroy his house and to build a vessel into which he was to bring representative living creatures.

The Epic goes on to tell in detail how Utnapishtim built the great boat which needed 30,000 baskets of pitch, and the great flood came after he and his family were safely aboard.

So terrible was the storm that followed that “even the gods were afeared at the deluge, took to flight and went up to the heaven of Anu, cowered they like dogs and crouched down at the outer defences”.

In passing we should notice just how different this concept of gods is from that given in the record of Genesis chapters 6 to 9. How impossible it would be to think of the God of the Bible “cowering like a dog” or “afeared at the deluge”.

Another translation tells us:

Ashtar cried like a woman in travail, wailed the queen of the gods with her beautiful voice: ‘Those creatures are turned to clay, since I commanded evil in the assembly of the gods; because I commanded evil in the assembly of the gods, for the destruction of my people I commanded battle. I alone bore my people; like spawn of fishes they fill the sea.’ The gods along with the Anunnaki wept with her, the gods bowed, sat as they wept; closed were their lips; (silent their) assembly.

Utnapishtim rode out the storm, then waited several days for the waters to abate. On the seventh day he freed a dove which flew around for a while, then came back. Similarly he sent forth a swallow which also came back. Next a raven was released, but the raven ‘saw again the natural flowing of the waters, and he ate and he flew about and he croaked, and came not returning”.

“The Gods Gathered Like Flies”

The waters were now swiftly abating, so Utnapishtim poured forth a libation to the gods, then made an offering for them —

And the gods smelled the savour, the gods smelled the sweet savour, the gods gathered like flies about the priest of the offering.

These poor gods had not been fed — because mankind had been destroyed. So they gathered like flies as soon as Utnapishtim remembered their need and did something about it!

Then we read of gods angry at each other. The god Enlil is furious against the other gods and demands, “Has ought of living-kind escaped? Not a man should have survived the destruction!” The gods were not one in their purpose, for Utnapishtim had survived the judgment because one of those very gods had given him warning.

Then, according to Utnapishtim, the god Ea suggested that Enlil had indiscriminately brought about the deluge. He argued that only those who had sinned should have been judged, and that instead of a flood animals such as lions and wolves should have been used, or a famine which would have impoverished but not destroyed mankind. Enlil listened to Ea’s reasoning, and then he came to Utnapishtim and his wife and decreed that they would henceforth be as one of the gods, dwelling in the “Far Distance, at the Mouth of the Rivers”.

Again, how different all this is from the God Who is revealed in Scripture — He does not need the offerings of a man to sate His hunger, nor could we ever imagine it being said of the true God of the Heavens that He has come like flies to an offering. Nor was there disharmony as to the divine judgment. When mercy was rejected, God’s judgment fell — a consistent Bible picture.

Similarities to, and Differences from the Bible

As with the Epic of Atrahasis, scholars have pointed to some similarities to the Bible story: thus in each record there is supposedly a final revelation to the hero of the flood, warning him that a deluge is coming which is unknown to everyone else. However, in the Bible story, Noah is told to warn others so that they, too, can accept the way of salvation if they so desire.

In each case the hero builds a vessel which is sealed within and without with pitch, it describes the flood in which all others are destroyed, tells of the great ship resting on a mountain, and of certain birds being sent out. Each record tells how the hero disembarks and offers a sacrifice, and then says that such a deluge shall not be visited on man again.

There are other Babylonian flood records, such as that written on a tablet at Nippur and dating before 2,000 B.C., but, as with the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Bible record is infinitely superior. It does not bear the marks of the grotesque, the superstitious or the magical.

Another interesting point is that part of the Epic of Gilgamesh was found in the excavations at Megiddo in ancient Palestine (now Israel) — it was nearly a thousand years earlier than that known in the palace of the Assyrian King, Ashur-bani-pal, and showed that the story was widely known in patriarchal times throughout the whole East. How did that story get from Babylon to Palestine? Someone who travelled the long route must have taken that clay tablet with him. And if that could be done with other ancient stories known in Mesopotamia, why not with the Bible stories? Abraham migrated across that same “Fertile Crescent” from Mesopotamia to Canaan not so very

long before the date of this particular copy of the Babylonian flood story, and he could well have carried original tablets which Moses eventually used to give us the early stories in Genesis.

