

## The Tradition in Ancient Sumer

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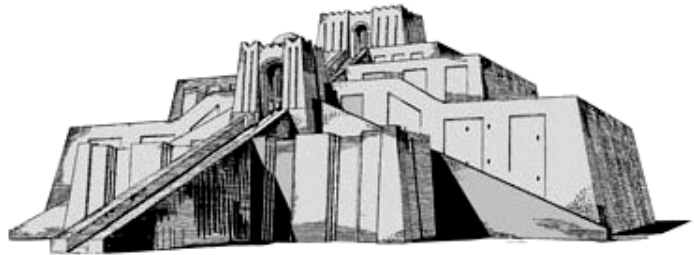
*Does Genesis have any value as evidence when seeking to understand how things began? While some say it is 'the word of God', this is to make a theological claim that shuts out most inquirers. If it is to be accepted as a historically reliable document, there needs to be a plausible case that it had an ancient and natural origin. This article argues that the material about the beginning of the world in Genesis 1-9 was already known in the third millennium BC, when it was part of an oral tradition. The biblical text is a distillation of that tradition, authenticated by the very texts that are alleged to discredit it.*

As pointed out in the [previous article](#), written documents cannot have been the source for the first chapters of Genesis. The story about the Creation and the temptation of the first human couple, the genealogies, the history of the antediluvian world and the story of the Deluge would have passed down from generation to generation by word of mouth. This would also be true of the story about Abraham. While it is not impossible that he was able to write, Abraham was an Aramean herdsman, not a member of the exclusive class of scribes and priests, and herdsman, just as in parts of the world today, had no use for writing. If Moses wrote Genesis, he must have learned about the lives of Abraham and his descendants through the tribe's oral traditions.

That may have been what happened. Amply authenticated by archaeological discoveries, the stories about these patriarchs are rich in details that are specific to the time described; they were not inventions of a later age (Kitchen 1995, Gordon & Rendsburg 1997). We can have some confidence that the oldest stories, about Abraham, went back to Abraham himself. And Abraham, the tradition tells us, came from polytheistic Sumer.

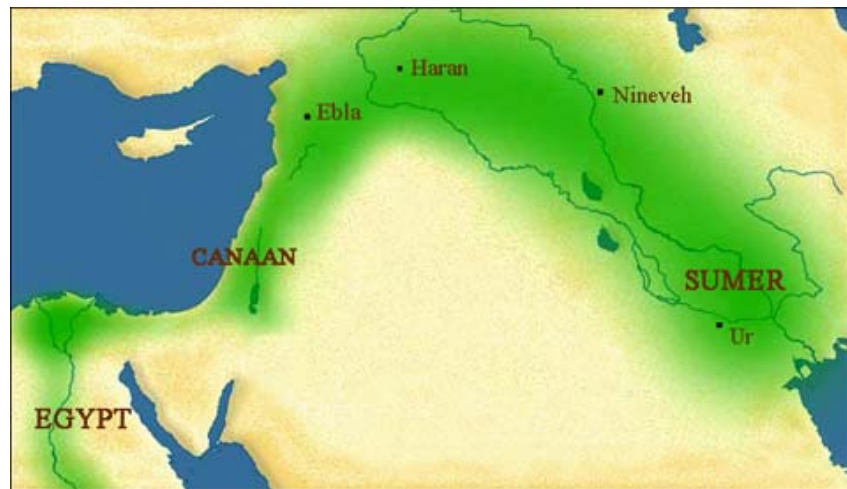
Sumer, or lower Mesopotamia, was the location of the world's oldest civilisation. Often Sumerian civilisation is referred to as 'the cradle of civilisation', as if the country hosted the birth of something innocent, but in fact the religion at its heart revolved around the art of sorcery, the magical invocation of spirits. Every city, it was believed, was ruled by a god, who lived much like a human king in his

