

Origins of Torah Stories in Genesis

In his book, *The Hebrew Bible: A translation with Commentary*, Robert Alter, the contemporary Tanach scholar and Professor of Literature at UC Berkeley, references the ancient Near East 170 times, about half of these to help explain Torah. In his words: "I thought it necessary to offer succinct explanations of some of the ancient Near Eastern cultural practices and social institutions that are presupposed by the narratives, for without an understanding of them it is sometimes hard to see exactly what is going on in the story."

Much historical, archeological, linguistic, literary and religious biblical research has been conducted by Christian, Jewish, and Islamic scholars to "see what is exactly going on in the story" and how these stories arose. This week we will concentrate on two stories in Genesis: Creation and The Flood.

Genesis 1 and 2: Creation story

Enuma Elish

The Enuma Elish (also known as The Seven Tablets of Creation) is the Mesopotamian creation myth whose title is derived from the opening lines of the piece, "When on High". It is approximately dated long before the fall of Sumer (1750 BCE). As far back as 4500 BCE, Sumer came to be identified with the southern portion of Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates but also included some territory on the Arabian Peninsula. Abraham, who is described as from Ur, would have been a Sumerian, although some argue that he was a Chaldean from northwest Mesopotamia. Abraham's life is most often placed at approximately 1900 BC.

In the Babylonian version, summarized below, Marduk is the high god who creates heaven and earth. In the older Sumerian version, Ea takes this role. However, the Babylonian version retains Ea as the god who creates humans.

Our discussion topic: This story is much different than the elegant and high-minded creation story in Genesis. However, what concepts and aspects of creation are similar to the creation story in Genesis? What differences significant to Jewish belief and thought do you see? More specifically, compare or contrast the purpose of the creation story, who performs the acts of creation and how are they done, the order and time duration of creation, the reason for creating humans, how humans were created, and what are differences in what is created.

Summary of the Enuma Elish (from J.J.Mark, Enuma Elish - The Babylonian Epic of Creation - Full Text, May 2018, www.ancient.eu)

Here are the first 6 lines of the word by word translation of the seven tablets found in the Nineveh Library of Ashurbanipal.

Tablet I

1 When the heavens above did not exist,

- 2 And earth beneath had not come into being —
- 3 There was Apsû, the first in order, their begetter,
- 4 And demiurge Tia-mat, who gave birth to them all;
- 5 They had mingled their waters together
- 6 Before meadow-land had coalesced and reed-bed was to be found —

In the beginning, there was only undifferentiated water swirling in chaos. Out of this swirl, the waters divided into sweet, fresh water, known as the god Apsu, and salty bitter water, the goddess Tiamat. Once differentiated, the union of these two entities gave birth to the younger gods.

These young gods, however, were extremely loud, troubling the sleep of Apsu at night and distracting him from his work by day. Upon the advice of his Vizier, Mummu, Apsu decides to kill the younger gods. Tiamat, hearing of their plan, warns her eldest son, Enki (sometimes Ea) and he puts Apsu to sleep and kills him. From Apsu's remains, Enki creates his home.

Tiamat, once the supporter of the younger gods, now is enraged that they have killed her mate. She consults with the god, Quingu, who advises her to make war on the younger gods. Tiamat rewards Quingu with the Tablets of Destiny, which legitimize the rule of a god and control the fates, and he wears them proudly as a breastplate. With Quingu as her champion, Tiamat summons the forces of chaos and creates eleven horrible monsters to destroy her children.

Ea, Enki, and the younger gods fight against Tiamat futilely until, from among them, emerges the champion Marduk who swears he will defeat Tiamat. Marduk defeats Quingu and kills Tiamat by shooting her with an arrow which splits her in two. Out of Tiamat's corpse, Marduk creates the heavens and the earth, he appoints gods to various duties and binds Tiamat's eleven creatures to his feet as trophies (to much adulation from the other gods) before setting their images in his new home.

Here are the exact words for earth and heaven creation.

Tablet IV

- 137 He split her (Tia-mat) into two like a dried fish:
- 138 One half of her he set up and stretched out as the heavens.
- 139 He stretched the skin and appointed a watch
- 140 With the instruction not to let her waters escape.
- 141 He crossed over the heavens, surveyed the celestial parts,
- 142 And adjusted them to match the Apsû, Nudimmud's abode.
- 143 Be-l measured the shape of the Apsû
- 144 And set up Ešarra*, a replica of Ešgalla.
- 145 In Ešgalla, Ešarra which he had built, and the heavens,
- 146 He settled in their shrines Anu, Enlil, and Ea.

