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The Hebrew Bible & the Eastern Mediterranean World:

Noah and the Ark & Gilgamesh's Epic Flood

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In the Hebrew text Genesis 6-9 documents the experience of a man named Noah whom God asked to build an ark. Noah was required to collect a large supply of food to feed the people and the animals who entered the ark. When the ark was completed Noah and his family and a pair of every animal entered the ark and they were protected from the destructive flood. While the people who remained outside perished with the animals. At the end of the flood, Noah was considered a hero and he was rewarded with material blessings for his obedience to the plan of God. Similarly, in the Gilgamesh epic flood mythology, Utnapishtim was asked to build a boat to protect people from a flood and he was rewarded with immortality for following the directive of the god. The ideas presented in Genesis 6-9, Jonah, and the Ark narrative and the Gilgamesh epic mythology documented on the tablet IX appears to be to have many commonalities. The dominant themes included the presence of a perfect deity, the sinful behaviors of imperfect humans, the use of a vessel to protect the good people, the use of water to cleanse the earth, blessings from a deity, and new beginnings. I will argue that the similarities in the Noah and the Ark narrative and the Gilgamesh epic narrative are significant because of similar belief systems, and similar cultural values, while the difference was due to ideas specific to each culture.

Mark Smith did a study about myth and scriptures and he noted that many modern people believe that the bible is the inspired word of God and a myth is a human perception of a story. Many documents present the bible as a historic document and the Gilgamesh story as a myth however there were many similarities in both events and it was a challenge to accurately determine the uniqueness of the Noah and the ark biblical narrative in comparison to the mythical status of the Gilgamesh story. Smith noted that there are many similarities between the Noah and the ark biblical narrative and the Ancient Near East Gilgamesh epic narrative. Both events included a command from a supreme being to build a boat to protect people and animals.

A flood was used to destroy a generation of humans, and rewards were given to the heroes for obeying the command of the deity. The flood lasted 40 days in the bible in contrast to 6 days in Gilgamesh's tale. The flood-affected a global population in the bible in contrast to 6 days in Gilgamesh's story and the Utnapishtim goal was immortality and Noah wanted material wealth. According to Smith, the ideas from the Gilgamesh epic narrative was written on tablets IX centuries before the possible occurrence of Noah's experience. Therefore, it is apparent that the biblical experience was not a unique event and there was the possible sampling of information due to shared belief system and cultural views that influenced the similarities in the Noah and Gilgamesh epic narrative. It was also noted that many times Hebrew people were taken captive in Babylonian territories so it was possible as the oral history was passed on some of the ideas could be combined. This is just one possible explanation for the similar in the flood narrative.

John Walton suggests that many Ancient Near East (ANE) countries shared land borders and many nomads and traders moved from one region to another. This movement from one geographic location to another may have increased the possibility of shared belief and cultural values. According to Walton, there are common similarities and some differences in the narratives found in the Hebrew text and Ancient Near East (ANE) mythology. There is a common belief in a supreme god, for example, ANE cultures believe in a god Anu who was the sky god and his son Enlil who had authority over the weather which includes his destructive powers that caused floods and storms and the Hebrew culture believes in one God who lives in heaven(sky). The deity had warned the people that a flood will destroy the people, so it was implied that the deity caused the flood. Both cultures respected the powers of their deity so preparation was made to build a boat to protect righteous people from the flood. The purpose of the floods was to destroy humans who were not compliant with the rules of the deity. Both male

heroes did a sacrifice at the end of the flood to appease the supreme deity. One can infer the ideas in the Israelite narrative reflected the ideas from the (ANE) epic narrative. The similarities in the Genesis Noah and the Ark narrative and the Gilgamesh epic narrative is one example of common belief system and cultural similarities because the ideas of the deity were important, it was necessary to appease the deity and the deity rewarded loyalty and punished disloyalty. The noted difference where physical differences such as in the flood had a global effect and the Gilgamesh narrative hand a local effect in areas of Mesopotamia. The shape of the boat was different and the Noah flood lasted 40 days and Gilgamesh flood lasted 6 days. Also, Noah was granted the material wealth based on his belief system, and Gilgamesh was given spiritual blessings based on his belief system.

Other authors such as Norman Cohn explained that the Genesis story is a narrative about an elderly man named Noah and God told him to build a boat using gopher wood with the dimension 300 cubic feet x 50 cubic feet x 30 cubic feet in height the boat should be sealed inside and outside with pitch. The boat should have a roof, 3 levels a door, and a window. The purpose of the boat was to store food supplies, protect a pair of every animal and Noah's family from an impending flood. Noah was warned that the earth will be destroyed because of the wickedness of humans. After the flood receded Noah made a sacrifice to thank God for his protection and God sent a rainbow as a promise that the earth will not be destroyed by water.