palace at the centre of the city and was present in his life-like statue. Close-by, a mountain-stairway enabled the gods of heaven to come down and the gods of the underworld to come up, so that they could assemble with the ruling god in council and assist him in his deliberations. There was one such ziggurat at Ur, home-city of Abraham. Its partly restored remains, now forever associated with the archaeologist Leonard Woolley, constitute the most impressive monument left from Sumerian civilisation, and Ur's citizens served the moon-god Nanna. This was certainly not a place where Abraham could have become acquainted with the monotheistic stories recorded in early Genesis. Haran, several hundred miles upstream from Ur, can be ruled out for the same reason: Abraham and his father lingered there after leaving Sumer because it too worshipped Nanna. The family knew too little about the god who had called them out of Sumer to want to venture further.



**ziggurat at Ur**

Some four hundred years later, we come to the time of Moses, a man who moved in the highest levels of Egyptian society. However, Pharaonic Egypt was also not a place where anyone could have become acquainted with the Genesis tradition. Though Moses might have had access to royal and temple libraries, there is no likelihood that any of these preserved a pristine account of the origin of the world. Such a tradition could only have come down to him through his forefathers. So where might they have learned about the tradition? Since we have eliminated both Mesopotamia and Egypt, they could only have learned about it somewhere between Mesopotamia and Egypt, in the land of Canaan. Which takes us back to the time of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.



In Abraham's day perhaps something close to a monotheistic cult might have survived in the hill-country of Canaan, on the outskirts of Sumerian civilisation. In support of this we have two pieces of evidence. One comes from Genesis itself, where, after defeating the king of Elam and his confederates, Abraham is greeted by Melchizedek, king of Jerusalem (Gen 14:18ff). Melchizedek means 'The righteous one [is] king', referring to the deity served by this priest-king, and he blesses Abraham in the name of 'God Most High, maker of heaven and earth'. The word 'God' here is *El*, the head of the Canaanite pantheon, to whom titles such as 'most high', 'lord of heaven', 'maker of heaven and earth' were regularly applied. As corroborated by numerous [Ugaritic](#) texts, El was the father of the gods, enthroned in heaven, and he ruled over his sons with supreme power.

A similar picture comes from Eblaite texts. [Ebla](#) was a huge cosmopolitan city a hundred and thirty miles south-west of Haran. In the mid 1970s an archive of over 17,000 tablets was discovered there, dating roughly to 2300 BC. Written in Sumerian script but in a language closely related to Hebrew, the tablets included a large number of bilingual dictionaries and showed that the city was often visited by itinerant teachers of Sumer's religion. Non-Sumerian gods were also known, the most eminent of whom were El and Ya. El and Ya were names for the same deity, Ya being the personal name of El. One text said of him (Pettinato 1981):

Lord of heaven and earth,  
The earth was not; you created it.  
The light of the day was not; you created it;  
The morning light you had not yet made.

This is remarkably close to the Genesis tradition, where God creates the earth and on the first day calls light into existence.

The texts show that Ebla's king worshipped other gods besides El, notably El's son Hadad, so we should not read too much into this document – it is evidence, simply, that the tradition was less corrupted by Sumerian ideas than it later was. Whether Melchizedek, in more remote Jerusalem, worshipped other gods is not known. By this time, c. 1870 BC, there can have been few places that had not gone down the road of confusing the sons of God with gods to be worshipped in their own right – inventing personalities, histories and genealogies for them, identifying them with aspects of the creation, ascribing them with power to bless and to curse. All we can say is that it is possible that Melchizedek still preserved the Genesis tradition intact. He was the priest of the Creator to whom all gods owed their existence, and Abraham saw that he was unlike other kings, someone eminently worthy of the office. It could have been from him, therefore, that Abraham received the tradition and learned more about the deity who had appeared and spoken to him.