*Ešarra is the earth and is imagined as a great canopy over Apsu

Tablet V

- 1 He fashioned heavenly stations for the great gods,
- 2 And set up constellations, the patterns of the stars.
- 3 He appointed the year, marked off divisions,
- 4 And set up three stars each for the twelve months.
- 5 After he had organized the year,
- 6 He established the heavenly station of Ne-beru to fix the stars' intervals.
- 7 That none should transgress or be slothful
- 8 He fixed the heavenly stations of Enlil and Ea with it.
- 9 Gates he opened on both sides.
- 11 He placed the heights (of heaven) in her (Tia-mat's) belly,
- 12 He created Nannar, entrusting to him the night.
- 13 He appointed him as the jewel of the night to fix the days,
- 14 And month by month without ceasing he elevated him with a crown,
- 15 (Saying,) "Shine over the land at the beginning of the month,
- 16 Resplendent with horns to fix six days.
- 17 On the seventh day the crown will be half size,
- 18 On the fifteenth day, halfway through each month, stand in opposition

After the gods have finished praising him for his great victory and the art of his creation, Marduk consults with the god Ea (the god of wisdom) and decides to create human beings from the remains of whichever of the gods instigated Tiamat to war. Quingu is charged as guilty and killed and, from his blood, Ea creates Lullu, the first man, to be a helper to the gods in their eternal task of maintaining order and keeping chaos at bay.

As the poem phrases it, "Ea created mankind/On whom he imposed the service of the gods and set the gods free" (Tablet VI.33-34). Following this, Marduk "arranged the organization of the netherworld" and distributed the gods to their appointed stations (Tablet VI.43-46). The poem ends in Tablet VII with long praise of Marduk for his accomplishments and a big celebration.

In an older Sumerian epic, it was Nammu, the primeval sea goddess, who asks her son, Enki, god of wisdom, to fashion servants of the gods. He led a group of fashioners. He then said to Nammu, "O my mother, the creature whose name you uttered, it exists, **bind upon it the image of the gods.** Mix the heart of clay that is over the abyss, the good and princely fashioners will thicken the clay..... It is man....."

Genesis 6-8: The Flood Story

All Mesopotamian cultures have a flood story. In the flat river valley such as that of the Tigris and Euphrates, where torrential rains still occur, it is likely that great floods occurred. Indeed, several excavations of Mesopotamian sites, exhibit layers of clear clay (no artifacts) which could have been deposited by such floods. The great flood story that was adapted by the writers of Genesis 6 - 8, appears to have its origin within Sumerian culture before 3000 BCE. This story was told in more detail within the famous Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh which was set down in tablets before 2000 BCE, about a 1000 years before King David and at least 1500 years before this story was incorporated into Torah.

Our discussion topic: Although this story is also polytheistic, similarities to the Noah story are striking. What are the most significant similarities in your mind? What is Enlil's reason for bringing the flood? There are also significant differences, brought about by differences in religious thought. For example, Genesis gives us a reason for choosing Noah to be saved. What is the reason to enlist Utanapishtim in building the boat? How do the factions among the gods influence the story line? How would you compare Utanapishtim to Noah? What is the difference in who and what had refuge in the arks between the two stories? Compare or contrast the responses of our God to the Sumerian gods during and after the flood?

Flood Story from Epic of Gilgamesh (translation by NK Sanders, AINA.org)

Utanapishtim spoke to Gilgamesh, saying:

‘You know the city Shurruk, it stands on the banks of Euphrates? That city grew old and the gods that were in it were old. There was Anu, lord of the firmament, their father, and warrior Enlil their counsellor, Ninurta the helper, and Ennugi watcher over canals; and with them also was Ea. In those days the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamour. Enlil heard the clamour and he said to the gods in council, "The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babel." So the gods agreed to exterminate mankind. Enlil did this, but Ea because of his oath warned me in a dream. ... O man of Shurruk, son of Ubara-Tutu; tear down your house and build a boat, abandon possessions and look for life, despise worldly goods and save your soul alive. Tear down your house, I say, and build a boat. These are the measurements of the barque as you shall build her: let her beam equal her length, let her deck be roofed like the vault that covers the abyss; then take up into the boat the seed of all living creatures."

‘When I had understood I said to my lord, "Behold, what you have commanded I will honour and perform, but how shall I answer the people, the city, the elders?" Then Ea opened his mouth and said to me, his servant, "Tell them this: I have learnt that Enlil is wrathful against me, I dare no longer walk in his land nor live in his city; I will go down to the Gulf to dwell with Ea my lord. ...

