

Flood stories, ancient Near East

BENJAMIN R. FOSTER

Flood stories refer to extended texts and passing references to a universal deluge in Akkadian, Sumerian, and Greek from Mesopotamia, and Hebrew from ancient Israel. The oldest flood story is the Babylonian poem *Atrahasis* (Foster 2005: 227–80), in versions from the early second to the late first millennium BCE. According to *Atrahasis*, the clamor of the multiplying human race so disturbed the chief god on earth, Enlil, that he sought to reduce it first by plague, drought, and starvation, then by a universal deluge. Enki, god of wisdom, warned a man, Atrahasis, who built a boat and took aboard his family and livestock. “Clamor” does not mean “hubris” or “sin” in Akkadian, as suggested by some authors. In the ensuing catastrophe, the gods learn how dependent they are on the human race. Another telling of the story in the *Gilgamesh Epic* (George 2003: 702–17; see *GILGAMESH, EPIC OF*) preserves more of the flood itself and its aftermath, in which the flood hero, now called Uta-napishtim, sends out birds to see if the waters have receded. A Sumerian flood story (Jacobsen 1981) calls the flood hero Ziusudra, and this underlies Xisouthros, the name given him by the third-century BCE Greek writer Berossos, who adds that tablets were buried to preserve knowledge, then dug up again (Verbrugge and Wickersham 1996: 49–50). References to the flood abound in other Mesopotamian sources, such as the SUMERIAN KING LIST. These, like the *Gilgamesh Epic*, often consider it the beginning of empirical time, when people lived normal life spans. “Flood” was proverbial in Akkadian and Sumerian as a term for disaster. The flood story (or stories) of Genesis is clearly related to the earlier Mesopotamian stories, but precisely how

is a matter of debate (Schmidt 1995). Rationalist explanations, such as localized floods imagined as universal or subsidence of the Black Sea, as well as the regular “discovery” of traces of the Ark, have no scientific basis. Mesopotamian archaeology shows only that cities were sometimes damaged by flooding (Mallowan 1964). Some elements, such as cause, hero, length of time, and who survived, vary from source to source, whereas others, such as heavy rain, releasing birds, sacrifice, reward for the hero, commencement of a new era, and non-recurrence, are consistent across the traditions (synoptic table in Schmidt 1995: 2346–7). Hittite and Egyptian literatures record no flood stories, and those in Latin and Greek sources (Caduff 1986) are likely of Near Eastern origin (Van Seters 1988).

SEE ALSO: *Atrahasis*.

REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READINGS

- Caduff, G. A. (1986) *Antike Sintflutsagen*. Göttingen.
- Foster, B. R. (2005) *Before the Muses: an anthology of Akkadian literature*. Bethesda.
- George, A. R. (2003) *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: introduction, critical edition and cuneiform texts*. Oxford.
- Jacobsen, T. (1981) “The Eridu Genesis.” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100: 513–29.
- Mallowan, M. (1964) “Noah’s flood reconsidered.” *Iraq* 26: 61–82.
- Schmidt, B. (1995) “Flood narratives of ancient western Asia.” In J. M. Sasson, ed., *Civilizations of the ancient Near East*, vol. 4: 2337–51. New York.
- Van Seters, J. (1988) “The primeval histories of Greece and Israel compared.” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 100: 1–22.
- Verbrugge, G. P. and Wickersham, J. M. (1996) *Berosus and Manetho, introduced and translated: native traditions in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt*. Ann Arbor.