Such a possibility has been developed by P. J. Wiseman in his fascinating book, *New Discoveries in Babylonia about Genesis*. He put forward the argument that the literary aids demonstrated in Genesis indicate “that the book was compiled at an early date, certainly not later than the age of Moses”. He suggested that the repetition of words and phrases pointed to different clay tablets, the first words of the new tablet being a repetition of the last words of the previous record — what is technically called a “colophon”. He argued that this can be seen as follows:

- Gen. 1 : 1 — “God created the heavens and the earth” (cf. 2:4)
- Gen. 2: 4 — “When they were created” (cf. 5:2).
- Gen. 6: 10 — “Shem, Ham and Japheth” (cf. 10:1)
- Gen. 10 : 1 — “After the flood” (cf. 11:10).
- Gen. 11 : 26 — “Abram, Nahor and Haran” (cf. 11:27).
- Gen. 25: 12 — “Abraham’s son” (cf. 25:19);
- Gen. 36: 1 — “Who is Edom” (cf. 36:8).
- Gen. 36 : 9 — “Father of the Edomites” (literally “Father Edom”) (cf. 36:43).

He adds convincing evidence to show similar practices from the written records of the ancient East — these early Bible records follow the recognized pattern.

Certainly the Bible records were not copied from those clay tablets recovered from the palace of the Assyrian King Ashur-bani-pal, as used to be claimed. Professor W. F. Albright points out, in fact, that “the Bible record contains archaic features dating it to before any Mesopotamian version that is “preserved in cuneiform sources.”¹

An interesting comment on these matters comes from Professor G. Ernest Wright of Harvard:

Consequently, an increasing number of scholars have been coming to the conclusion that many of these ancient traditions regarding origins must go back to an earlier period. In fact, it seems most probable that some of the traditions about the Creation, the Garden of Eden, the Flood, the stories of Nimrod (Gen. 10:8ff.) and of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11) were brought from Mesopotamia by the Patriarchs themselves. How else explain why Israel had them but Canaan did not?²

Has Evidence of Noah’s Flood been Found?

¹ In *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, p. 86.

² In *Biblical Archaeology* p. 45.

In 1929 Sir Leonard Woolley, the famous excavator of Abraham's city of Ur, claimed to have found evidence of Noah's flood at Ur. In two different shafts he was able to show that civilization existed above a layer of sterile clay eight feet deep, with evidence of earlier civilization below the clay level. However, the clay was found in only two of the five shafts sunk, and Woolley himself did not find any similar evidence at Tell Obeid, only four miles away.

Soon after Woolley's discovery similar levels were found at other sites in ancient Mesopotamia, notably at Tell Fara which is half-way between Ur and Babylon, and at Kish, as well as at Nineveh to the north. The dates were different from Woolley's find at Ur, and so they could not be from the same inundation. More recently Professor M. E. L. Mallowan has suggested that the inundation at Tell Fara might be the Biblical flood, and that the findings at Kish could relate to the same disaster. However, the evidence is inconclusive.

Has the Ark Itself been Found?

From time to time theories are put forward as to the finding of the ark, one such having been investigated by Turkish Army authorities in the late 1960's. It was a huge object some five hundred yards long, but wood found in the area proved to be relatively recent. What was believed to have been a huge man-made object turned out to be a natural formation after all.

Another claim was that two World War II airmen saw the ark high up on one of the mountains inside Russian territory, but this particular "sighting" has been authoritatively denied. Similar claims have been made from time to time, without denials, and it certainly is not impossible that the ark has been or will be both seen and found.

There are well attested records relating to a Roman Catholic monastery destroyed by an avalanche at the beginning of this century. There were many ancient objects in this monastery which were supposed to have come from the ark, having been gathered over the centuries in times of a hotter than usual summer when the ice-line was higher than in other seasons, thus losing some of the treasure normally bound in impenetrable ice.