### **The problem posed by *Gilgamesh***

In 1872 an assistant Assyriologist at the British Museum named George Smith found himself handling a polytheistic text that was evidently also related to that tradition. The tablet, inscribed in cuneiform, came from the royal libraries at Nineveh and belonged to a larger work about Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, but as Smith began to decipher its meaning, he realised that this part of the epic told of a flood astonishingly similar to Noah's flood. Around the discovery clamoured questions that were to shake the foundations of western civilisation almost as much as the theory of evolution did. Was the story younger or older than the book of Genesis? Who had borrowed from whom – the Sumerians from the Hebrews or the Hebrews from the Sumerians? Even before they knew that *Gilgamesh* was a much older composition than Genesis, archaeologists and theologians alike concluded that the Hebrews had borrowed from the Sumerians.

#### **Points of correspondence between the Hebrew and Sumerian flood accounts**

1. The flood was ordained by God (Ellil).
2. Its purpose was to destroy all mankind.
3. One man was forewarned of the flood by God (Ea), and given instructions about how to build a vessel which would keep him safe.
4. He was spared because he was devout (Noah) or wise (Atrahasis).
5. The vessel was caulked with pitch.
6. He was to take birds and animals on board as well as his family.
7. Seven days passed before the onset of the flood.
8. After the vessel had run aground, the man sent out birds at intervals to determine whether there was land beyond the horizon.
9. On leaving the vessel, the man offered sacrifice, which was accepted.

The Gilgamesh epic exists in a number of versions, some going back to the Old Babylonian period, well before the earliest date for Genesis, and even in the oldest version the flood features as a story within a story, narrated not by the poet himself but by Utnapishtim, the Noah-like survivor of the flood whom Gilgamesh meets in his search for eternal life. The flood story is in fact borrowed from another poem, *Atrahasis*, a work much more like the first chapters of Genesis. Here it constitutes the principal theme, the climax of an epic which opens with a description of the world when gods inhabited the earth. The gods are creatures that have work to do – canal-digging – and, finding the work burdensome, they threaten to rebel against their masters who live in heaven. They rouse the chief god Ellil from his bed and petition him to do something. In consultation with the other chief gods, Ea and Anu, Ellil agrees that another being, man, should be created to carry out the work. But man proves a mixed blessing, because he produces too many children, and the people’s noise stops Ellil from sleeping. After several vain attempts to reduce the population by disease and famine, Ellil decides to destroy the entire race by a flood. Ea, however, privately dissents and tells *Atrahasis* – another name for Utnapishtim – to build a vessel in which birds, cattle and wild animals can be saved.

So life, in the event, is not totally extinguished. Ellil is furious when he discovers that he has been thwarted. As a propitiating compromise, Ea limits the post-flood population by a variety of less drastic measures, such as ensuring that some babies are snatched away by demons and others perish in miscarriages. The only man who is granted immortality is Utnapishtim himself.

Evidently the Sumerians did not borrow from the Hebrews for this story. On the other hand, it is also difficult to argue that the Hebrews got theirs from the Sumerians, or from the Babylonians who inherited Sumerian culture. Why would monotheists have wanted to take over a polytheistic story? And if that is what happened, why did they not set the story in the land of Canaan, in the same way as every other people with a flood tradition set it in their own land? While there are striking similarities, there are also differences, and the differences are significant enough to make the suggestion of indebtedness to Babylonian literature problematic.

So what about the possibility, neglected by most scholars, that *Gilgamesh* and Genesis derive from a tradition common to both peoples? For the moment the crucial points to note are:

- The earliest known context for the flood story – *Atrahasis* – was a work that was universal in scope, about the creation of man, the offence he gave to the gods, and his eventual extermination.
- Although historical in the sense of giving an explanatory story about the past, *Atrahasis* was an epic poem and as such quite different from the dry, historical prose in which Genesis was written.
- It was permitted for epic poets to take an element (in this case, the flood) of one story and appropriate it, with alterations, for the purposes of another.
- The theology in *Atrahasis* was amoral: for example, man was created to be the gods’ slave, and Ellil eventually destroyed the human race because its noise kept him awake.

