

The traditions of ancient peoples throughout the world share in common the inclusion of flood stories. The Mesopotamian accounts have garnered the most discussion since they are culturally closer to the Biblical material than any of the other non-Scriptural narratives. The most famous of the many ancient flood stories is the Mesopotamian flood account, the Babylonian version, found in the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal (seventh century BCE) as part of the larger Epic of Gilgamesh.



Is the Genesis account just one of many ancient flood stories?

In this epic, Gilgamesh searches for a man named Utnapishtum (the equivalent of the Biblical Noah), whose story is then recounted. When one of the highest gods, Enlil, becomes annoyed by the cacophony of noise coming from human beings, he decides to inundate and destroy them all in a catastrophic deluge. Enki, the god of waters, reveals Enlil's intent to the mortal Utnapishtum, directing him to construct an enormous boat and load it with pairs of animals. Instructed not to reveal the reason for this mystifying building project, Utnapishtum is further commanded at a critical point to take his wife on board with him. For seven harried days and nights Utnapishtum and his wife are tossed about in this vessel as floodwaters engulf the earth. When the waters finally subside, the boat lodges atop a tall mountain. Utnapishtum sends out a dove, a swallow and a raven, the last of which fails to return, apparently having located nourishment.

The man then disembarks and offers lavish sacrifices to the gods, who in turn bestow eternal life upon him and his wife for having safeguarded the future of humans and animals.

An Akkadian account dating to around 1600 BCE recounts basically the same tale as that

embedded in the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh, except that the Noah-character is named Atra-hasis. An even earlier Sumerian version, known as the Eridu Genesis, contains the stories of creation and the development of the first cities, along with an account of the great flood. Here the hero is Ziusudra.

Bible readers will immediately recognize the similarities between the Mesopotamian and Biblical accounts. But there are significant differences, too. According to the Bible God, was not simply irritated by the badness of humanity. He was terribly grieved, to the point that “his heart was filled with pain” by the magnitude of human sin (**Genesis 6:5-7**). God’s plan was not thwarted by the cunning of another deity. Yahweh God himself chose to preserve both humanity and animal life through Noah (**Genesis 6:13-21**). Genesis also attests to a longer flood period than other ancient flood stories, and, although God made a covenant with Noah, he did not grant him immortality. **“After the flood, Noah lived 350 years. Noah lived a total of 950 years, and then he died” (Genesis 9:28,29 NIV).**

Assuming a later date for the Biblical composition, some scholars have suggested that Mesopotamian accounts may have served as a prototype for the narrative in Genesis. But most researchers believe that the Biblical account is not simply a modification of the Mesopotamian ancient flood stories, but one of several versions of a common story. The differences can be attributed to the special revelation God gave the Biblical authors, including Moses, the writer of Genesis, by which he made known his plan of redemption. This makes the Bible unique. The other versions, or ancient flood stories, provide extra-biblical confirmation of the story of a great flood rather than demonstrating, as some have suggested, that the Biblical account is a myth. The other ancient flood stories help to confirm the Biblical account as genuine, in fact, as **“the word of the Lord” (1 Peter 1:25).**

One source: New International Version Archaeological Study Bible