Certain it is that Fernand Navarra, a Frenchman, believes that he has found evidence of Noah's ark, and following one of his visits to Mount Ararat in 1955 he wrote his best-seller, *I Found Noah's Ark*.

Carbon-dating has shown that some of the wood he found near the summit of this 17,000 ft. mountain was over 4,000 years old, and to Navarra the logical explanation was that this was part of the wood from Noah's ark. Others challenged this conclusion, pointing out that in very early times the region around Mt. Ararat was thickly forested, and that tribes in the area built log huts and in doing so displayed real skill in their primitive woodwork. Others have suggested that Navarra actually found part of an

ancient wooden temple dedicated to gods in the region, this being a real possibility on the summit of a mountain such as Ararat.

However, this is not without problems, for when the late Ralph E. Crawford, President of the Search Foundation Incorporated of Washington, D.C., U.S.A., reported on this finding he stated that the timbers recovered appeared to be white oak. As there is no white oak within hundreds of miles of the mountain it is hard to see how this timber could have been transported to high up the mountain for the purpose of building a temple.

The Frenchman Navarra estimated that the timbers he saw embedded in a frozen lake in 1955 would have weighed about 50 tons. The “proof” piece he chopped out at his first sighting was about five feet long — and, as we have already said, it was carbon-dated as being over 4,000 years old.

The Turkish Government constantly receives requests from those who want to climb Mt. Ararat, but these are usually turned down — one reason is that the Russians object to the area being visited because of the very real possibility of spying, and also because the region is part of a N.A.T.O. restricted area.

Some, though not all, pieces of wood found recently are reported to be identical to those found 14 years before. One of the expedition members is reported as saying that the main part of a great man-made wooden construction which could be Noah’s ark was buried in 900,000 cubic yards of ice and debris left by earlier glaciers. He reported that modern techniques would be essential if the ice and debris were to be removed.

A number of Americans, including John Warwick Montgomery, Eryl Cummings and Ralph A. Lenton, have continued separate activities towards finding the ark. Another who believes he has seen the famous old vessel is Mr. Hardwick Knight.

This author has talked at length to Mr. Knight, a well-known New Zealand archaeologist who has no special brief to “prove the Bible”. He saw a man-made wooden structure high up on Mt. Ararat, and revisited the area with an American investigation team. At the time of his “sighting” he was moving away from the area as fast as he could, and did not stop to photograph what he saw, nor did he take a sample of the wood. In fact, it was not until a few minutes later that it registered that what he had seen was at least unusual, but his immediate circumstances did not allow him to retrace his steps. It was a particularly hot summer, and he believed that what he had seen would be uncovered only in such a season, when the ice-line was higher than usual.

When this author talked at length with Mr. Knight, he certainly impressed by his objective approach to what he had seen. He believes it is possible he stumbled on Noah’s ark, but he does not insist dogmatically that he has done so.

He described the object as resembling the framework of a large wooden gun-carriage. I rather doubted if such a description would fit Noah’s ark, unless it were only a part of it.

However, Mr. Knight's "find" was some distance from Fernand Navarra's sighting, and it could be that time and the elements have broken this "object" into sections. Only time will tell as to whether the ark has in fact been found.

The Table of Nations and the Tower of Babel

Two other topics should be commented on before we leave Genesis chapters 1-11, the seed-plot of the Bible. They are the Table of Nations and the Tower of Babel. We shall first glance at the Table of Nations in Genesis chapter 10.

The table itself is astonishingly accurate, according to Professor Albright, who wrote:

It stands absolutely alone in ancient literature without a remote parallel even among the Greeks . . . 'The Table of Nations' remains an astonishingly accurate document . . . (It) shows such remarkably 'modern' understanding of the ethnic and linguistic situation in the modern world, in spite of all its complexity, that scholars never fail to be impressed with the author's knowledge of the subject."³

Archaeology has given clear testimony to the accuracy of the chapter, for nearly all the names mentioned are now known. The Bible records have been substantiated in no uncertain manner — not only as regards the people who are in the centre of Biblical history, but as regards other peoples as well. The Assyrians, the Medes, the Greeks, the Egyptians and others are referred to in ways that are astonishingly accurate. We even find mention of points that were long ago forgotten, but are now known to have been just as the Bible briefly states. One example is that Nineveh was established by the rulers of Babylon, stated in Genesis 10:1, 12. This is in harmony with what the monuments tell us.