The Sumerian work is inherently fictionalising. Historical events – known about independently through a different tradition of story-telling – serve as raw material for the poet’s art, which has licence to embroider and reweave. There is no obligation to be true to source. The deliberations of

the gods are dramatised, one god pitted against another, and it is beside the point to ask how the poet could have known what they said to each other. We are dealing with entertainment, not history.

With Genesis we have the reverse situation. The motive for telling about the Deluge generation after generation is apparent from the story itself: the event was momentous, and what it revealed about the creation and its Creator was of abiding significance, a compelling reason not to replace truth with fiction. As man multiplied and spread abroad, the knowledge that God had granted him after the destruction of the old creation a second chance helped him to understand his present existence. The story revealed who God was. There is no similar sense when we read *Atrahasis*. The subject matter is valueless for understanding life: if the story has any meaning, it is that life has no meaning, for the gods are selfish and capricious, divided in their counsel, false to one another and to man. The historiographic interest is replaced by the dramatic, prose turned into poetry. Whereas in Genesis the storyteller's art serves the purpose of the history, in *Atrahasis* the history serves the purpose of the storyteller, who therefore includes, modifies and alters whatever of the facts he likes. The conditions for preserving the original story intact have gone.

Thus, if the Gilgamesh and Genesis versions are similar because they derive from a common tradition, the version likely to be closer to that tradition, to be the more accurate version, is Genesis, even though, as a text, it is younger. Genesis is the tradition put into writing: literary in form, but under an obligation both of genre and theology not to embellish, not to fictionalise. In Hebrew literature there is no evidence that writers were accustomed to reshuffle the themes that made up their total repertoire, still less to borrow from peoples whose culture was fundamentally alien to theirs. By contrast, partly because it had to cater for many gods, Sumerian literature was much more promiscuous. Poets drew upon a common stock of narrative themes which they 'used in different stories, and adapted in various places for diverse gods' (Dalley 2000, p 204).

### **The name of God**

One of the strongest evidences for the view that monotheism preceded polytheism in Sumer is that, until the Late Uruk period, the country knew only two gods: Anu, who had a temple at Uruk, and Ea, who had a temple at Eridu. Somewhat later, they were joined by a third, Ellil, who was worshipped at Nippur. These were high gods, with absolute authority in the universe; lesser deities appeared only after them, increasing in number in the same way that a family does. A new deity was assigned a parentage from pre-existing gods, and adapted to his niche in the human world by appropriating much of his role from a god who was less specialised.

In the ancient world all gods had names, because in principle they were knowable. Some had more than one name: for example, the goddess Ninhursag ('lady of the mountains'), also known as Nintu ('lady of birth') and Belet-ili ('mistress of the gods'). Likewise Anu, Ea and Ellil were originally different names for the same god. *Anu* meant 'Heaven', an impersonal synonym for God. His personal name was *Ea*, pronounced, and sometimes written, as *Ay-a* (Roberts 1972). *Ellil* was a duplication of the Semitic word *il*, as in Eblaite texts, where the name appears in the form *il-ilu*. The duplication signified that he was the one, self-existent God before all others, the 'god of gods', much as Hebrew used the plural form *Elohim* to refer to the one God. The three names together designated Aya (who he was), god (what he was) of heaven (where he was).

The most common proper name for God among the Israelites was *Yahweh*, the one by which he first revealed himself when he appeared to Moses (Ex 3:15, 6:3). When Abraham called on his name after building an altar between Ai and Bethel (Gen 12:8), he evidently knew him by a different name from Yahweh. The reference to Yahweh in the text is retrospective: Abraham was calling on the one whom Israel later came to know as Yahweh by what was then his personal name.

