Reflections on the Mesopotamian Flood

The Cuneiform Data: New and Old

By SAMUEL NOAH KRAMER

Historiography, the writing of history, was hardly a favorite subject of the ancient Mesopo-
tamian academicians and men of letters. Lacking the verifiable facts, the tools of definition and
generalization, and immobilized by a sterile, static
view of man and his past, they became at best
archivists and chroniclers rather than interpreters
and expositors of historical truths. Now one of
the most valuable of the cuneiform chronicle-like
documents that has as yet been dug up from the
Mesopotamian soil is the so-called Sumerian
“King List,” which records the dynasties and
kings that held sway over much of Mesopotamia
from the time when “kingship descended from
ever,” that is, from the very beginning of
history, down to the early second millennium
B.C. To be sure, this unique document is actually
a mixture of fact and fancy, and it is often difficult
to decide where the one begins and the other
ends. But in spite of its defects and shortcomings
it provides us with an historical framework of
inestimable value if utilized with discrimination and
understanding. It is the very first section of
this Sumerian “King List” that contains two
brief passages of fundamental significance for
the subject of this paper: the character and
chronology of the Mesopotamian Flood as
recorded in the available cuneiform materials.

“After kingship had descended from Heaven,” begins our King List, there were five
cities “before the Flood” whose eight fabulous
kings ruled no less than 241,200 years. Following
the hegemony of these five antediluvian cities,
the document goes on to tell us:

The Flood swept over everything. After the
Flood swept over everything, and kingship
was descended from Heaven, Kish became the seat
of kingship.

Little did the ancient scholar who “Penned”
these lines dream that this innocent-sounding
passage would lead to heated debate and pas-
sionate controversy among his colleagues living
and working more than four thousand years after
he had departed for the Sumerian “Land of No-
Return.” For, what he seemed to say is that he
knew of a real, historic, universal, catastrophic
Deluge that had overwhelmed and destroyed not
only Sumer, but mankind as a whole, a statement
which most modern historians would hardly
accept as credible and true. Still there are a few
who, especially in view of the Biblical account
of the Deluge that has been part and parcel of
Judaic-Christian tradition for thousands of years,
would like to think of it as an authentic event
that had taken place in the far distast past. And
even among the skeptics, there are some who
feel that there must be at least a kernel of truth
in the Flood-motif, it seems to have played too
large a role in Mesopotamian myth and legend, for
it to have been nothing more than a total
fabrication of fancy and fantasy.

It was just a little over a hundred years ago,
on December 3, 1862, to be exact, that an
Englishman by the name of George Smith who
had been studying thousands of clay tablets and
fragments brought to the British Museum from
Ancient Nineveh, read a paper before the Society
of Biblical Archæology, in which he announced
the discovery of the tablet, on one of which
these clay tablets dug up from the long buried library of
King Assurbanipal, of a version of a Deluge
myth that showed marked resemblances to the
Flood of the Book of Genesis. The document
has since been studied by a whole host of scholars,
and the story it tells is now known to be as follows:

Once upon a time the gods, whose peace
was disturbed by the “noisy,” that is, sinful deeds
of man, decided to send a Flood that would
destroy him utterly and wipe him off the face
of the Earth. But Ea, the kindly god of wisdom,
was unhappy with this cruel decision; he felt
that even a transgresser should suffer for his
sins and not all mankind. He therefore reveals
the decision of the gods to Utanapishtim, a king of
Shuruppak, who not unlike the Biblical Noah,
as a wise, wise, and god-fearing man, and
instructs him to build a huge, zigurat-like boat,
and lead with all his possessions, his family
and kin, the beasts of the field, and all sorts of
craftsmen. Utanapishtim followed the directions
in every detail, and when the Flood came, he
boarded the boat, and put it in charge of a trusty
sea-captain by the name of Shem-Emeri. For
six days and six nights the Flood winds blew over
the land and the South-wind tempest swept over
it. On the seventh day, the winds subsided, the
sea grew still, and the Flood ceased. But when
Utanapishtim looked out, he saw that the land-
scape was flat and bare and that all mankind had
“returned to clay.” With tears running down his
checks, he saw that the land had turned into a
vast sea. Here and there, however, the top of
a mountain was visible, and on these of these, Mt.
Nirar, generally identified with Mt. Ararat in
Eastern Anatolia, the boat found a resting place.
Still, Utanapishtim was unable to leave his “ark,”
until he was sure that the land had become dry
again. He sent forth a dove, and then a
swallow, but both returned to the boat for safety.
Utanapishtim then set free the raven, and when
this bird failed to return, he took it as a sign that
the land had become sufficiently dry for human
habitation. With joyous thanksgiving, Utanapis-
tim then proceeded to offer sacrifices and
pour libations to the gods and to enshew the “sweet
savor” of his offerings with deep satisfaction and
Enlil, their king, then proceeded to bless him and
his wife saying:

Until now Utanapishtim was mortal, Horeczefot, Utanapishtim and his wife shall be like the gods,
Utanapishtim shall dwell in a faraway land, at the mouth of the rivers.

The Flood legend sketched above is in-
scribed in the cuneiform script, but in the Semitic
language commonly known as Assyrian or Babylon-
ian. The Sumerian version of the story was
unknown until 1914 when, along with a number of col-
league, the distinguished Samarologist, Arno
Poebel, published a copy and translation of a
tablet excavated some time between 1889 and
1900 at Nippur, Sumer’s holy city. Only the
lower third of the tablet is preserved—scholars
have searched in vain for possible duplicates in
the museums and libraries of the world over—and it
still remains our sole source for the Sumerian version of the Deluge myth. Frag-
mentary as it is, however, the Flood story it tells can be reconstructed in large part, thus:

Sometime after the gods had created man,
plants, and animals, and kingship had been estab-
lished in five special cult centers, they decided to
bring the Flood and destroy mankind—the pas-
sage giving the reason for this melancholy judg-
ment is broken away, but no doubt it was some
act of hubris or disobedience on the part of man.
But, the tale continues, some of the gods were
unhappy with the extreme severity of the decree, and one of the Edicts, Enki, who is none other than
the Ea of the Babylonian version, reveals it to

Stephen Langdon's copy of the first part of the Sumerian King List, from a prism in the Weld-Blissell Collection of the Ashmolean Museum. The first line (shown in color) reads: "After kingship had descended from heaven." There follows a list of the eight legendary ruling families, each of which included seven cities, together with the fabulous length of their reigns. Then the "Flood passage" (shown in color) that reads: "The Flood swept over everything. After the Flood etc. etc." The King List was probably copied in part about 2100 B.C., but the copies excavated thus far date from the early second millen-
ium B.C.
Following a break in the text, we find Ziusuda prosternating himself before An and Enlil, the two leading gods of the Sumerian pantheon, who are so pleased with his god-fearing humility that they give him “a life like a god,” and breath eternal, and translate him to Diliman, the Divine Paradise, “the place where the sun rises.”

This is all that was known about the Sumerian Flood until 1964. In the summer of that year I was working in the Student Room of the Western Asiatic Section of the British Museum when the keeper in charge of its famous tablet collection, Edmund Scheil, brought me some sixty tablets bought by the museum many years ago, inscribed with a number of hitherto un-studied Sumerian literary works. Among these were two beginning with “Flood” passages. The first is inscribed with an as yet unknown myth about the birth of the namûn plant, the reedy rushes that played no little role in Sumerian daily life. Its initial lines which set the scene for the tale as a whole read:

After the storm had brought the rains,
After (all) built walls had been destroyed.
After the raging tempest had brought the rains,

The second tablet was to some extent even more intriguing; it was inscribed with a document that purported to give an outline sketch of the growth and development of the city of Lagash from earliest times to the days of Gudea, the ruler whose face and features are now so well known from the numerous statues excavated by the French at that ancient city. It is the introductory passage to this pseudo-historical composition that concerns the Flood and reads:

Cyril God’s copy of a tablet excavated by Leonard Woolley at Ur, inscribed with a collection of proverbs commonly known as “The Instructions of Ziusuda.” They were purportedly addressed by Shuruppak, the last antediluvian king who reigned in the city Shuruppak (modern Fais), note that the king and the city have the same name), to his son, the Flood-hero Ziusuda. The tablets dates from the early second millennium B.C., but parts of it, recently uncovered in Salhiya, dates from about 2500 B.C. The passage in color contains the lines translated on page 16.

Woolley’s large Flood-deposit at Ur (from Ur Excavations Vol. IV, pl. 73). Above the Flood-deposit is a sifter deposit of cists and wasters, and above that, strata dating from 3000-2500 B.C.
After the Flood had wiped out (every-
After the destruction of the lands had
been achieved,
After mankind was made (to endure)
forever.
After the seed of mankind had been
saved,
After the black-headed people (the
Sumerians) had of themselves been
lifted high,
After An and Enlil had called man by
name
After ensi-ship (had been established)
But kingship .
Had not yet descended from
heaven .

So much for the cuneiform literary works
documenting the Flood. All in all they justify
the conclusion that the Mesopotamian minis-
trists and poets knew of a cataclysmic Deluge
that had done immense damage to the land and its
people, but from which it eventually recovered,
and that it was this unforgettable disaster (together
with its “happy ending,” that inspired them to
create and develop over the centuries a universal
Flood-myth that was appealing, entertaining, and
in accord with their religious world view. That
this took place in Mesopotamia, and particularly
in its southern half, the Sumer of most ancient
days, is not surprising, for it is a region where
torrential floods are endemic to this day. 
There was one such appalling disaster for example, in
1954, when an exceptionally rainy spring com-
bined with the melting snows of Armenia and
Kurdistan, so swelled the Tigris River that it
submerged the low-lying plain for hundreds of
miles, and all Baghdad was in imminent danger
of destruction. Max Mallowan, the distinguished
British archaeologist who, when a young man, was
one of Leonard Woolley’s associates in the
excavation of Ur, reports that from 1925 to
1930,

there was hardly a season either in the
spring or autumn, when the desert did
not, at least for a few days, assume
the appearance of a lake, and quite
often Eridu (some 12 miles to the
southeast) was cut off from us. I
remember a day in the month of No-
veryber, either 1925 or 1926, when in
a torrential downpour we had to use
our two hundred workmen to complete
a dyke across the courtyard of our
expedition house in order to save it
from being swept away; within a few
minutes of this cloud-burst, we were
standing chest-deep in water outside
our own front door.

There are historical references to violent
floods in Southern Mesopotamia going back to
Akkadian days of the seventh and eighth century
A.D., as well as to tenth, eighteenth, and ten-
tieth century B.C., and there were certainly many
more of which we have no record. As for the
date of the cataclysmic event on which the
Sumerian Flood-myth is based, this will obviously
depend on the date ascribed to its hero Ziusudra.
Unfortunately we have as yet no authentic, con
temporary historical records of his life and times.
But the fact is that there is a version of the King
List which lists him as the king of Shuruppak
immediately before the Flood. Moreover, as has
long been known, he was an important figure in
Sumerian historical and literary tradition, a ruler
noted for his wisdom and perspicacity, as is
befitting a hero who somehow managed to escape
an overwhelming disaster, such as the Flood.
Thus, we have a Sumerian wisdom document
known as “The Instructions of Shuruppak to his
son Ziusudra,” which begins with the lines:

Shuruppak gave instructions to his son,
Shuruppak, the son of Ubartu,
Gave instructions to his son Ziusudra:
“My son, I would instruct you,
Take my instruction,
Ziusudra, I would utter a word to you,
Give heed to it,
Do not neglect my instruction,
Do not transgress the word I uttered,
The father’s instructions, the precious,
Carry out diligently.”

Now until recently these lines were
known only from tablets dated as late as the
first half of the second millennium B.C. But
two years ago, the Oriental Institute of the
University of Chicago, while excavating the ruins
of Susahib, a city some twenty kilometers north-
west of Nippur, whose ancient name is still un-
known, discovered a tablet inscribed with a ver-
sion of “The Instructions of Shuruppak” that can
be dated to about 3000 B.C. The name of Shur-
uppak’s son is not actually stated in the text, but
it may well turn out to be Ziusudra. In any case,
it is fairly certain that Ziusudra had be-
come a venerable figure in literary tradition by
the middle of the third millennium B.C., it is not
unreasonable to conclude that he lived some
centuries earlier, and we may therefore date his
reign, as well as the Flood that presumably oc-

Water-logged deposits in a street of ancient Kish (from an original photograph by Max Mallowan, published in IRAQ, Vol. XXVI, pl. 19), the lowest of which date from about 3000 B.C.

