

Biblical Flood Story and Mesopotamian Gilgamesh Epic Compared

One way to map the structure of the Flood story (based on 6.9-9.19)

- A: 6:9-10: transitional intro: Noah and sons
 - B: 6:11-12: violence/ruin in humanity's relationship with creation
 - C: 6:13-22: first divine speech: God's resolve to destroy
 - D: 7:1-10: second divine speech: "enter ark" (7 days)
 - E: 7:11-16: beginning of flood: ark closed (7:17a: 40 days)
 - F: 7:17-24: rising flood (150 days)/death of "all flesh"
 - G: 8:1a: God remembered Noah/beginning of re-creation
 - F1: 8:1b-5: receding flood (150 days)
 - E1: 8:6-14: drying of earth: ark opened (40 days) (8:6: 7 days)
 - D1: 8:15-19: third divine speech: "leave ark"
 - C1: 8:20-22: God's resolve to preserve
 - B1: 9:1-17: fourth divine speech: covenant: new relationship between humanity and creation
 - A1: 9:18-19: transitional conclusion: Noah and sons

Babylonian Flood Story context

Contained within the "Epic of Gilgamesh," the adventures of a Sumerian king (circa 2600 BCE) who quests for immortality along with his "nature man" companion, Enkidu. After Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh seeks and finds his revered ancestor, Ziusudra (in the earliest version)/Utnapishtim (in the later version), who tells him the story of having been the only survivor of an ancient flood.

Narrative parallels between Gilgamesh Tablet XI and Gen 6-9:

1. hero as 10th generation of ancestors
2. age of hero at time of Flood: Noah = 600, Ziusudra reign = 36,000 years
3. fixing of measurement of ark/ship by divine command
4. mention of the covering, entrance and window
5. use of "pitch" (Heb, *kopher*; Akkad., *kupru*)
6. predetermination of time of commencement of Flood by exact dating
7. specification of flood length in terms of 7 days:
Gilgamesh, 7 days total; Genesis, "after 7 days" it starts
8. animals coming on their own without coercion.
9. closing of entrance and opening after
10. resting of ark/ship on Ararat/Armenia
11. specific birds sent forth (raven and dove)
12. sending of birds on 7th day after stranding of boat
13. pleasing odor of sacrifice following

Theological contrasts between Gen 6-9 and Gilgamesh Flood epics:

| Theme | Genesis | Gilgamesh |
|--|--|--|
| Central narrative purpose | Reveal YHWH's sadness over violence/ruin and sovereignty over evil | Celebrate royal (male) power over nature and women |
| Reason for Flood | Moral corruption of humanity | humans are too populous and hence, too noisy |
| Narrative form leading to flood | Divine monologue | contentious heavenly dialogue |
| Divine relationship to events | God in total control | fearful deities who "cowered like dogs" |
| Relationship of divine to the survivor's sacrifice | God smelled the pleasing odor | The gods "crowded around the sacrifice like flies" |
| Status of hero | Noah as righteous but ordinary person | Ziusudra (also known as Utnapishtim) is a royal figure |

By Wes Howard-Brook and Sue Ferguson Johnson