Cohn suggested the Mesopotamian Gilgamesh epic narrative was written on tablet IX many centuries before the Noah and the ark narrative and Utnapishtim was required to build a sealed covered ark to protect people from a flood. After the flood, Utnapishtim made a sacrifice to thank the deity for protecting the people from death. The effect of the deity was a common theme because both cultures believed that floods were divinely decreed and the flood was used to

represent conquest. The conquest in both events was the people who had demonstrated behaviors that were not pleasing for the deity. Therefore, the earth was cleansed from people who were rebellious against the deity.

According to David Melvin Gilgamesh was believed to be part human and part deity. One of his limitations as a mortal is the inevitability of death. It was believed that after Gilgamesh completed the flood assignment he was blessed with immortality. One can suggest that his immortal status was a great accomplishment for someone who feared the possibility of death. Gilgamesh was terrified of death after he experienced the death of his friend Enkidu. Thus, it can be proposed that the narrative was one way to show humans in ANE cultures that they can gain deity status if they obeyed the rules established by the gods. While if they are disobedient, they will dye. The fear of death may have been a powerful motivation for the heroes to follow the commands of the deity. Melvin also indicated the ancient Hebrew myth could have linked Gilgamesh as one of the giants who existed on earth. This was an interesting cultural idea that connected Gilgamesh to Hebrew culture and myths.

Eugene Fisher was one author who identified human and deity themes to demonstrate a spiritual connection in the Genesis flood narrative. The themes Fisher identified included death. Death was seen as a separation from fellow humans. The people who believed and follow the rules of God were blessed and the ones who disobeyed perished. The relationship that humans have with God was identified as an important spiritual connection and the concept of punishment for humans who demonstrated behavioral issues that were offensive to God was another important theme. The ideas of death, humanity, and deity were noted in the Noah and the ark cultural and spiritual values. While in the Epic of Gilgamesh's narrative the main theme was death and mortality status because Gilgamesh's involvement in the flood narrative was because

he wanted to earn mortality status. So, one can propose that spiritual and cultural beliefs such as blessings from the deity and death of foes were a reoccurring theme.

Steven Holloway has proposed that the flood was a symbolic event in both Gilgamesh's epic narrative and the Genesis Noah and the Ark narrative. In both narratives, the deity was angry with the moral values of the humans and a flood was used to destroy people who were not living a righteous life. It appears the water was used as a symbol for cleansing the earth from unrighteous people and the boat was viewed as a symbol of safety to protect the righteous people. Samuel Boyd suggests the use of gopher wood, and reeds was a boat making method typically used by the Babylonians and the techniques were shared by the Hebrew people. Both vessels had one door so the people could enter and leave the boat and one window to release the birds after the flood. Noah had his family in the ark and Utnapishtim had his family and a crew to operate the boat. Ravens and doves were used to find the land after the flood. Holloway suggests the belief in mythology, religious rituals, and symbols is a major component of Ancient Near East cultures. In Gilgamesh's narrative, the ark was a symbol of a ziggurat, and Noah’s ark was viewed as symbolically representing Solomon’s temple. According to Holloway, the temple comparison was common in both Akkadian and Hebrew cultures. The temple was viewed as a place to connect to the supreme deity who created the humans and controlled all forces of nature. At the end of the flood, Noah’s ark rested on Mt. Ararat and Utnapishtim boat rested on Mt. Nisir. The mountain was a symbolic place where people prayed and connected with the deity. Both men made a sacrifice to the deity after the flood. Noah in the Hebrew text and Utnapishtim in the Gilgamesh epic tale was chosen as the heroes because this was a patriarchal society. The men were blessed for their involvement in the flood so Utnapishtim was granted eternal life while Noah was blessed with the privilege to have children and dominion over the animals. In

Babylonian culture, immortality was considered a gift. In Hebrew culture material wealth on earth such as food, property, and children were blessings. There were some differences in the narratives which included Gilgamesh's epic flood that was set in Babylon and the bible had a global setting, the ark was rectangular and the boat in Gilgamesh epic tale was square. The ark had 3 levels and the other boat had 6 levels, Noah flood lasted 40 days/nights and Gilgamesh flood was 6 days/night, Utnapishtim becomes immortal like a god, and Noah remained a mortal. It was understandable that the geographic location was different because the setting was different and the dimensions and shape of the vessel were related to the size and shape of the temple. The number 40 was a significant number when used in terms of time in Hebrew culture as it was viewed as a time of testing and trial. One can deduce that the 40 days in the ark could be viewed as a time of testing the faith of Noah and his family. The number 40 appears in many incidences, for example, Moses fasting 40 days, the children of Israel were in the wilderness for 40 years, 40 stripes were the maximum amount of stipes that could be used to punish a person. While six days could be significant for the earth to be made as represented as 6 days of flood in Gilgamesh's story. The faith of Noah and his family was rewarded with blessings in the end. While the six days for Gilgamesh could be the end of one spiritual journey as a mortal and the possibility of gaining immortality as a reward.

It is normal for people to research the authenticity of events that occurred in the past. The presence of empirical evidence can be used to determine if the event was just a myth or religious belief rather than a factual event. Sean Kingsley did a prehistoric study of Israel and many other ANE regions to find artifacts or identify a possible location for either the Gilgamesh epic flood or the Noah’s Ark. There were no identifiable artifacts or locations for either event. The study concluded that either the stories are myths or the evidence was not preserved and only the oral

history was passed on from generations until the written memories were documented. Oral history was a common way for the elders and grandparents to communicate historic information to family and community, so the flood narrative was likely communicated using oral narrative until it was documented on tablets and scrolls.

James Franklin Armstrong reviewed Hebrew and Arabic translation of Gilgamesh epic flood and the Noah's Ark narrative and he suggested that a redaction criticism was used to edit the original narrative. He suggested that originally the dimensions for the Gilgamesh boat were a small boat and the information was changed to make it a bigger boat. Also, there were some discrepancies in the words used to translate the roof so it was not clear if the roof was flat or vaulted. A vaulted roof could make it easier for the water to runoff. There were concerns about the presence of an actual window or a slight opening. It was believed that some of the information was possibly changed as the narrative was passed on from generation, then translated to other languages and oral to written history. While there may have been some changes in the narrative the moral of the story that was passed on had not changed. The role of the deity was consistent and the imperfections of human were evident and the blessing from the deity were notable. These cultural and spiritual belief systems were consistent in the narrative. I believe it is important to question the authenticity of an event and to acquire as much information as possible to support one's learning experience. I believe the consistent information on cultural and spiritual belief influence has continued to support the similarities in the Noah and the Ark Narrative and the Gilgamesh epic myth. The information has provided enlightenment on the events that may have occurred during the period of both flood and the effect in the community.

The underlying theme of death was always a topic for discussion as so many people died in both floods. Berit Synøve Thorbjørnsrud and Tzvi Abusch identify the roles Gilgamesh epic

tales as a man, hero, king, and partial god. The narrative identified the role of a human who was the son of a King and he wanted to gain immortal status because of his fear of death. As a result, he was required to earn his status by obeying all the commands of the god, confronting his feelings of inadequacy, and realizing that death was inevitable. Gilgamesh was scared of dying because he experienced the death of his friend. However, the status of immortality was reserved for people who were completely gods and this was a gift Gilgamesh craved because he wanted to live forever. Noah also had to confront the idea that many people will perish when the flood came. I believe that it was one of the reasons Noah was warning the people to change their behavior because a destructive flood was imminent. I also believe that it is the reason why many preachers, teachers, and other people continue to share a belief in an eternal God who can save people from eternal destruction. I am aware that death is inevitable however when the occasion occurs that a loved one has transitioned it is challenging to cope with the grief and the loss. Most people who have a faith belief system will indicate that they believe in a God and even if the body dies the spirit may live on forever and they will be with their loved ones in the afterlife. This belief system may bring a source of comfort to people as they cope with death and dying.

In our present world, we are experiencing a different type of epic flood that is affecting the global community. The heroes are the healthcare workers and other people who are working every day on the frontline to manage this deadly disease. The disease is a very contagious disease that is killing thousands of people and it is called the “Corona Virus”. The reality of death is evident and almost everyone knows someone who has been affected by the disease. The disease has ravaged places like New York City and the count of dead bodies is several hundred every day. People are experiencing grief every day as their loved ones die. I believe it is only their spiritual belief in the afterlife and the support of their cultural and social community that is

helping everyone to cope. People are working together to provide physical, financial, and moral support for each other as the global world cope with the disease. The thought of dying makes the disease process unbearable. Many people are dying alone because they fear possible infection for the ones that are living. The connection of the fear of the virus was made so that people can relate to the fear that people many have experienced during the flood in Noah's time as well as the flood in Gilgamesh's epic flood experience. Also, people could relate to many dead bodies and dead animals after the flood to the many dead bodies that are waiting to be cremated because of the virus. This virus is a health epidemic that affects all cultures in the global community and the flood-affected.

As I conclude I will propose that there were many similarities in the Noah and the Ark narrative and the Gilgamesh epic narrative. The similarities in both narratives included the presence of a powerful deity, the occurrence of social behaviors that were offensive to the deity, the heroes who were chosen to build a boat to save the righteous families, a flood that destroyed many people and the blessing that was given to the heroes for obeying the deity. These cultural and spiritual ideas have provided a significant basis for concluding that the belief systems and similar cultural values were the dominant themes in the Noah and the Ark narrative and the Gilgamesh epic narrative. While the difference was due to ideas specific to each culture.

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