

Is the Biblical Flood Account a Modified Copy of the Epic of Gilgamesh?

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Introduction

Skeptics claim that the flood narrative of Genesis¹ is a rewritten version of an original myth, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, produced by the Sumerians. The flood of the Epic of Gilgamesh is contained on Tablet XI² of twelve large stone tablets that date to around 650 B.C. These tablets are obviously not originals, since fragments of the flood story have been found on tablets that date to 2,000 B.C. It is likely that the story itself originated much before that, since the Sumerian cuneiform writing has been estimated to go as far back as 3,300 B.C.

The dating of Genesis is uncertain, since the preservation of papyri is not nearly as good as that of stone. Liberal scholars place the date between 1,500 and 500 B.C., although the events are claimed to have occurred several thousand years earlier.

Epic of Gilgamesh

Here is a brief background of the Epic of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh was an oppressive ruler of the Sumerians, whose people called to the gods to send a nemesis. One nemesis, Enkidu, became friends with Gilgamesh, and the two went out on many adventures. Enkidu was eventually killed and Gilgamesh then feared for his own life. In his search for immortality, he met Utnapishtim, who had been granted immortality by the gods, following his rescue from the flood. Utnapishtim then recounted the flood and how he became immortal.

Similarities between Genesis and Gilgamesh

Superficially, the flood accounts appear to be similar:

1. Flood occurs in the Mesopotamian plain.
2. Main character is warned to build a boat to escape the flood
3. Main character is told to save himself, his family, and a sampling of animals
4. The boats were sealed with tar
5. The boats came to rest on a mountain
6. Birds were released to determine if the waters receded
7. Main character sacrificed an offering

Differences between Genesis and Gilgamesh

Despite superficial similarities, the differences between the accounts are quite significant. The table below lists most of the differences.

¹ See <http://www.godandscience.org/apologetics/floodtrans.html>

² Epic of Gilgamesh Tablet XI (<http://www.mythome.org/gilgamesh11.html>).

Significant Differences Between Genesis and Epic of Gilgamesh		
Characteristic	Genesis	Gilgamesh
Reason for flood	human wickedness (extreme violence)	excessive human noisiness
Response of deity	Lord was sorry He made man because of his wickedness	gods could not sleep
Warned by	Yahweh (God)	Ea
Main character	Noah ("rest")	Utnapishtim ("finder of life")
Why character chosen	a righteous man	no reason given
Intended for	All humans except Noah and his family	all humans
Decision to send flood	Yahweh (God)	council of the gods (primarily Enlil)
Builders	Noah and family	Utnapishtim, his family, and many craftsmen from city
Character's response	Noah warned his neighbors of upcoming judgment as "Preacher of righteousness" ³	Told by Ea to lie to neighbors so that they would help him build the boat
Building time	100 years	7 days
Boat size	450x75x45 feet	200x200x200 feet (unseaworthy cube)
Boat roof	wood	slate (top heavy?)
# Decks	3	12
Humans	Noah and family	Utnapishtim, his family, and craftsmen from city
Cargo	animals and food	animals, food, gold jewels, and other valuables
Launching	by the floodwaters	pushed to the river
Door closed by	Yahweh (God)	Utnapishtim
Sign of coming flood	none	extremely bright light sent by god Annanuki
Waters sent by	Yahweh (God)	gods Nergal and Ninurta
Reaction of deity to flood	in control of waters	gods scrambled to get away from water like "whipped dogs"
Duration of rain	40 days	7 days

³ For if God did not spare angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment; and did not spare the ancient world, but preserved Noah, a preacher of righteousness, with seven others, when He brought a flood upon the world of the ungodly; (2 Peter 2:4-5)

Duration of flood	260 days	14 days
Boat landing	Mt. Ararat	Mt. Nisir
Deity's reaction to human deaths	no regret mentioned	regretted that they had killed all the humans
Birds sent out	raven returns, dove returns second time with olive branch, then leaves	dove returns, swallow returns, raven does not return
Offering after flood	every clean animal and bird	wines and a sheep
Aftermath	God promises not to destroy humanity by flood again	gods quarrel among themselves, god Ea lies to Enlil. Utnapishtim and wife given immortality like the gods
Repopulation	Noah and family told to multiply and repopulate the earth	Ea and Mami created 14 human beings to help repopulate the earth

What would be expected in *any* flood account?

Among the similarities between the Genesis and Gilgamesh there are some that would be expected to be found in *any* flood account. Since both cultures existed in the Middle East, it is not unexpected to find that both accounts occurred in the plains of Mesopotamia. The Bible described the creation of humans in the locale of the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, and never describes them expanding beyond that area prior to the flood. Therefore, this similarity (#1 on our list above) is just due to the nature of where the peoples lived.

