

10.3 Epic of Gilgamesh and the Story of Noah

Background: The Judeo-Christian Old Testament includes a story about Noah and the flood. According to it, the Hebraic God planned to destroy most of the earth because of the wickedness of mankind. However God warned Noah, who was considered righteous, to build a large ship in order to save his family and two of each variety of living things. Historians have been puzzled by the origin of this story because flooding was not a problem in ancient Judea. A possible explanation is that the Israelites adopted the story from the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh. This is a plausible explanation because Judea would have been in contact with Babylon, and because Babylon was located in the Tigris Euphrates River Valley where flooding was a regular phenomenon.

Instructions: Examine the two stories and identify similarities and differences. In your opinion, are the similarities significant enough to suggest a common origin?

Epic of Gilgamesh

<http://college.cengage.com/history/west/resources/students/primary/gilgamesh.htm>

1. In those days the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamor. Enlil heard the clamor and he said to the gods in council, "The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babble." So the gods agreed to exterminate mankind. Enlil did this, but Ea warned me in a dream. "Tear down your house, I say, and build a boat. These are the measurements of the boat 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."

2. On the seventh day the boat was complete. I loaded into her all that I had of gold and of living things, my family, my kin, the beasts of the field both wild and tame, and all the craftsmen. 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.

3. For six days and six nights the winds blew, torrent and tempest and flood overwhelmed the world, and 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. The surface of the sea stretched as flat as a rooftop; I opened a hatch and the light fell on my face. Then I bowed low, I sat down and I wept. I looked for land in vain, but fourteen leagues distant there appeared a mountain, and there the boat grounded. 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.

Story of Noah (Genesis 6.9-22)

Source: <http://www.bartleby.com/108/01/6.html>

1. The earth also was corrupt before God; and the earth was filled with violence. And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth. And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make thee an ark of gopher wood; the length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, the breadth of it fifty cubits, and the height of it thirty cubits. And, behold, I do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die. But with thee will I establish my covenant; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons' wives with thee. And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou bring into the ark, to keep them alive with thee; they shall be male and female.

2. For yet seven days, and I will cause it to rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights; and every living substance that I have made will I destroy from off the face of the earth. And Noah did according unto all that the LORD commanded him.

3. After the end of the hundred and fifty days the waters were abated and the ark rested upon the mountains of Ararat and the waters decreased continually. And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window of the ark and he sent forth a raven, which went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth. Also he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground. But the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him into the ark; for the waters were on the face of the whole earth. Then he put forth his hand, and took her, and pulled her in unto him into the ark. And he stayed yet other seven days; and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark. And the dove came in to him in the evening, and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf plucked off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth.