

The Early Narratives of Genesis.

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VII.—THE STORY OF THE FLOOD—*continued.*

2. It has been claimed that the tradition of the Deluge is to be met with, in some form or another, in every quarter of the globe. Certainly in Greek, Assyrian, Persian, Indian, and Scandinavian legends we find mention of a Deluge. More than that, if the sources of our information are correct, traditions of a similar event are said to be forthcoming from the primitive religions of Mexico, of South America, and even of Southern Africa. In some of these cases the alleged points of correspondence with the Scriptural account require to be submitted to a more rigorously scientific test than has hitherto been possible. But, even making allowance for a certain amount of hasty generalisation, we may regard it as an established fact that Deluge traditions are extremely widely diffused, and that, in the comparative study of early religions, their discussion will supply a most interesting and important chapter, in which their relation to the narrative in Genesis would have to be duly considered.

But with that more general inquiry we are not here concerned. That which demands our attention is the Assyro-Babylonian account of the Flood, which in many of its features so closely resembles that of the Bible.

What was known as the “Chaldee” version of the Flood narrative was preserved, though doubtless in a somewhat fragmentary and imperfect form, by extracts from the history of Berossus extant in the writings of Eusebius and Syncellus. According to this account, Xisuthros, the “Chaldean” Noah, was warned by Chronos, in a dream, of an approaching Deluge that should destroy all living things; and he was commanded to do two things. In the first place, he was to record in writing a history of the world, and to deposit it at a place called Sipara, which was sacred to the sun. In the second place, he was to construct a ship, 15 stadia long and 2 broad, into which he was to convey his family and his friends; he was then to replenish it with provisions, and to collect into it every kind of beast and bird. This was done; and the Flood came. When it ceased, Xisuthros

sent out birds three times to discover whether the water had abated. On the first occasion they returned, having found neither food nor rest for the sole of their foot; on the second occasion they returned, but there was wet mud upon their feet; on the last occasion they came not back again. Xisuthros then removed part of the roof, and came forth with his family and the pilot, and offered a sacrifice to the gods. They were at once taken up into heaven. But the voice of Xisuthros was heard informing those who remained in the ship of the happy lot which they had received, and commanding them to leave Armenia, where the ship had landed, and to return to Babylon, and to recover the hidden records of Sipara.

Until the year 1872 it was very commonly supposed that the interesting Chaldean account, of which the foregoing gives the rough outline, had come down to us through channels into which had been imported from Judea many of the characteristic features of the Biblical narrative. But this opinion was destined to be falsified by the decipherment of the cuneiform characters. On the 3rd of December 1872, Mr. George Smith, the famous Assyrologist, announced his discovery of the brick tablet which contained the Assyro-Babylonian account of the Deluge. This tablet was the eleventh in a series of twelve, which contained the so-called Izdubar legends; and, according to Sir H. Rawlinson’s conjecture, the tablets corresponded to the months in the year, so that the eleventh tablet, containing the legend of the Flood, belonged to the eleventh month, whose patron-deity was the storm god Ramman (Schrader). The form which this version of the legends takes is that of a narrative spoken by Hasisadra (or Xisuthros) to Izdubar.

The Flood is described as having been brought about by the gods Anu, Bel, Adar, and En-nugi. The god Ea instructed Hasisadra to prepare a ship in spite of the ridicule he should incur by its construction, and gave directions as to its size.

Hasisadra built a great ship like a dwelling-house, and covered it with bitumen within and without. He put within it all his treasures of silver and gold and corn, and caused his slaves

and concubines, his cattle and beasts of the field, to enter. The command came to enter into the ship and close the door. Hasisadra entered, closed the door, and handed over the care of the "palace" and all its goods to the pilot, Buzur-sadi-rabi. The Flood commenced : "The spirits of earth carried the flood; in their terribleness they sweep through the land; the deluge of Rimmon reaches unto heaven," etc. "In heaven the gods feared the flood, and sought a refuge; they ascended to the heaven of Anu. The gods, like a dog in his kennel, crouched down in a heap. Istar cries like a mother." For six days the wind, flood, and storm continued; on the seventh, they abated. Destruction was to be seen everywhere; "like reeds the corpses floated." "I opened the window," says Hasisadra, "and the light smote upon my face; I stooped and sat down; I weep; over my face flow my tears." The ship grounded on Mount Nizir. On the seventh day afterwards, Hasisadra "sent forth a dove, and it left. The dove went and returned, and found no resting-place, and it came back." Again, he sent a swallow forth, and it went; but after going to and fro, it too returned. Then he sent a raven, and the raven "went and saw the carion on the water, and it ate, it swam, it wandered away, it did not return." Then Hasisadra describes how he let forth the animals from the ship; how he built an altar and offered sacrifice; and how the gods smelt the savour, and "gathered like flies over the sacrifices. Thereupon the great goddess, at her approach, lighted up the rainbow, which Anu had created according to his glory."

The god Bel was wroth at Hasisadra's escape, but was propitiated by Ea, who reasoned with him, saying, among other things, "Let the doer of sin bear his sin, and the doer of wickedness his wickedness. Let not the first prince be cut off, nor the faithful be destroyed. Instead of a flood, let lions increase, that men may be minished, or let a famine break out, or a plague." Then Bel hearkened, and gave his hand to Hasisadra and his wife, and joined himself to them in a covenant, and blessed them, and, raising them to be as gods, caused them to dwell afar off at the mouth of the rivers.¹

The tablet containing this account belonged to

¹ See especially Schrader's *Cuneiform Inscriptions and the Old Testament*, vol. i. (Williams & Norgate), translated by Whitehouse.

the library of Assurbanipal (668-626), but fragments of other editions of the poem (see Sayce's *Fresh Lights, etc.*, p. 33) have been found not only among the ruins of Nineveh, but also in Babylonia. Accordingly, even if this particular tablet dated only from the seventh century B.C., there is no reason to doubt that the legend which it records is substantially the common form of the legend about the Flood that had been current in Assyria and Babylonia for centuries.

It has been observed that if we compare it with the two Deluge narratives of which the Biblical narrative is compounded, it shows a marked resemblance to the "Priestly" narrative in its account of the preparation and construction of the Ark, and in its mention of the rainbow and the covenant; but to the "Prophetic" or "Jehovistic" narrative, in its mention of the seven days; in the prominence given to the downpour of rain; in the thrice-repeated sending of the birds; and in the offering of the sacrifice.

But while both versions of the Hebrew narrative are thus in agreement with the Assyro-Babylonian upon certain points, the points of difference are equally striking. According to the Genesis account, the Flood is sent as a Divine punishment for the wickedness of the human race; it is Divine compassion which causes it to cease, and establishes the rainbow as the sign of a covenant with man that God will no more again destroy the world with water. According to the Assyro-Babylonian account, the Flood is sent upon the world by the caprice of the gods, especially of the god Bel; and although the idea of it as a punishment for sin is suffered to appear in the colloquy of Ea with Bel, attention is directed primarily to the arbitrary action of the gods; the Flood, too, is made to cease because of the intercession of Ishtar, and the tears and terror of other deities. The vindictiveness of Bel towards Hasisadra and his wife, on account of their escape, changes rapidly, at the end of the narrative, to the extreme of benevolence towards them; instead of slaying them, he grants them the privilege of admission within the ranks of the immortals.

The difference between the Hebrew and the Assyro-Babylonian versions is therefore most clearly marked at the beginning and close of the narrative. It corresponds to the contrast between Hebrew and Assyrian religious thought, the one pure and monotheistic, the other superstitious and polytheistic.

The Bible version may lack some of the poetical touches in the description. But its immense superiority is shown not only by its freedom from the mythological element, but by its moral purpose, by its simple dignity, and by the purity of its religious tone.

To determine the exact relationship between the Hebrew and the Assyro-Babylonian narratives is not such an easy matter, as some have supposed.

When Mr. George Smith's discovery was first announced, many who in their first excitement hailed it as a confirmation of the accuracy of the Genesis narrative, evidently hardly realised its exact bearing upon Biblical questions. For, on the one hand, the cuneiform account was thoroughly mythological in character; on the other hand, it was, in all probability, drawn from legends belonging to an antiquity earlier than the age of Abraham; and the significance of these facts was hardly appreciated by some. It was clear, of course, that the Assyro-Babylonian account was neither borrowed from nor expanded from the Hebrew. For while it belongs to a class of legends that were current long before the time of Abraham, no one could suppose that Babylon and Nineveh were ever beholden to the Hebrew race for literary records dealing with early ages.

On the other hand, there are not wanting scholars who claim that the Hebrew version of the story of the Flood is based upon that which is contained in the cuneiform texts, and that the resemblance of our Genesis narrative to the cuneiform shows that the Jews became acquainted with the Assyro-Babylonian account during the exile in Babylon. With this theory, I confess, I find myself in complete disagreement.

(a) In the first place, the Jehovahist narrative was current and well known long before the Captivity, and, in all probability, before the influence of Nineveh and Babylon had made itself felt by the people of Israel. There is no sufficient reason to warrant the view that the Priestly narrative has been derived from any but genuinely Hebrew tradition.

(b) In the second place, if the Hebrew was derived from the Assyro-Babylonian account at so late a period as the time of the Exile, it is difficult to account for the variations in the narrative which immediately occur to our minds. Thus, why should the Hebrew version omit the mention of the swallow, and all reference to the pilot, while it gives so

much more of detail respecting the entrance of the animals into the Ark, and concerning the family of Noah?

(c) Lastly, the improbability that the Jews would derive from the religion of their captors materials for the purpose of supplementing their own sacred history appears too obvious to require discussion. The pious Jews of the Exile found little at Babylon to tempt them to syncretism in religion; nor can it be said that there is any proved case of an instance in which the Jewish scribes amplified their national traditions by borrowing directly from those of Babylon. In reference to the narrative of the Flood, the express allusions to it in Isaiah liv. 9, Ezekiel xiv. 14, sufficiently confirm the general independence of the Israelite version as embodying the traditions of the Hebrew nation.

Admitting, therefore, the independence of the two narratives, the Hebrew and the Assyro-Babylonian, in the literary form in which they have come down to us, how do we explain their obvious resemblance? The explanation is to be found in their common origin. Both the Hebrew and the Assyro-Babylonian traditions are derived from a primitive and prehistoric Semitic original. The Hebrew ancestors of the people of Israel were members of the same stock as the founders of the great empires on the Euphrates, and received from yet earlier ages the traditions of the past.

The different forms under which the same tradition is presented to us in the different literatures reflect the influences which time and religious belief have wrought upon their common inheritance. Despite the changes in points of detail, the identity of the two narratives is indisputable. But while the Assyro-Babylonian narrative reproduces the character of the mythology which marked the religious thought of the great world-empires of the Euphrates valley, the Hebrew narrative has come to us stripped of every trace of the old idolatry. The Israelite writers transmit it to us in the form which most perfectly expresses the pure religion of those to whom Jehovah revealed Himself. They do not cut themselves adrift from the past. They preserve the tradition of their fathers, adapting its form, as time went on, to the needs of that higher religious standpoint which they were privileged to occupy.

3. It would argue want of candour not to consider frankly at this point the historic character of the narrative which describes so tremendous a

calamity. And, on the threshold of such an inquiry, we have to deal with the fact that science speaks in no hesitating language upon the subject. There is no indication that, since man appeared upon the earth, any universal and simultaneous inundation of so extraordinary a character as to overwhelm the highest mountain peaks has ever occurred. So vast an accumulation of water all over the terrestrial globe would be in itself a physical impossibility. None, at any rate, has taken place in the geological period to which our race belongs.

The language describing the catastrophe is that of the ancient legend describing a prehistoric event. It must be judged as such. Allowance must be made both for the exaggeration of poetical description and for the influence of oral tradition during generations, if not centuries, before the beginnings of Hebrew literature.

Perhaps the best solution of many obvious difficulties which the narrative suggests, is supplied by the recollection of the limited horizon which bounded the world of those ancestors of Israel, from whom the primitive tradition was derived. To them the world was the valley of the Euphrates and the Tigris, and the highest hills were the mountains that skirted its north-eastern and eastern sides. The Israelites of a later age had a more extended view; but even to them the area of the world was, if judged by our notions, strangely limited, since the ethnography of Genesis x. seemed to include all the races of mankind.

In the name of Ararat which occurs in the Hebrew narrative, and in that of Nizir which occurs in the Assyro-Babylonian, we have either an attempt to transliterate the names employed in the primitive tradition or the tendency to substitute a known or celebrated proper name for one that was unknown.

According to this line of explanation, the narrative of the Flood records to us some terrible but local cataclysm which overtook the original seat of the Semitic race. The Hebrew and Assyro-Babylonian accounts are two parallel versions of it, transmitted by the two strangely different branches of that stock in literature so varied as the clay-tablets of Nineveh and the Scriptures of the Jews. There seems to be no reason whatever to call in question the historic character of the event which the Semitic tradition commemorated. To deny that the Deluge ever occurred, because the tradi-

tions which describe it have come down to us with certain variations, is an attitude which, I am aware, has been taken up by some who would desire, above all things, to weigh the evidence candidly; but it is one which it is very hard to appreciate. The very variety of the tradition seems to increase the probability of its historic character in the main points upon which there is agreement.

But if the Flood of Genesis were a local catastrophe and not universal, how are we to account for the ubiquity of the legend? That, it seems to me, is a question which we had best leave the historians of primitive civilisation to answer. While it is not improbable that the similarity of legends testifies in a great measure to the radiation of nations from a common geographical centre, we must remember that to primitive races inundations were the commonest and most destructive visitation. This would account for a Deluge playing a part in the legends of different parts of the globe, where the influence of Semitic races never penetrated. But there is no reason to doubt that the Semitic tradition became widely known, and is answerable for many points of resemblance in the legends of races quite unconnected with the Semitic stock.