Obviously, for humans to survive the flood, there would have to be a means of escape. A boat makes sense, since the cultures did not have the technology to build an airplane. Humans would not know that a flood was coming unless they were told so by someone. Therefore, the idea that the gods or God would warn certain humans would not be unexpected, either. Similarity #2 seems like an integral part of any ancient flood story, so does not constitute an unexpected similarity.

Since a flood would obviously kill livestock in addition to humans, it would make sense that the survivors should take some animals on board with them. They would probably want to eat during the time of the flood, so would be expected that food would be taken on board the boat. Therefore, similarity #3 would be expected in any flood account.

Since there was no glue or other sealing materials, it would be expected that the builders of the boats would use something natural that was water resistant. Hence, it is not surprising to find that both stories recount the use of tar or other natural resin. Eliminate similarity #4 as being significant.

The laws of physics require that wooden boats would float on top of the water (although this is questionable with the Gilgamesh boat, see [below](#)). When the waters began to recede, it would not be unreasonable for the boat to come to rest on a mountain or the foothills of a mountain. However, it would probably be expected that the boat would come to rest somewhere on the

plains of Mesopotamia. Although superficially similar, the boats came to rest on different mountain ranges. The boat from Gilgamesh came to rest on Mt. Nisir, whereas the ark came to rest on Mt. Ararat. Why these details would have been changed is unknown.

Probably the most unique feature common to both accounts are the release of birds to determine when the waters had receded. However, there are some significant differences between the two accounts. In Gilgamesh, a dove is sent out first, whereas in Genesis, it is a raven. The second bird sent is a swallow in Gilgamesh and a dove in Genesis. A third bird, a raven, is sent out in Gilgamesh, whereas the dove is sent out again in Genesis and returns with an olive leaf. In Genesis, the dove is sent out a third time and does not return. If the Genesis account was copied from Gilgamesh, these details were changed significantly for no apparent reason.

The seventh similarity was a sacrificial offering made to the gods or God, when the main character had been delivered from the flood. The details of the offerings were quite different, since the Gilgamesh epic describes the offering of wines and a sheep. Noah sacrificed burnt offerings of all the clean animals on the ark, but no drink offering. Although it may seem like an unusual thing to do, in the cultures of the time, it would be expected that an offering would be made as an act of appreciation. In this age, it would be expected that religious people would offer prayers of thanks or at least a "Was I lucky" (depending upon one's religious worldview). Therefore, similarity #7 should not be seen as significant.

What would be expected if Genesis *were* a copy of Gilgamesh?

The first striking thing that one notices when reading the Epic of Gilgamesh is how silly the story is. Part of the silliness is because of the obviously human-like behavior of the gods. They are constantly fighting amongst each other, plotting and deceiving each other. One would expect this part of the story to be removed from a Genesis copy. Therefore, we would expect that the Genesis account would be changed to involve some kind of judgment, since Yahweh (God) does not capriciously destroy humans, as was done in the Gilgamesh epic. It would, therefore, make sense that Noah would be chosen for his righteousness although Utnapishtim was chosen for no apparent reason.

Even with these major changes not considered, there are many dissimilarities that would not be expected from a story copied from another story. For example, the timings of the flood accounts are vastly different. The Gilgamesh flood took only 3 weeks, whereas the Genesis flood lasted nearly a year. The Gilgamesh flood included several 7 day long events. This "perfect" number is found throughout the Bible, so would be expected to be retained if copied from the epic of Gilgamesh. However, the Bible uses numbers like 40 and 150 - much longer timeframes.

The boats in the two accounts are quite different. The Gilgamesh boat was an unseaworthy cube with a slate roof. Obviously, such a design would immediately flip over or roll around in the water. In contrast, the ark had dimensions that were ideal for a seaworthy ship. This might be surprising, since both cultures were not noted for their nautical skills. It is obvious that the gods of the Sumerians had no expertise in shipbuilding.

Conclusion

We have examined the similarities between the Epic of Gilgamesh and Genesis flood account of the Bible. Although there are a number of similarities between the accounts, the vast majority of similarities would be expected to be found in *any* ancient flood account. Only two similarities stand out as being unique - landing of the boats on a mountain and the use of birds to determine when the flood subsided. However, both of these similarities differ in important details. In addition, there are great differences in the timing of each of the flood accounts and the nature of the vessels. Why these details would be so drastically changed is a problem for those who claim that the Genesis flood was derived from the Epic of Gilgamesh.

There are a couple possible explanations for the existence of multiple ancient flood accounts. One - that Genesis was a copy of Gilgamesh - has already been discussed and does not seem to fit the available data. The other possible explanation is that the flood was a real event in the history of mankind that was passed down through the generations of different cultures. If so, the Gilgamesh account seems to have undergone some rather radical transformations. The story is a rather silly myth that bears little resemblance to reality. In contrast, the Genesis account is a logical, seemingly factual account of a historical event. It lacks the obvious mythological aspects of the Gilgamesh epic.