Flood deposits of about 3000 B.C. uncovered by Eric Schumacher at Fara (ancient Shuruppak, the city of the Flood-hero Ziusudra) (from the Museum Journal, Vol. XXII, Nos. 3-4, pl. IV, fig. 2).
curred in his days, to the early third millennium B.C., not long after kingship had come into vogue. But if so, if a catastrophic deluge of immense destructive force had actually come upon the land close to 3000 B.C., there should be some corroborative archaeological evidence from some of the more important excavated sites in Sumer. And this is actually the case; in the past forty years quite a number of significant discoveries relating to the "archaeology of the Flood" have been made, but their interpretation has been a source of considerable controversy and debate.

The key figure in the archaeological Flood debate, the excavator who staked first claim to the discovery and identification of a Flood stratum is Leonard Woolley. In 1929, after he had completed excavating the Royal Cemetery of Ur with its extraordinary and dazzling finds, he sank a small shaft, not more than five feet square at the top, into the underlying soil. For about three feet, this shaft penetrated a layer of mixed rubbish typical of inhabited sites—decomposed mud-brick, ashes, and broken pottery. But then, to use the excavator's own words:

it all stopped—there were no more potsherds, no ashes, only clean, water-laid
mud, and the Arab workman at the
bottom of the shaft told me that he had
reached virgin soil; there was nothing
more to be found, and he had better go
elsewhere (Leonard Woolley, Excava-
tions at Ur, page 26).

Woolley, however, noted that this so-called virgin soil was not nearly as deep down as he had expected, and he told the worker to keep on digging. He did so rather grudgingly, and went through eight feet of absolutely clean soil, without any sign of human activity. Suddenly, immediately below this "empty" stratum, there appeared pottery vessels and stone implements readily recognizable as belonging to the prehistoric Ubaid period of occupation. Woolley was convinced then and there that he had the "Flood." But since he could scarcely argue convincingly for the Deluge on the strength of a pit a yard square, he dug the following season a rectangle some seventy-five feet by sixty and went down sixty-four feet deep. And here, too, above the Ubaid remains, he found a deposit of clean, water-laid soil, this time eleven feet thick. All in all Woolley sank fourteen pits at various points down to sea-level, or approximately so, and in virtually every case he encountered some clean water-laid soil overlying Ubaid remains. He therefore concluded that he had found the Flood-myth archaeologically verified at Ur.

Unfortunately that matter was not so simple and clear-cut as Woolley assumed; his Flood deposits at Ur go back to at least 3500 B.C., and this is far too early for the Ziusudra Deluge. Moreover, the year before Woolley staked his claim for Ur, Stephen Langdon and L. Watelen, the excavators of Kish, had discovered a Flood layer there that is chronologically in closer agreement with Ziusudra's date; it lay directly above a stratum of "Jemdet Nasr" remains, that is an archaeological horizon ranging from about 3200 to 3000 B.C. first identified in Jemdet Nasr, a small mound not far from Kish. Even more intriguing and apropos was a similar discovery in 1931 by Eric Schmidt of a Flood level immediately above Jemdet Nasr remains in Ziusudra's own city, Shuruppak. All in all, therefore, it is justifiable to conclude from the present evidence, as does Max Mallowan in his recent thoughtful and comprehensive article, "Noah's Flood Reconsidered" (Iraq, vol. XXVI, 1964, pages 62-83) that the Mesopotamian Flood-story, and the Old Testament version based on it, was inspired by an actual catastrophic but by no means universal disaster that took place, not as Woolley claimed, immediately after the Ubaid period, but some time about 3000 B.C., and that it left its archaeological traces in Kish, Shuruppak, and probably at a good many other places yet to be discovered.

SUGGESTED READING


SALUEL NOAH KRAMER, Curator of the Tablet Collection in the University Museum and Clark Research Professor of Assyriology at the University of Pennsylvania, is one of the foremost authorities on Sumerian literary works. His study of the clay tablets on which this literature is written has taken him to the museums in Iraq, Turkey, and Russia, as well as to many in this country. From these scattered tablets and fragments he has been able to piece together such poems as Gilgamesh and the Hulupp Tu tree, Lamentation over the Destruction of Ur, Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta. His book, History begins at Sumer, has been translated into more than a dozen languages.