Other nations such as the Greeks had stories about the origins of peoples, but they are clearly mythological. The Bible "Table of Nations" is unique, and is another indication that its history must be taken seriously. For this "Table of Nations" was a survey of the history of many nations over several centuries.

Incidentally, only the Bible gives an acceptable history of a people from its actual development through individuals. Most other peoples start their written histories only when they are well established, when powerful kings are ruling, by which time the nation's early beginnings have been lost in antiquity. By comparison the Hebrew people have a remarkable outline of their origins in Genesis chapters 1 through 11.

The Tower of Babel

³ *Recent Discoveries in Bible Lands*, pp. 70 ff.

Our final story from these chapters relates to the Tower of Babel. It is as though we listen in to an ancient conversation and we hear men saying, “Go to, let us build a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Gen. 11:3).

Ancient peoples often built their cities around their sacred towers. That was what Sir Leonard Woolley found when he excavated at the city of Ur, and it has been found in many other places too. With the successful development of fired bricks, much bigger buildings were possible than before with stones, and so men now decided to build this great tower towards heaven.

Possibly they were thinking of being safe in case another flood judgment came; certainly they were setting themselves up as a super people, and their tower would not be to the glory of God. This becomes clear by the excavations of later towers. The actual pattern of ancient temple towers was to have the shrine of the god at the top, and thus it was the focal point, the centre of attention. Little wonder that God was displeased, for such a temple spoke of rejection of the true God. And in this first temple at Babel we find the seeds of rebellion and self-glorification, fully developed in later times. When we look at the great ziggurat, or temple tower, at the city of Ur — which was in this same general area — we find that it contained an inner shrine where all sorts of abominable practices were carried out in the name of the moon-god Nannar.

No longer do scholars disregard this story, for modern research has clearly demonstrated that many civilizations did indeed have their beginnings from Mesopotamia. Archaeology confirms that the influence and the culture of Mesopotamia spread far and wide as men scattered abroad upon the face of the earth. In this general pattern of the spread of culture archaeology supports the story. It is well attested too that many of the languages known in the Ancient Near East were actually developed in the general area of Mesopotamia, the plain of Shinar.

Professor W. F. Albright suggested that the story should be dated to the twenty-second century B.C., and that the word “sem” does not mean “name” but “an (inscribed) monument”. He says, “It was, therefore, as a tremendous monument to its builders that the Tower of Babel was intended.”⁴

It was a sad picture. Man’s rebellion and self-glorification led once again to the judgment of God, not by a flood this time, but his language was confused and he was scattered throughout the earth.

The Site of Babel

The question is often asked, “Is the site of the Tower of Babel known today?” The answer is, opinions differ.

⁴ *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan*, p. 87.

There is a large waterhole at the site of Nebuchadnezzar's famous city of Babylon. Some scholars claim that this was the site of the Tower of Babel, and that its bricks have been used for nearby building activities. However, it might have been a later tower.

Others suggest that ancient Kish, a few miles from Babylon, is the correct site. Others again suggest a third nearby site, Birs-Nimrud, the ancient Borsippa. But no one really knows. The pattern of "ziggurats", or temple-towers, is, however, well attested in these areas of the East.

It is interesting that other peoples also have traditions as to the Tower of Babel. Robert T. Boyd writes:

Not only has the discovery of many 'ziggurats' helped to confirm the Biblical record of a tower at Babel, but further evidence relates a story of King Ur-Nammu of the Third Dynasty of Ur (2044 to 2007 B.C.). He received orders from his god and goddess to build the ziggurat. The stele is nearly five feet across and ten feet high. At the top, the king stands in an attitude of prayer. Above his head is the symbol of the moon god Nannar and to the right are figures of angels with vases from which flow the streams of life (the earliest known artistic figures of angels). The panels show the king setting out with compass, pick and trowel, and mortar baskets to begin construction. One panel preserves only a ladder used as the structure was rising. The reverse side records a commemorative feast.