In Abraham's day the proper name was *Yah*. Unlike Yahweh, *Yah* is attested as a component of both Israelite and Eblaite names from before the time of Moses. The name of Jacob's great-grandson, Abiah, meant 'Yah is father'; Joshua meant 'Yah saves.' Texts found in the Syrian city of Ebla (c. 2250 BC) included such names as *Isa-yah* ('Yah has gone forth') and *Mika-ya* ('Who is like Yah?'). Although the names *Yah* and *Yahweh* were associated from early on, as in Exodus 15:2, and may derive from the same root, it is unlikely that the shorter was an abbreviation of the longer – any more than Abram was an abbreviation of Abraham. Indeed, if the Israelites did not know the name *Yahweh* prior to Moses, *Yah* cannot have been an abbreviation of the later name. This can also be inferred from texts where the two are in apposition: *Yah Yahweh* (as in Isa 12:2). Parallel titles, such as *Adonai Yahweh* ('Lord Yahweh', Gen 15:2) or *Yahweh Elohim* ('Yahweh who is God', Gen 2:4), suggest that the meaning is 'Yah who is Yahweh', that is, *Yah* who revealed himself as *Yahweh*. It would have been pointless to add the full name after the abbreviation. *Yah* renamed himself *Yahweh* as a token of the covenant relationship which he was about to enter with Moses' people, just as he had earlier renamed Abram Abraham.

To make it clear that he was the deity whom Israel's ancestors knew as *Yah*, *Yahweh* instructed Moses to tell the Israelites, "I am has sent me to you." 'I am' in Hebrew was *Eyah*, equivalent to Akkadian *Ayah*, with *Ya(h)* being a West Semitic contraction of the word. Mesopotamians would have known him by his East Semitic name: *Ea* – or *Aya*. Like *Yahweh*, the name was derived from the verb 'to live' or 'to be,' and meant 'The Living One' or 'I am'. *Ea* and *Yah* were the same name, representing the same god, and *Yah*, in turn, was the same god as *Yahweh*.

| Akkadian name | Sumerian name | Akkadian meaning |
|---------------|---------------|------------------|
| Anu           | An            | Heaven           |
| Aya           | Enki          | The Living One   |
| Ellil         | Enlil         | God              |

The names of the principal gods of Akkad and Sumer, c.3100 BC.

Over time the concept of a transcendent Creator in Mesopotamia disintegrated, with different parts of the creation being allocated to a multitude of gods. The author of *Atrahasis* mythologises this process by characterising the universe as an inheritance for which they cast lots. The god of heaven, now called Anu as if this were a proper name, was allocated the highest part. *Ea* was allocated the subterranean earth and the watery Apsu (the great deep). Ellil took charge of the subaerial world between the heavens and the Apsu. His name too was treated as a proper name. In the person of Ellil, God lived at the same level as man in a world from which he was no longer estranged. And all three took on the nature of carnal human beings. They took wives. Uniting with them, their wives produced sons and daughters, who in turn begot more deities. The deities functioned as the proprietors and guardians of Mesopotamia's now competing cities, patrons of the powers and attributes that gave civilisation its lustre. As the human population grew, so did the

divine population, until by the mid third millennium the pantheon, according to one god list, totalled around five hundred – a huge number, even allowing for the fact that some names referred to the same deity. By the end of the second millennium there were around two thousand.

### **Genesis and *Atrahasis* compared**

*Atrahasis* does not open with the creation but plunges straight in, explaining how the gods once lived as human beings on the earth. In Stephanie Dalley's translation:

When the gods instead of man  
Did the work, bore the loads,  
The gods' load was too great,  
The work too hard, the trouble too much,  
The great Anunnaki made the Igigi  
Carry the workload sevenfold.  
Anu their father was king,  
Their counsellor warrior Ellil,  
Their chamberlain was Ninurta,  
Their canal-controller Ennugi.  
They took the box (of lots)...,  
Cast the lots; the gods made the division.  
Anu went up to the sky,  
[And Ellil] took the earth for his people (?).  
The bolt which bars the sea  
Was assigned to far-sighted Enki.  
When Anu had gone up to the sky,  
[And the gods of] the Apsu had gone below,  
The Anunnaki of the sky  
Made the Igigi bear the workload.  
The gods had to dig out canals...



