

## The Flood: Two Accounts

One of the oldest stories in the world tells of a great flood that devastated the lands and peoples of the earth, an event that can be traced to the warming of the earth's climate at the end of the last Ice Age. Many ancient cultures told versions of this story, and two of these are excerpted below. The first, included in the Epic of Gilgamesh, was written down during the first half of the third millennium B.C.E., making it at least 1,500 years older than the similar account in the Hebrew Bible. But both are probably the products of much older storytelling traditions. The hero of the Sumerian story is Utnapishtim. The Hebrew story's hero is Noah.

### The Epic of Gilgamesh

Utnapishtim spoke to Gilgamesh, saying: "I will reveal to you, Gilgamesh... a secret of the gods... The hearts of the Great Gods moved them to inflict the Flood. Their Father Anu uttered the oath (of secrecy)... [But the god] Ea... repeated their talk [to me, saying]: 'O man of Shuruppak, son of Ubartutu: Tear down the house and build a boat!... Spurn possessions and keep alive living beings! Make all living beings go up into the boat. The boat which you are to build, its dimensions must measure equal to each other: its length must correspond to its width. Roof it over like the Apsu.' I understood and spoke to my lord, Ea: 'My lord, thus is the command which you have uttered. I will heed and will do it.'... On the fifth day I laid out her exterior. It was a field in area, its walls

were each 10 times 12 cubits in height... I provided it with six decks, thus dividing it into seven (levels)... Whatever I had I loaded on it... All the living beings that I had I loaded on it. I had all my kith and kin go up into the boat, all the beasts and animals of the field and the draftsmen I had go up.

"I watched the appearance of the weather—the weather was frightful to behold! I went into the boat and sealed the entry... All day long the South Wind blew... , submerging the mountain in water, overwhelming the people like an attack... Six days and seven nights came the wind and flood, the storm flattening the land. When the seventh day arrived... the sea calmed, fell still, the whirlwind and flood stopped up... When a seventh day arrived, I sent forth a dove and released it. The dove

went off, but came back to me, no perch was visible so it circled back to me. I sent forth a swallow and released it. The swallow went off, but came back to me, no perch was visible so it circled back to me. I sent forth a raven and released it. The raven went off, and saw the waters slither back. It eats, it scratches, it bobs, but does not circle back to me. Then I sent out everything in all directions and sacrificed (a sheep). I offered incense in front of the mountain-ziggurat...

"The gods smelled the savor... and collected like flies over a sacrifice... Just then Enlil arrived. He saw the boat and became furious... 'Where did a living being escape? No man was to survive the annihilation!' Ea spoke to Valiant Enlil, saying... 'How, how could you bring about a Flood without consideration? Charge the violation to the

western Asia and Europe had learned how to produce weapons and tools using copper. By the Uruk Period (4300–2900 B.C.E.), trade routes were bringing this raw element into Sumer, where it was processed into weapons and tools. Shortly before 3000 B.C.E., people further discovered that copper could be alloyed with arsenic (or later, tin) to produce bronze. Bronze is almost as malleable as copper, and it pours more easily into molds; but when

cooled, it maintains its rigidity and shape even better than copper. For almost two thousand years, until about 1200 B.C.E. and the development of techniques for smelting iron, bronze was the strongest metal known to man—the most useful and, in war, the most deadly. Following the Greeks (see Chapter 3), we call this period the Bronze Age.

Alongside writing and the making of bronze, the invention of the wheel was the fundamental technological

violation, charge the offense to the offender, but be compassionate lest (mankind) be cut off, be patient lest they be killed.' Enlil went up inside the boat and,

grasping my hand, made me go up. He had my wife go up and kneel by my side. He touched our forehead and, standing between us, he blessed us..."

Source: Maureen Gallery Kovacs, trans., *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet XI (Stanford, CA: 1985, 1989), pp. 97–103.

### The Book of Genesis

The Lord saw that the wickedness of humankind was great in the earth and... said, "I will blot out from the earth the human beings I have created... for I am sorry I have made them." But Noah found favor in the sight of the Lord... God saw that the earth was corrupt and... said to Noah, "I have determined to make an end to all flesh... Make yourself an ark of cypress wood, make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch... Make a roof for the ark, and put the door of the ark in its side... For my part I am going to bring a flood on the earth, to destroy from under heaven all flesh... But I will establish a covenant with you, and you shall come into the ark, you, your sons, your wife, and your sons' wives with you. And of every living thing you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you... Also take with you every kind of food that is eaten..." All the

fountains of the great deep burst forth, and the windows of the heavens were opened... The waters gradually receded from the earth... At the end of forty days, Noah opened a window of the ark... and sent out the raven, and it went to and fro until the waters were dried up from the earth. Then he sent out the dove from him, to see if the waters had subsided from the face of the ground, but the dove found no place to set its foot, and it returned... He waited another seven days, and again sent out the dove [which] came back to him... and there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf, so Noah knew the waters had subsided from the earth. Then he... sent out the dove, and it did not return to him anymore... Noah built an altar to the Lord... and offered burnt offerings. And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, "I will never again curse the ground because of humankind... nor

will I ever again destroy every living creature as I have done..." God blessed Noah and his sons.

Source: Genesis 6:5–9:1, *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (Oxford: 1994).

### Questions for Analysis

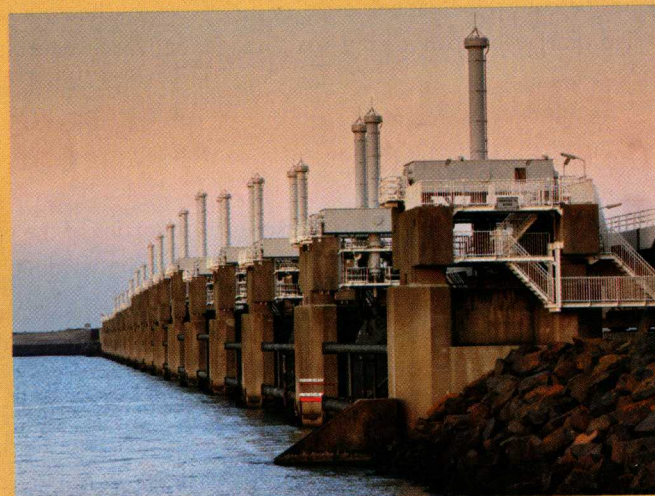
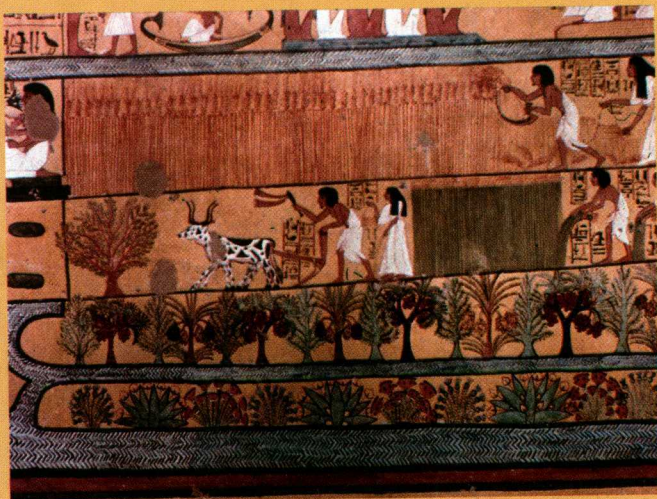
1. What are the similarities and differences between these two accounts?
2. What do these differences or similarities reveal about the two societies that told these stories? Does one seem to derive from the other? Why or why not?
3. How is the geography and climate of Mesopotamia reflected in the Sumerian version of the story?

achievement of the era. The Sumerians were using potter's wheels by the middle of the fourth millennium B.C.E. and could produce high-quality clay vessels in greater quantity than ever before. By around 3200 B.C.E., the Sumerians were also using two- and four-wheeled chariots and carts drawn by donkeys. (Horses were unknown in this region until sometime between 2000 and 1700 B.C.E.). Chariots were another new and deadly military technology, giving

warriors a tremendous advantage over armies on foot: the earliest depiction of their use, dating from 2600 B.C.E., shows one trampling an enemy. At the same time, wheeled carts dramatically increased the productivity of the Sumerian workforce.

Other inventions derived from the study of mathematics. In order to construct their elaborate irrigation systems, the Sumerians had to develop sophisticated

## Engineering Nature



Humans have been manipulating our planet's environment since the Neolithic Revolution. The image on the left shows the irrigation canals that enabled ancient Egyptians to channel the Nile's life-giving waters into the desert. The image on the right shows a storm-surge barrier in the Netherlands, which protects reclaimed land from rising sea levels (ironically) caused by the cumulative results of man-made climate change.

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measuring and surveying techniques as well as the art of map making. Agricultural needs may also lie behind the lunar calendar they invented, which consisted of twelve months, six lasting 30 days and six lasting 29 days. Since this produced a year of only 354 days, the Sumerians eventually began to add a month to their calendars every few years in order to predict the recurrence of the seasons with sufficient accuracy. The Sumerian practice of dividing time into multiples of sixty has lasted to the present day, not only in our notion of the 30-day month but also in our division of the hour into sixty minutes, each comprised of sixty seconds. Mathematics also contributed to Sumerian architecture, allowing them to build domes and arches thousands of years before the Romans would adopt and spread these architectural forms throughout their empire (Chapter 5).