A clay tablet was unearthed which gave the following account of a ziggurat: 'The erection (building) of this tower (temple) highly offended all the gods. In a night they (threw down) what man had built, and impeded their progress. They were scattered abroad, and their speech was strange.' Once again the archaeologist has given to us evidence that the Bible records and accounts of other peoples of other nations are closely related, and that the Bible is not just a 'one-sided' account of events and happenings.⁵

The Confusion of Tongues

One final point. The March, 1968, *Journal of the American Oriental Society* consists of a series of essays in memory of the famous archaeologist E. A. Speiser, and one essay is by Professor S. N. Kramer, of the University of Pennsylvania — *The 'Babel of Tongues' — A Sumerian Version*. Dr. Kramer reminds us that E. A. Speiser analysed with characteristic acumen, learning and skill the Mesopotamian background of the "Tower

⁵ In *Tells, Tombs and Treasures*.

of Babel” narrative, and came to the conclusion that it “had a demonstrable source in cuneiform literature”.⁶

Professor Speiser was by no means alone in this view — e.g. Professor Robert Braidwood was another who referred to the widespread acceptance of a factual basis to much about early civilization that had previously been regarded as purely mythical.

Dr. Kramer says of his own article: “This paper will help to corroborate and confirm Speiser’s conclusion by bringing to light a new parallel to one of the essential motifs in the ‘Tower of Babel’ theme — the confusion of tongues.”

Another essay in the same series tells of a fragmentary tablet of 27 lines, that has recently been copied by the Oxford cuneiformist Oliver Gurney. This helps to restore the idea of a golden age, an idea known in literature for about 25 years. This “Golden Age” was supposed to have been in the earlier Sumerian period. The new fragmentary tablet includes a Sumerian version of the story of the Babel of tongues. This “golden age” passage is actually part of an address where an unknown ruler wants “the lord of Arrata” to allow him to become his vassal, and then to have gold, silver and semi-precious stones procured in order to build various shrines and temples, with a special emphasis on the great temple in the city of Eridu.

Here is the translation as it relates to this Sumerian version of the time when there was only one language:

Once upon a time there was no snake, there was no scorpion,
There was no hyena, there was no lion,
There was no wild dog, no wolf. There was no fear, no terror.
140 Man had no rival.
In those days, the lands Subur and Hamazi,
Harmony-tongued Sumer, the great land of the decrees of princship,
Uri, the land having all that is appropriate.
The land Martu, resting in security,
145 The whole universe, the people in unison To Enlil in one tongue . . .

Clearly, men believed in a golden age when they were free from fear and want, living in a world that knew nothing but prosperity. All the people of the world worshipped one god, it being claimed in this story that he was the Sumerian god Enlil. They were able to speak to their god in one tongue, as we are told at line 146.

This is not the first tablet in which there is a reference to speaking in one tongue, but this new tablet is actually a better preserved copy of the previously known Epic tale “Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta,” published by Dr. Kramer in 1952 as a monograph of the University of Pennsylvania Museum. However, until this new tablet was translated the meaning was ambiguous — it could have been taken literally to suggest that all the

⁶ pp. 74-76, Anchor Bible *Genesis*.

peoples of the world did indeed use the same language, or it could have been looked at as a figurative expression declaring the unanimity of all people as they acknowledged the supremacy of Enlil.

This new text now makes it clear that people were indeed supposed to speak but one language.

As Dr. Kramer says:

Our new piece, therefore, puts it beyond all doubt that the Sumerians believed that there was a time when all mankind spoke one and the same language, and that it was Enki, the Sumerian god of wisdom, who confounded their speech. The reason for this fateful deed is not stated in the text; it may well have been inspired by Enki's jealousy of Enlil and the universal sway over mankind that he enjoyed.

No matter how we look at it, it surely is amazing that the Bible record of Babel, the confusion of tongues — and so much else — has been preserved, not needing to be dug up. It is in THAT INCREDIBLE BOOK!

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