So begins an account that refashions the Genesis tradition in keeping with a polytheistic view of the world. The gods known as Igigi are 'instead of man', not only in the sense that they do his work, but that they have completely taken his place. In the original tradition it is man who has to work. Adam is condemned to till the ground and toil for his bread (Gen 3:19, 23). Much later, Noah is the hope of his father because he 'will bring us relief from our work and from the toil of our hands' (Gen 5:29). In *Atrahasis* those who toil are a lower order of gods, and they dig the ground not to grow crops but to make canals, a specifically Mesopotamian form of hard labour, performed by slaves.

A historical account must be self-consistent if it is to have any claim to be authentic. While a fictional account may also be self-consistent, an account which fictionalises and misrepresents history is likely in places to retain details that make little sense in the new version. Unassimilated traces of its origin may remain: incongruous details that point back to a prior account where they are not incongruous.

It is striking that the Genesis account describes a world quite different from the one which existed when Genesis was written down. Though the names are mostly familiar, the geography is decidedly not. For example, the river flowing out of Eden branched into four: Pishon, Gihon, Tigris and Euphrates, whereas in the present world these rivers do not issue from a single source, and Pishon and Gihon are difficult to identify at all. In the antediluvian world Pishon flowed round the borders of Havilah, Gihon round the borders of Cush. In the Ancient Near East, by contrast, Havilah was part of Arabia, Cush was Ethiopia, and neither territory was bounded by a river. They were expressly postdiluvian territories. Havilah was so named after the descendant of Shem who settled there after the Deluge (Gen 10:29), and Cush was named after a descendant of Ham who settled there after the Deluge (Gen 10:6). They were postdiluvians named after antediluvians, and the lands where they settled were named, respectively, after them. Eden cannot be located at all in the postdiluvian world.

The foreignness of the geography makes sense if the dry land had been destroyed in the Cataclysm (Gen 9:11) and those who settled the Ancient Near East were drawing upon a primeval tradition about that lost world when they chose place names. They were attempting to re-evolve the old world, much as European settlers of North America and Australia sought to do when they chose place names.

In *Atrahasis* we encounter a world that is entirely familiar. A world where there are many gods, and the gods mirror the social order of Sumer: the Anunnaki upper class, with their own chamberlain and canal-controller, ruling the Igigi lower class. A world whose geography is recognisably Mesopotamian, watered by just two rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates. We are struck at once by details that seem incongruous. Why are gods digging canals? Why have the Anunnaki forced them to labour in this way? For what purpose? The original account of creation has been overturned in order to provide justification for a new theology. Man has been created to serve the gods and hence to serve the priests and the king who represent them.

In Sumerian theology it was the king alone who in any way reflected the divine nature. The [Sumerian King List](#) tells us that there was a moment in history when 'kingship came down from heaven' and was delegated to human beings. So the king served the gods, who were present, after a ceremony of breathing into their nostrils (exactly as in Gen 2:7), in the effigies made for them, and the people served the king. With help from the priests, it was his duty to ensure that they were clothed, housed and fed, and to do that, the king required the services of craftsmen, builders, farm-workers. In *Atrahasis* Ea therefore creates man to be the gods' slave, and it is unnecessary that man should reflect anything of the divine nature.

That there is a sense in which, nonetheless, he does reflect divinity is incongruous. Ea has him made partly from clay, partly from the flesh and blood of one of the Anunnaki, slaughtered for that purpose. By these means 'god and man will be mixed together' (illogically, for man is supposed to be the product of this fusion), and the death of the god will ensure that a 'ghost' lives inside him. These details become comprehensible only in the context of the Genesis account, where God appoints the whole human race to reflect his nature. He forms him from clay and animates him, not by taking the life of one of his sons, but by breathing into him something of his own life (2:7). He forms the man and the woman personally, and they are made 'in his image'. Not only are their bodies to be a dwelling-place for his spirit (6:3), but he has them bear the physical image in which

he himself has chosen to manifest himself. He blesses them and gives them dominion over the animals; they are to rule over the rest of creation, not the rest of mankind.