‘In the first light of dawn all my household gathered round me, the children brought pitch and the men whatever was necessary. On the fifth day I laid the keel and the ribs, then I made fast the planking. The ground-space was one acre, each side of the deck measured one hundred and twenty cubits, making a square. I built six decks below, seven in all, I divided them into nine sections with bulkheads between. I drove in wedges where needed, I saw to the punt poles, and laid in supplies. The carriers brought oil in baskets, I poured pitch into the furnace and asphalt and oil; more oil was consumed in caulking, and more

again the master of the boat took into his stores. I slaughtered bullocks for the people and every day I killed sheep. I gave the shipwrights wine to drink as though it were river water, raw wine and red wine and oil and white wine. There was feasting then as -there is at the time of the New Year's festival; I myself anointed my head. On the seventh day the boat was complete.

-'Then was the launching full of difficulty; there was shifting of ballast above and below till two thirds was submerged. I loaded into her all that I had of gold and of living things, my family, my kin, the beast of the field both wild and tame, and all the craftsmen. I sent them on board, for the time that Shamash (sun god) had ordained was already fulfilled when he said, "in the evening, when the rider of the storm sends down the destroying rain, enter the boat and batten her down." The time was fulfilled, the evening came, the rider of the storm sent down the rain. I looked out at the weather and it was terrible, so I too boarded the boat and battened her down. All was now complete, the battening and the caulking; so I handed the tiller to Puzur-Amurri the steersman, with the navigation and the care of the whole boat.

'With the first light of dawn a black cloud came from the horizon; it thundered within where Adad, lord of the storm was riding. In front over hill and plain Shullat and Hanish, heralds of the storm, led on. Then the gods of the abyss rose up; Nergal pulled out the dams of the nether waters, Ninurta the war-lord threw down the dykes, and the seven judges of hell, the Annunaki, raised their torches, lighting the land with their livid flame. A stupor of despair went up to heaven when the god of the storm turned daylight to darkness, when he smashed the land like a cup. One whole day the tempest raged, gathering fury as it went, it poured over the people like the tides of battle; a man could not see his brother nor the people be seen from heaven. Even the gods were terrified at the flood, they fled to the highest heaven, the firmament of Ann; they crouched against the walls, cowering like curs. Then Ishtar the sweet-voiced Queen of Heaven cried out like a woman in travail: "Alas the days -of old are turned to dust because I commanded evil; why did I command thus evil in the council of all the gods? I commanded wars to destroy the people, but are they not my people, for I brought them forth? Now like the spawn of fish they float in the ocean." The great gods of heaven and of hell wept, they covered their mouths.

'For six days and six nights the winds blew, torrent and tempest and flood overwhelmed the world, tempest and flood raged together like warring hosts. When the seventh day dawned the storm from the south subsided, the sea grew calm, the flood was stilled; I looked at the face of the world and there was silence, all mankind was turned to clay. The surface of the sea stretched as flat as a roof-top; I opened a hatch and the light fell on my face. Then I bowed low, I sat down and I wept, the tears streamed down my face, for on every side was the waste of water. I looked for land in vain, but fourteen leagues distant there appeared a mountain, and there the boat grounded; on the mountain of Nisir the boat held fast, she held fast and did not budge. One day she held, and -a second day on the mountain of Nisir she held fast and did not budge. A third day, and a fourth day she held fast on the mountain and did not budge; a fifth day and a sixth day she held fast on the mountain. When the seventh day dawned I loosed a dove and let her go. She flew away, but finding no resting-place she returned. Then I loosed a swallow, and she flew away but finding no resting-place she returned. I loosed a raven, she saw that the waters had retreated, she ate, she flew around, she cawed, and she did not come back. Then I threw everything open to the four winds, I made a sacrifice and poured out a libation on the mountain top. Seven and again seven cauldrons I set up on their stands, I heaped up wood and cane and cedar and myrtle. When the gods smelled the sweet savour, they gathered like flies over the sacrifice. Then, at last, Ishtar also came, she lifted her necklace with the jewels of heaven that once Anu had made to please her. "O you gods here present, by the lapis lazuli round my neck I shall remember these days as I remember the jewels of my throat; these last days I shall not forget. Let all the gods gather round the sacrifice, except Enlil. He shall not approach this offering, for without reflection he brought the flood; he consigned my people to destruction."

‘When Enlil had come, when he saw the boat, he was wrath and swelled with anger at the gods, the host of heaven, "Has any of these mortals escaped? Not one was to have survived the destruction." Then the god of the wells and canals Ninurta opened his mouth and said to the warrior Enlil, "Who is there of the gods that can devise without Ea? It is Ea alone who knows all things." Then Ea opened his mouth and spoke to warrior Enlil, "Wisest of gods, hero Enlil, how could you so senselessly bring down the flood?"
