

The gift of the first fruits is due not only from the first ripe crops of the soil but also from certain foods processed from these crops, i.e. grain, new wine, new (olive) oil, fruit syrup, leavened food and bread dough. Thus, "All the best of the oil, all the best of the new wine and of the grain, their first fruits which they offer to the Lord, I have given them to you. Whatever first-ripe fruit is in their land, which they bring to the Lord, shall be yours" (Num 18:12-13; cf Ezek 44:30); grain, wine and oil as well as fruit syrup, leaven and dough and wool (Num 15:20-21; Deut 18:4; II Chr 31:5). The most significant festival involving the first of a crop to ripen was that of the first-ripe wheat, which was made to coincide with the Pentecost or Feast of Weeks (Ex 23:16; 34:22; Lev 23:15, 21; Num 28:26; Deut 16:9-12). In a figurative sense Israel is called the first fruits of God (Jer 2:3). In the NT, Jesus — the first to rise to a new life — is the first fruits of the dead (I Cor 15:20). Even in this life, Christians possess the first fruits of the spirit. The first generations of the Church were the first fruits of God (James 1:18; Rev 14:4) while the first Christians to be converted are also referred to as first fruits (Rom 16:5; I Cor 16:15).

FISH GATE One of the gates of Jerusalem, built by King Manasseh of Judah (II Chr 33:14); it was repaired after the return from the Babylonian Exile by the sons of Hassenaah (Neh 3:3), and mentioned together with the Gate of Ephraim, the Old Gate and the Tower of Hananea (Hananeel, Neh 3:1) in conjunction with the thanksgiving ceremony marking the completion of the work (Neh 12:39). It is identified by some with the Gate of Ephraim in the northern wall of the city. The name apparently derives from the nearby fish market (Neh 13:16).

FLAX See PLANTS

FLEA See ANIMALS

FLOOD The biblical flood story (Gen 6:5-9:17) relates how, in the tenth generation from Adam, God found that mankind's evil had reached proportions beyond toleration. As a result, God resolved to wipe out the human race and begin again with the only virtuous person in that entire generation, Noah, and his family. God revealed his fateful plan to Noah alone, ordering him to build a huge ark for himself and his family to ride out the flood in safety, along with representatives of every species of animal, so that they, too, could be regenerated after the calamity (Gen 6:14-20). Noah obeyed all of God's orders punctiliously. The flood came and destroyed all earthly life save the small party in the ark. After seven and a half months the ark came to rest upon the mountains of the Ararat region, in Armenia (Gen 8:4). Noah opened his window and sent out birds to see whether the earth had dried. He made four probes, once with a raven and three times with a dove; on the final occasion the dove failed to return (Gen 8:7-12). A year after the onset of the flood, God commanded Noah to leave the ark. Noah built an altar and offered sacrifices to God in gratitude for his deliverance (Gen 8:15-20). Upon smelling the sacrifices, God swore never again to doom the world because of man; just as he had commanded humanity at the beginning so he now commanded Noah, "be fruitful and multiply", so that the world would be repopulated (Gen 9:1). The reason for God's forswearing the future destruction of humanity is because "the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth," (Gen 8:32). Realizing that, given human nature, the same problem was likely to arise again, God decided that repeated floods would be futile, whereupon he adopted a new approach: he gave man laws, spelling out what is prohibited, and ordering man himself to punish violators. He now permitted man to eat meat (without the blood) and prohibited

FISH
GATE

II Chr 33:14.

Neh 3:3;

12:39. Zeph

1:10

Illustrations & Dictionary of Concordance of the Bible. ed. Geoffrey Wiseman (W.T. Macmillan, 1986)

murder, ordering that "whoever sheds man's blood, by man his blood shall be shed." (Gen 9:1-6). He then placed a rainbow in the clouds as a token of his covenant never again to destroy the human race by flood (Gen 9:12-17).