In *Atrahasis* Ea does not create man personally; he delegates the task to Ninhursag, here called Beletili ('mistress of the gods'). Once again, there is something unexplained about this, since although she is characterised as a womb-goddess, she exists before any human beings exist, and the man about to be created does not come from any womb. The reason for her involvement becomes apparent only when we turn to Genesis and recognise that Ninhursag has her prototype in Eve, the first woman. Eve has been deified: Ninhursag exemplifies how in the Sumerian version gods (as

the opening line of the poem says) are 'instead of man' and how, in pushing man down to a lower level, they take away from his god-like qualities. Ninhursag's true identity is clear from two other titles of hers, 'mother of the gods' and 'mother of all children', from which again we see the equivalence between gods and men. Eve, correspondingly, is 'the mother of all living' (Gen 3:20), because she has been created with the ability to procreate; under God, and via Adam, she is the ancestor of all humanity. In *Atrahasis* she is a goddess to whom the creation of all mankind is delegated, and consequently the creation of woman, distinct from man, is not described.

In Genesis God expressly invites man to multiply and fill the earth. But he creates him mortal: man is made of dust, and to dust he will return (3:19). The only way he could become immortal would be to eat of the tree of life, and that he fails to do. Instead he does the one thing that guarantees he will not live forever: he eats of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. The act of disobedience seals his death; he cannot now eat of the tree of life. God therefore drives him out of the garden into the natural world where he has to toil for his bread



In *Atrahasis* God puts no limit on man's mortality, since there seems no reason why the slave should not live as long as his masters. His filling the earth unchecked by mortality is both unforeseen and regretted; it was never part of the plan. Disease and famine (not mentioned in Genesis) are unsuccessful *ad-hoc* attempts to deal with the noise problem by culling the population. Death becomes the lot of all humanity only after the flood (Dalley 2000). The rationale is implicitly Malthusian: if man had not been created with the ability to reproduce, or if the earth had not been finite, he might have lived forever.

In Genesis, the problem has nothing to do with the din from an over-populated earth. It has to do with the fact that the the sons of God – in *Atrahasis* called the Anunnaki – are copulating with the daughters of men (Gen 6:1-4), and man himself is continually thinking and plotting evil. The whole earth is corrupted with man's wickedness, and heaven is implicated in it. In *Atrahasis* the

moral perspective is lost. God is divided against himself, Ea versus Ellil and Anu. He creates man by killing one of his sons. He brings the deluge because he cannot sleep – a Sumerian perversion of the detail that God rested on the seventh day of creation (Gen 2:3). The only trace of a moral perspective is the character of the man who objects to Ellil's measures:

Now there was one Atrahasis  
Whose ear was open (to) his god Enki.  
He would speak with his god,  
And his god would speak with him.  
Atrahasis made his voice heard  
And spoke to his lord,  
    'How long (?) [will the gods make us suffer]?'  
    Will they make us suffer illness forever?

But even here Atrahasis is described as an exceedingly wise man rather than an exceptionally righteous man (Gen 6:9), and the problem is not man's wickedness but the gods'. The deluge is the culmination of their wickedness. Ea's advice to Atrahasis that he dismantle his house and build a boat is a scheme only to mitigate the atrocity. It is, moreover, an exceedingly thoughtless atrocity. For who will do the work of building the canals if man is wiped out? The story neither asks nor answers the question, because it is parasitic and has not been thought through. The deluge makes no sense, despite being the climax of the story.