Sumerian technology depended not only on ingenuity but also the spread of information and raw materials through trade. Sumerian pioneers traced routes up and down the rivers and into the hinterlands of Mesopotamia, following the tributaries of the Tigris and Euphrates. They blazed trails across the deserts toward the west, where they interacted with and influenced the Egyptians. By sea, they traded with the peoples of the Persian Gulf and, directly or indirectly, with the civilizations of the Indus Valley (modern Pakistan and India). And, along with merchandise, they carried ideas: stories, art, the use of writing, and the whole cultural complex that arose from their way of life. The elements of civilization, which had fused in their urban crucible, would thus come together in many other places.

## THE FIRST EMPIRES

Evidence shows that competition among Sumerian city-states reached a new level around 2500 B.C.E., as ambitious lugal vied to magnify themselves and their kingdoms. Still, it seems that no Sumerian lugal ever attempted to create an empire by imposing centralized rule on the cities he conquered. As a result, Sumer remained a collection of interdependent but mutually hostile states whose rulers were unable to forge any lasting structures of authority. This pattern would ultimately make the people of Sumer vulnerable to a new style of imperial rulership imposed on them from the north in the person of Sargon the Akkadian.

### *Sargon and the Akkadian Empire, 2350–2160 B.C.E.*

The Akkadians were the predominant people of central Mesopotamia. Their Sumerian neighbors to the south had greatly influenced them, and they had adopted cuneiform script along with many other elements of Sumerian culture. Yet the Akkadians preserved their own Semitic language, part of the linguistic family that includes Hebrew and Arabic. Sumerians tended to regard them as uncivilized, but in the case of the lugal whom the Akkadians called “great king,” this probably meant not being bound by the conventions of Sumerian warfare. For Sargon initiated a systematic program of conquest designed to subject all the neighboring regions to his authority. By 2350 B.C.E., he had conquered the cities of Sumer and then moved to establish direct control over all of Mesopotamia.

From his capital at Akkad, Sargon installed Akkadian-speaking governors to rule the cities of Sumer, ordering them to pull down existing fortifications, collect taxes, and obey his will. Sargon thus transformed the independent city-states of Sumer and Akkad into a much larger political unit: the first known empire, a word derived from the Latin *imperium*, “command.” This enabled him to manage and exploit the network of trade routes crisscrossing the power broader area known as the Near East. So although his political influence was felt only in Mesopotamia, his economic influence stretched from Ethiopia to India. Sargon's capital became the most splendid city in the world, and he exercised unprecedented power for a remarkable fifty-six years.

Sargon's imperialism also had a marked effect on Sumerian religion. To unite the two halves of his empire, Sargon merged Akkadian and Sumerian divinities. He also tried to lessen the rivalry of Sumerian cities by appointing a single Akkadian high priest or priestess, often a member of his own family, to preside over several local temples.

Sargon's successor, his grandson Naram-Sin, extended Akkadian conquests and consolidated trade, helping to stimulate the growth of cities throughout the Near East and binding them more closely together. By 2200 B.C.E., most people in central and southern Mesopotamia would have been able to converse in the language of either the Sumerians or the Akkadians. Indeed, the two civilizations became virtually indistinguishable except for these different languages.

### *The Dynasty of Ur and the Amorites, 2100–1800 B.C.E.*

After Naram-Sin's death, Akkadian rule faltered. Around 2100 B.C.E., however, a new dynasty came to power in Ur under its first king, Ur-Nammu, and his son Shulgi. Ur-Nammu was responsible for the construction of the great ziggurat at Ur, a massive temple complex that originally rose seventy feet above the surrounding plain. Shulgi continued his father's work, subduing the lands up to the Zagros Mountains northeast of Ur and demanding massive tribute payments from them; one collection site accounted for 350,000 sheep per year, and Shulgi built state-run textile-production facilities to process the wool. He promulgated a code of law, calling for fair weights and measures, the protection of widows and orphans, and limitations on the death penalty for crimes. He also pursued military conquests, the centralization of government, commercial expansion and consolidation, and the patronage of art and literature. Shulgi thus established a pattern of rule that influenced the region for centuries to come.

### *The Empire of Hammurabi*

In 1792 B.C.E., a young Amorite chieftain named Hammurabi (*hah-muh-RAH-bee*) became the ruler of Babylon, an insignificant city in central Mesopotamia. The Amorites, like the Akkadians, were a Semitic people. Until this period they had largely been nomads and warriors, but now they came to control the ancient cities of Mesopotamia.