

Light From the Past – April '07

When the Rains Came Down

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In August 2005, tens of thousands of people were caught helpless in the onslaught of Hurricane Katrina. Many watched helplessly as muddy water surged upward like an unstoppable juggernaut swallowing everything in its path. Parts of New Orleans were flooded for weeks. Historic homes that had stood since the Civil War were destroyed by the sheer immensity of the storm. Small coastal towns were wiped off the face of the earth. Floodwaters left a mark that will no doubt last for decades.

Floods – like earthquakes, lightning, and tornadoes – are one of many great natural disasters that have plagued man from the beginning. The first flood in human history is recorded in the book of Genesis. But it is much more than a simple natural disaster. It is truly an “act of God.” It is humanity’s enjoyment of depravity that forces God’s hand of judgment.

The flood story of the Bible is not unique. In fact, there are many versions of such stories ranging from the Middle East to America, from Greece to Hawaii. With the notable exception of Egypt, virtually every ancient civilization had a story of a cataclysmic flood that destroyed most of humanity.

One of the finds that sparked a great deal of excitement in the late 1800’s was the discovery of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The hero of the story is a king of the Mesopotamian city of Uruk who begins as a playboy tyrant. He is particularly gifted at womanizing, oppressing his people, and getting drunk. His poor subjects cry out to the gods for relief. In response to the desperate prayers, the gods send a part man, part animal creature named Enkidu to battle Gilgamesh. They duke it out but become fast friends, adventuring and killing monsters together. One day the pair anger the goddess Ishtar, who in her fury kills Enkidu. The death of his dear friend forces Gilgamesh to put everything in perspective. The king hears of a man who received the gift of eternal life from the gods, so he sets out on a mission to discover the secret of immortality.

Gilgamesh eventually finds the immortal man named Utnapishtim. He tells Gilgamesh the story of how mankind offended the gods, prompting the upset deities to send a flood to wipe out humanity. One of the gods tells Utnapishtim to build a boat for his family to escape the coming deluge. He takes other living creatures on board. As the floodwaters abate, Utnapishtim sends out a series of birds to find dry land. Once he sets foot on the earth he offers sacrifices to the gods. Sounds like the story of Noah’s flood in Genesis, doesn’t it?

When the flood story was first published in 1872 in Europe, it caused quite a sensation. Some claimed that it proved that a great flood actually occurred, and that Noah wasn’t a mythical figure after all. Others argued the opposite; that it proved the Bible was not unique and was nothing more than a reworked copy of other ancient stories. If one were to poll scholars today, most would say that the flood of Noah is borrowed from other accounts. The average critic would agree.

But is the Bible dependent upon other stories? Many scholars are concluding that this option is highly unlikely. While the vocal critics of Scripture emphasize the similarities between the biblical flood and other flood stories to suggest that the biblical

writers borrowed from the others, they are also equally guilty of sweeping the dissimilarities under the rug. The differences include: the reason for the flood, the nature of the gods, the particulars of the boat, and the theological significance of the flood. With everything put in proper perspective, the two stories could not be more unlike.

If the ancient Hebrews adopted Mesopotamian flood stories for their use in Genesis, then they did something completely unique in the history of writing. The story of Noah's flood would have required a complete rewrite. The biblical authors would have been forced to remove polytheism, change the reason for the flood, and completely alter the theological purpose of the story. Acclaimed Near Eastern scholar Alan Millard says that "All who suspect or suggest borrowing by the Hebrews are compelled to admit large-scale revision, alteration, and reinterpretation in a fashion that cannot be substantiated for any other composition from the ancient Near East or in any other Hebrew writing."¹ Millard makes his case quite plain: if the biblical author borrowed from another source, he did so in a way that goes against *everything* we know about ancient writing.

In studying the stories of the ancient world, two things become clear. First, the Bible does appear to be similar to other stories. But we also have to recognize that similarity does not mean dependency. Just because the story of Noah's flood is similar to other flood stories does not mean that the biblical author plagiarized other material. In modern terms, it would be like accusing the scriptwriters of the television show *Law and Order* of ripping off *Perry Mason*. Just because each of the two dramas feature lawyers arguing their cases before judge and jury and putting bad guys in prison does not mean that one depended upon the other for its material.

There are numerous examples throughout the Old Testament that the biblical authors wrote against the pagan beliefs of surrounding cultures. The story of Noah's flood is just such a case. It appears that the writer is aware of other flood stories, but is more interested in "setting the record straight." It is possible that the record of actual events of Noah's day filtered down through various cultures, each of whom put their own particular spin on the tale. The final product was a collection of stories that are similar in some respects and different in others. Ultimately, critics cannot rule out the possibility that the Bible is attempting to give the correct version of what happened during the days of Noah.²

God's authors were not guilty of stealing intellectual property, nor is the Bible a second rate knock-off. As we continue to uncover more information about the ancient world, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to deny the truthfulness of God's Word. From studies in language and history to archaeology, the academic arena is increasingly confirming the Bible's reliability. Although borrowing is a charge often leveled against the Bible, Christians everywhere may be confident that God's Word is exactly what it claims to be.

¹ Alan R. Millard, "A New Babylonian 'Genesis' Story," *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 (1967):17-18.

² John Walton, "Flood" in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 324.