Commentators have long supposed that the Mesopotamian version must have been inspired by the experience of an exceptionally devastating flood caused by the overflowing of the Tigris and Euphrates. And there are some details which do give the Mesopotamian version a local character. But there are others which do not. The details are conflicting, as if two events – one regional and recent, the other global and ancient – were conflated into one. Winds rage, screaming like a wild ass, the land is shattered like a pot, and there is total darkness. A mere overflowing of rivers? Possibly. On the other hand, in the later myth [\*Erra and Ishum\*](#) we are told,

The control of heaven and earth was undone. The very heavens I made to tremble,  
the positions of the stars changed... even Erkalla [the underground city of the dead] quaked.

The measures Atrahasis has to take in order to circumvent the disaster also hint at a more than regional disaster. He must take birds of the air, wild beasts and cattle on board his boat, as well as his family, for Ellil's intention is to destroy all life and leave no survivors. He must build (in the Gilgamesh version) a gigantic cube seven storeys high, its length, breadth and height each 120 cubits (50 metres), and take on board 'the seed of all living creatures'. It is, again, Genesis which makes clear the reason for these instructions. The design of the vessel, a vastly more seaworthy 300 by 50 by 30 cubits, answers its explicit purpose: the earth's animals are to be entirely blotted out, and from those preserved in the ark the earth, once the deluge is over, is to be restocked. Even birds will not survive the cataclysm.

The landing of Atrahasis' boat on Mount Nimush is similarly incongruous. According to one Assyrian text the mountain lay southeast of the Lower Zab, a tributary of the Tigris, in which case it was probably Pir Omar Gudrun, rising to 9,000 feet. Whether or not this is correct, had the

floodwaters reached only the foothills of the Zagros Mountains, Sumerian civilisation would have been wiped out. There would have been no restoration of cult centres or renewal of the kingship, as *Gilgamesh* relates, merely a depopulated wasteland. In the context of *Gilgamesh* the detail that the boat landed on a mountain is completely foreign. It implies a depth of water that only makes sense in the context of a universal deluge.

Nonetheless, for all its Mesopotamian colour, *Atrahasis* is a story about the whole human race. It explains in Mesopotamian terms why mankind was created, and why mankind had to be destroyed. After the Deluge death is instituted as the normal end to human life, whereas before it was the consequence only of disease and famine. In such a context the Deluge cannot but have been universal. The same applies to the tradition which tells of it. If the deluge was a real event, and was perceived as affecting the whole of mankind, it hardly seems adequate to suggest that the tradition originated in the experience of a merely regional flood.

## Conclusions

That the Sumerian and Hebrew accounts of the Deluge are related to each other in some way is beyond dispute: they have too many details in common for their similarity to be coincidental. The key question is, in what way are they related? Neither of them seems directly dependent on the other. *Atrahasis* cannot have borrowed from Genesis, because it is the older text of the two, and Genesis cannot have borrowed from *Atrahasis*, because at every point of comparison it shows itself to be the less corrupted version. *Atrahasis* and Genesis must stem from an oral tradition that was older than both. It is on this basis that Genesis has some claim to be treated as a historical text. It is not a document without discernible origins. The Sumerian versions throw the Hebrew text into sharp historical relief. They demonstrate that Genesis has a pedigree in oral tradition stretching at least as far back as the third millennium BC. They also demonstrate just how far, on the Sumerian side, the story had by then undergone ideologically motivated misrepresentation.

Finally, the findings presented here help us to interpret the deluge stories which ethnologists in the 19th and 20th centuries documented from many other parts of the world. It is sometimes suggested that the similarities shared with the Genesis account are due either to contamination of the native tradition by Christian missionaries or to experiences of periodic floods that any tribe might be inclined to exaggerate and represent as a calamity affecting the whole world. Since the Sumerian flood story is evidently not susceptible to these explanations, it strengthens the case for taking some, if not most, of the other deluge stories as also having stemmed from a once common tradition.

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*Related material:*

[The chronology of Genesis 7-8.](#)

Discusses further evidence, both Hebrew and Sumerian, that the cataclysm described in these chapters was a unique event.

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