In this, as in the other sections of the early portion of Genesis, we are in constant danger of suffering our interest and attention to be absorbed in the form rather than in the teaching of the narrative. But the purpose for which it is recorded is obviously not merely to preserve the memory of a great event, but rather to employ the record of that great event with the hope of impressing upon the people of Israel the fundamental truths of their religion, which could thus be so signally illustrated.

Every reader is doubtless conscious, in some degree or another, of this thought. But it will probably strike him more forcibly in the light of the comparison between the Hebrew and Assyro-Babylonian narratives of the Flood. He cannot fail to observe the contrast between the cuneiform picture of the deities, some angry, some interceding, some frightened, some summoning the storm, others fleeing from it; and the Hebrew picture of the God of heaven and earth, who alone inflicts the calamity as a punishment, alone abates it, and alone is the deliverer of Noah and his family. He cannot fail to contrast the apotheosis of Hasisadra with the covenant made with all mankind, the

whimsicalness of Bel towards individuals with the purpose of love towards the world.

But over and above the teaching of such an obvious contrast, the Hebrew narrative threw light upon a further group of ideas. It emphasised the fact of the judicial character of the overthrow; it laid stress upon the departure of the human race from their appointed path; it sketched, in the tremendous scene of overthrow, the first judgment, the first declaration, so often repeated to Israel, that the history of the race, even in its disasters, fulfils and corresponds to the decrees of the Almighty. It illustrated the principle of salvation, destined to be expanded in the history of the Jews. Noah is the first "righteous" man (Gen. vi. 9); his righteousness is evidenced by the faith which trusted in the Divine promise. His faith, avowed in the construction of the Ark, was a condemnation to an unbelieving world; it received its reward in the deliverance which redounded to those of Noah's household (Heb. xi. 7; 1 Pet. iii. 20; cf. Ezek. xiv. 14; Ecclus. xliv. 17).

ix. 1-17. The sign of the rainbow. The story of the Flood closes with the covenant of Noah and the sign of the rainbow. Here, as in the covenants with Abraham and with Moses, the description is drawn from the Priestly writing, whose characteristic style can easily be discerned.

Noah is the representative of a new epoch. God grants to him a new covenant, while He declares His blessing upon man, and extends his dominion over the animal world. Hitherto, according to this account, man had been a vegetarian (cf. Gen. i. 30 with vii. 19, ix. 3). Now, however, permission is granted him to eat the flesh of animals. And in connexion with this extension of privilege, two binding enactments are laid down. By the first, man is forbidden to eat of the blood along with the flesh. According to the second, the death of the manslayer is required of his fellow-men. In these rules we recognise the requirements of universal primitive custom in the East. The former was to be repeated in the Mosaic legislation; the latter, the law of blood-revenge, was to be restricted within the limits of a more civilised existence.

The covenant relation is established not with the descendants of Shem only, but with all mankind. Its pledge, the sign or symbol of hope, is correspondingly universal.

The rainbow had, of course, been seen upon earth, ever since the sun had shone and the rain had fallen, in remote ages long before man had appeared. Only those who are quite ignorant of the laws of "light" can now suppose that the appearance of the "rainbow" was posterior to the creation of man. Accordingly, the mention of the rainbow in ix. 13-17 has sometimes caused perplexity to candid and fair-minded readers. There are, it seems to me, two possible courses of explanation open to us:—(1) In the first place, it is possible to say that the passage, which incorporates an ancient tradition, reflects the prevalent ignorance of physical science. The language here used would then express the popular, but erroneous Hebrew explanation of the phenomena of the rainbow, which supposed it to have been first miraculously *created* after the catastrophe of the Deluge. But it is noticeable that the word employed is not *bara*, "create," but *sim*, "set," or "appoint." (2) In the second place, it is possible to see in the words of verse 13 "I do set" or "I have set" not the fiat of *creation*, but the declaration of Divine *appointment*. The rainbow had existed before. Henceforward, it was to be endowed with a new significance as the sign or symbol of mercy. God "set" one of the most beautiful and yet frequent phenomena in the natural world to be the sacrament of the new covenant. The same word occurs in Genesis iv. 15: "And the Lord appointed a sign for Cain." And very probably the best solution of the difficulty is to be found in this use of the word.

At the same time, the two explanations are perfectly compatible with one another. The fact that the rainbow was appointed as the pledge of the Noachic covenant does not exclude the idea suggested by the whole passage, that, according to the ancient Hebrew tradition, the rainbow was first actually made in the days of Noah. The narrative possibly embodies a popular but quite unscientific idea. But the narrative is not incorporated in the Hebrew Scriptures for the purpose of teaching science, but for the purpose of instructing men in the things which concern their spiritual welfare, their hope of salvation, and their trust in Divine Mercy.

In the next communication it is hoped to bring to a conclusion this series of papers, which must sorely have tried the patience of many of the readers of THE EXPOSITORY TIMES.