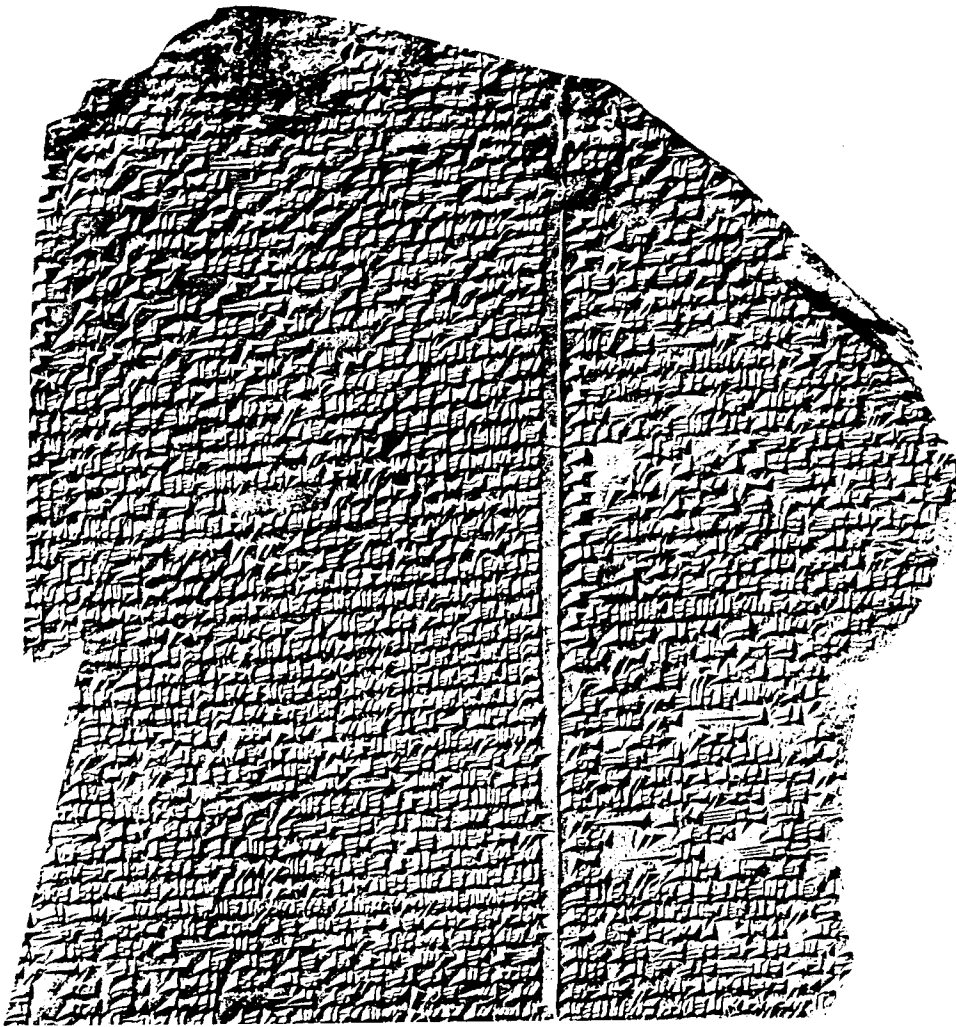
Because of certain inconsistencies in the account of the flood (e.g., the number of animals Noah was to take, the chronology of the flood), critical scholars are of the opinion that the present biblical text amalgamates two originally separate narratives which shared the same outline but differed from each other in formulation and certain details.

The biblical account of the flood has much in common with one from Mesopotamia which is known in several versions. The oldest and fullest versions are a Sumerian one in which the survivor is called Ziusudra ("life of long days"), an Akkadian one in which he is called Atrahasis ("exceedingly wise"), and, borrowed from the latter, another Akkadian one in the *Gilgamesh Epic*, where the survivor of the flood is called Utnapishtim (probably meaning "he found life").

The Mesopotamian stories contain many similarities to the biblical account. The flood marks a turning point in primeval history. It is brought on by divine decision as a punishment for man's sins against the gods. One man, the favorite of a god, is singled out for salvation. To save his family and representatives of all living creatures, he is to build a vessel caulked inside and out with pitch. The flood results from a rainstorm. After the devastation of the flood, the vessel comes to rest on a mountain peak. Birds are dispatched to discover whether dry land has appeared. When the hero leaves the boat he offers a sacrifice. The gods express their sorrow over what has happened.

All these similarities leave little doubt that there is a very close relationship between the biblical and Mesopotamian accounts of the flood; extensive floods being common in the Tigris-Euphrates Valley, but not Palestine, and the Mesopotamian texts being centuries older than the biblical ones, there is no doubt that the Israelites were the borrowers, though it cannot be said whether they drew on the known Mesopotamian texts, other texts or oral tradition. (A fragment of the flood story found at Ugarit shows that the Mesopotamian story was known in the Syro-Palestinian region by about the 14th century B.C.). This indebtedness is not surprising since biblical tradition traces the early Hebrew back to Mesopotamia, where they undoubtedly learned many traditions about early human history. But the borrowing did not take the form of unreflecting imitation. Probably feeling that key parts of the Mesopotamian version were highly improbable, the Israelites revised the account in accordance with their own views of what is believable. Consequently, despite its similarities to the Mesopotamian myth, the biblical version radically transforms the raw materials in light of original Israelite religious values.

In the polytheistic Mesopotamian version, the flood is brought on when the gods' sleep is disturbed by mankind's bellowing and uproar, which reached intolerable levels after humanity had multiplied. The idea is that too many people produce too much noise. That is why the gods sent all the plagues: to reduce the human population to a size which would not produce such a racket. This explanation was unacceptable to the Bible, for two reasons. First, God was not opposed to increases in the human population; his first utterance to man was "Be fruitful and multiply" (Gen 1:28), a blessing repeated immediately after the flood (Gen 9:1, 7). Second, the Bible rejects the notion that God sleeps and can be awakened by noise: "he who keeps Israel shall neither slumber nor sleep" (Ps 121:4), and Elijah used this as an accusation against Baal in mocking those who believed in him (1 Kgs 18:27). The



(left)
Part of a tablet on which the Epic of Gilgamesh, the Babylonian version of the Flood, is recorded. c. 2000-1800 B.C.

People drowning in the Flood.
Detail of a Spanish illuminated manuscript of the 8th century. (Library of the Cathedral of Gerona, Spain)



historicity of the flood itself was not doubted, but the event had to be interpreted in a manner compatible with the Israelite view of the way God operates. And since that view held that God judges the human race for actions in the moral sphere, it followed that the human offense which led to the flood must have been a moral breach, not a noisy violation of mythic divine repose.

A second biblical innovation involves the question of who is to be punished. In the Mesopotamian version, although mankind offended the gods, it is clear that the chief god was not interested in whether any humans were virtuous. After the flood was over, he was scolded by a fellow god, who said "Punish the sinner for his sin" (i.e. and not the innocent). In contrast, the biblical version takes great pains to show that all those punished were really guilty, by stating explicitly that man's devisings were nothing but evil and that the earth was filled with injustice (Gen 6:5). Even the seemingly naive statement that "all flesh had corrupted their ways" (Gen 6:12) emphasizes that not even a dumb beast would suffer undeservingly; if the animals died in the flood, they, too, must have sinned.

A third innovation is the reason for the protection of the hero. The Mesopotamian versions seem to stress that Atrahasis was a pious king favored by his god. His moral qualities are not emphasized, nor is his piety explicitly given as the reason for his salvation. In contrast, the Bible stresses that Noah was saved because he was a man who walked

with God and, especially, was a “just man”, upright in his dealing with his fellow man. In addition, the Bible stresses that he was a just man “in his generation”, in other words, that he resisted the influence of the corrupt society around him (Gen 6:8-9).

A fourth distinctive characteristic is the contrasting divine solutions to the problem of humanity after the flood. In the Mesopotamian story, man having sinned by disturbing the divine rest with his noise, the gods’ solution is to reduce the population and prevent it from growing too much in the future. In the Bible, man’s sin is lawlessness, especially violence. God’s solution is to establish laws against murder and to entrust man with the responsibility for enforcing them, thereby living up to the God-like role conferred upon him by being created in God’s image (Gen 9:6).

There are, moreover, several other unique features of the biblical account when compared with its Mesopotamian counterparts. In Mesopotamia, the hero constructs a boat (with a displacement about five times that of Noah’s vessel) and takes aboard a boatman to navigate the ship; by contrast, Noah is commanded to build an ark which, being unnavigable, stresses that his deliverance can be attributed solely to the will of God. Furthermore, at the end of the earlier tale, the hero is elevated to the status of a god; Noah, however, maintains his human status, since the Bible never blurs the dividing line between humanity and divinity. These innovations in the biblical account endow it with uniqueness in spite of its dependence on Mesopotamia for details. The biblical account took the raw materials of the Mesopotamian myth and transformed them into a paradigm of the moral principles governing God’s relationship with man.

The “waters of Noah” are referred to once in later biblical literature, in Isaiah 54:9. In the NT, the sudden advent of the deluge is compared to the sudden arrival of the Son of man (Matt 24:37-39; Luke 17:26-27) and its waters are comparable to the waters of baptism (I Pet 3:20).

FLY See ANIMALS

FOOD AND DRINK In the Canaanite and Israelite periods the term “food” included both the produce of the soil and meat, but in the Bible the most frequent term for food is “bread” (Gen 3:19; Ex 2:20), probably because this was the staple element in the diet.

Bread was made of wheat or barley and sometimes from a mixture of other ingredients. Flour was used both for baking bread and for fried dishes (Lev 7:12), cakes (II Sam 13:8) and wafers mixed with honey, to which the manna of the wilderness is likened in Exodus 16:31. Grain was eaten dried (I Sam 17:17) or green (Lev 23:14). Vegetables were eaten as well — mainly beans, pulses (II Sam 17:28) and lentils, from which a soup was made (Gen 25:34). Other foods mentioned among those to which the Israelites were accustomed in Egypt are cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions and garlic (Num 11:5). There is no reason to suppose that these were not grown in Palestine as well.

Farmers bearing geese. From a carved ivory plaque found at Megiddo. 1350-1150 B.C.

