

God, Land, and the Great Flood

Chapter Seven

A Cuneiform Blueprint for Building an Ark: What It Tells Us About the Antecedents of Scripture

Most readers of the Bible do not suspect that prior documents were available to Bible authors, or that they referred to these documents as they wrote. This is because Bible writers do not often identify their sources. As a result, the reader may get the impression that these writers were eyewitnesses to, or at least in close contact with, the events they describe. However, despite this general practice, the Bible authors occasionally indicate that not only did they lack first-hand knowledge of the events they were describing but they did not even live in the *same century*. For example the author of Genesis tells us that seventy-five year old Abram moved from Haran to Shechem in Canaan when instructed to do so by YAHWEH. He further states that “at that time the Canaanite was still in the land” (Gen. 12:6). Clearly, the author was writing long after the event he was describing—long enough to warrant an explanation (several hundred years later in this case). A second example is the episode of the sun “standing still” for “about a whole day” during a battle between Israelites and Amorites. Reporting on this event the Bible writer notes that “there has been no day like it before or since” (Josh. 10:14). The writer not only implies the passage of substantial amount of time (“no day like it ...since”), he also confirms that he did not witness the event personally by citing as his source the *Book of Jashar* (Josh. 10:12).

Such literary references as to the *Book of the Wars of the LORD* (Num. 21:14) and the *Annals of the Kings of Media and Persia* (Est. 10:2), indicate that sources were used, particularly in Kings and Chronicles. The *Records of the Seer Samuel*, the *Records of the Prophet Nathan*, and the *Records of the Seer Gad*, are cited (1 Chr. 29:29) along with many others. The reference works below are listed as they are named in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV):

Acts of Solomon (1 Kgs. 11:41)
Annals of Jehu (2 Chr. 29:34)
Annals of Jehu son of Hanani (2 Chr. 20:34)
Annals of King David (1 Chr. 27:24)
Annals of the Kings of Israel (2 Chr. 33:18)
Book of the Annals of the Kings of Israel (1 Kgs. 14:19; 15:31; 16:5, 14, 20; 20:27; 22:39; 2 Kgs. 1:18; 10:34; 13:8, 12; 14:15, 28; 15:11, 15, 21, 26, 31)
Book of the Annals of the Kings of Judah (1 Kgs. 14:29; 15:7, 23; 22:45; 2 Kgs. 8:23; 12:19; 13:12; 14:15, 18, 28; 15:6, 36; 16:19; 20:20; 21:17, 25; 23:28; 24:5)
Book of the Kings of Israel (1 Chr. 9:1; 2 Chr. 20:34)
Book of the Kings of Israel and Judah (2 Chr. 27:7; 35:27; 36:8)
Book of the Kings of Judah and Israel (2 Chr. 16:11; 25:26; 32:32)
Chronicles of Gad the Seer (1 Chr. 29:29)
Commentary on the Book of the Kings (2 Chr. 24:27)
History (Story) of the Prophet Nathan (2 Chr. 9:29; 1 Chr. 29:29)
Lament for Josiah (2 Chr. 35:25; likely a reference to Lamentations 3)
Prophecy of Ahijah the Shilonite (2 Chr. 9:29)
Records of the Prophet Shemaiah (2 Chr. 12:15)
Records of the Seers (2 Chr. 33:19)
Record of the Seer Gad (1 Chr. 29:29)
Story of the Prophet Iddo (2 Chr. 13:22)
Visions of the Seer Iddo (2 Chr. 9:29; 12:15; 13:22)

Among the Literary Sources, a Cuneiform Ark Tablet Perhaps?

Even when their existence is not explicitly referenced it is often reasonable to infer that Bible authors were familiar with pre-existing sources and relied upon them to some degree as they produced their own writings. The Flood story likely falls into this category. An ancient cuneiform tablet recently translated into English by Irving Finkel is the most ancient (c. 1750 B.C.E.) Flood account yet discovered. It begins:

Wall, wall! Reed wall, reed wall!
Atra-hasis, pay heed to my advice, / That you may live for ever!
Destroy your house, build a boat; / Spare property and save life!
Draw out the boat that you will make / On a circular plan.
Let her length and breadth be equal, / Let her floor area be one field,
Let her sides be one *nindan* high.

The high god, Enlil, has decided to drown out humanity. A lesser god, Enki, has taken pity on the human race and has gone to warn Atra-hasis—telling him to destroy his house and build a boat. This odd juxtaposition makes sense when we realize that Atra-hasis's house consisted mostly of reeds (reed wall, reed wall) probably with a wood frame. Enki is speaking to the wall rather than to Atra-hasis who is behind it so that if he (Enki) is caught going against Enlil he can claim “plausible deniability”!

As recorded 1,000 years later Noah's instructions were: “Make yourself an ark with ribs of cypress; cover it with *reeds* and coat it inside and out with pitch” (Gen 6:14, New English Bible). Other versions (mostly Jewish) have translated the Hebrew in similar fashion. However, most versions, probably influenced by the Latin Vulgate, render it as does the King James Bible: “Make thee an ark of gopher wood; *rooms* shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch.” In Hebrew the difference between “reeds” and “rooms” is the difference between *qnm* and *qnm̄* (the doubling of the “n” is indicated by a dot placed inside the Hebrew letter *nun* by the Masoretes working between the 7th and 10th centuries C.E.). Actually the closest English word to the Hebrew *qnm̄* is not “rooms” but “nests”.

The instruction to Noah to “coat it inside and out with pitch” seems likely to be an echo of Atra-hasis who reports: “I apportioned one finger [thickness] of bitumen (pitch) for her outsides; I apportioned one finger [thickness] of bitumen (pitch) for her interior.” Later the Ark Tablet (51-2) reads, “The wild animals from the steppe / Two by two . . . did they enter the ark.”

Conclusions

Unfortunately, many readers of Scripture are uncomfortable when they learn of earlier writings the Bible writers may well have employed in their own compositions. The discomfort deepens with the recognition that some of these materials—exemplified by the Ark Tablet—predated the Biblical accounts by as much as a thousand years. Almost certainly some such accounts would have been part of the common knowledge of the believing community. But the essential message of the Genesis narrative of the Great Flood has little or nothing to do with whether the ark was a gigantic bitumen-covered reed and wood basket or a wooden boat 300 cubits long and 50 cubits wide. For more than 3,000 years the account of the Great Flood has been preserved to enrich the life of believing communities. It tells us that God “remembered Noah” (Gen. 8:1), in the midst of unprecedented human and ecological disaster and, it further tells us of a God who established an “everlasting covenant” with “every living creature” that “the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh” (Gen. 9:15-16 NRSV).

Our Bible had antecedents—both oral traditions and previously existing documents. Knowing this does not precipitate a theological problem unless the concept of “inspiration” is attached to the precise wording of the resulting documents (verbal inspiration) rather than to the overall process by which God communicates to us what we need to know about Him. The Bible documents a continual advance in this knowledge through time. In the process of telling, retelling, and eventually writing them down, the accounts of the Great Flood came to reflect a developing understanding of God. In this process the believing community matured the ethical monotheism that is our Judeo-Christian heritage and prepared the groundwork for the definitive revelation of God in Jesus of Nazareth.