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A REAPPRAISAL OF TABLET RECORDS
OF THE FLOOD.

In this paper Preb. Victor Pearce summarises the present position with regard to ancient records of the Flood.

In the near East archaeologists have unearthed tablets of various ancient peoples which give a very full account of the Flood. They come from the Sumerians of South Mesopotamia, a culture which came into being soon after the Flood, from their migrant Eblaite Society in Syria, and also from the Babylonians who were much later, c. 1900 BC. The biblical account also appears to be based on tablets, apparently, as we shall see, older than any of the above. In addition, there are Hindu, Persian, Chinese, Japanese and Titetan records of the same event.

As André Parrot points out, it is difficult to doubt that such detailed and persistent records have a factual basis.¹ "There can be no question that the Flood marked a clear break in history." he writes, "The memory of it remained vividly in mens' minds as well in Mesopotamia as in Palestine". And again, "The cataclysm was accompanied by destruction on such a scale, and made such an impression, that it became one of the themes of cuneiform literature".²

We learn from the Bible and from many ancient tablets in the Near East³ that the refuge centre was artificially provided by the building of a huge boat called the "Ark".

Some might object that the Bible should not be brought into a scientific discussion on the distribution of man. Such an objection cannot be maintained in the light of modern archaeological methods even if the Bible be regarded as folklore. For though at one time folklore and mythology were disregarded by archaeologists, opinion has now changed; there have been many instances in which folklore has proved to be a reliable guide to discovery. The earliest to demonstrate this was Schliemann who believed that when, in the sixth century BC, Homer wrote about Helen of Troy and the Wooden Horse, his folklore sources had foundation in fact. Consequently Schliemann went to the site: he was able to find evidence of seven stages of the history of Troy, the sixth being that associated with Helen of Troy 1,200 BC. Likewise, the Greek epic of the Minator and the

Labyrinth, apart from its mythological content, has some basis in fact, as shown by the excavations at Knossos on the Isle of Crete. The Labyrinth Palace of Minos was unearthed by the archaeologists: a labyrinth of rooms and passages it certainly is, for today one can easily get lost when investigating and photographing the excavations. Even Ulysses' expedition for the Golden Fleece is probably a reference to the early method of gold prospecting by placing a fleece in a river to collect the floating gold dust. The gold dust settled into a fleece as the water flowed over it.

Thus, whether mythological or not, the tablets referring to the great Flood which wiped out mankind are certainly worthy of attention. As regards the account in the Bible, this is the purest account that has come down to us: it is devoid of the gross romancings and polytheistic fantasies of the later myths. If Schliemann could take the story of Helen of Troy as a guide to his excavations, there is no reason why we should not be guided similarly to an interpretation of archaeology. In this connection Dr. Schonfield,⁴ tells us that Israeli archaeologists frequently use the text of Scripture as a guide to their excavations and find it accurate even to small details. Already several archaeological enigmas have been solved as a result.

To what extent are such records, mythical or otherwise, to be taken as evidence of the reality of the Flood? Let us look at what some of the tablets say.

The Sumerian tablet WB62 consists of eighteen lines and gives the names of the ten kings who reigned before the Flood. An interesting factor is the great length of life credited to these individuals.⁵

It is strange that at Hacilar, Turkey, which is a pre-Flood site, and at al Ubaid which is immediately post-Flood, there are skulls in which the teeth are worn right down to the gums. It seems hardly possible that a grain-diet could explain such rapid wear as the teeth are hard and undecayed. Longevity may well be the cause.

Among the names on the tablet are included individuals known from other tablets. The names of five pre-Flood cities are also given.

Tablet WB444 then takes up the story. As is common in such tablets, there is a recapitulatory note to link up the preceding tablet with the sequel. It mentions the name of the last king, and that there were eight others, and names the five pre-Flood cities. Then appear the words:- "The Flood came up. After the Flood had come kingship descended from heaven. The kingship was at Kish".^{3a} A list of post-Flood cities and kings follows.

The words "The Flood came up" correlate with the expression in Genesis 7. "The fountains of the great deep were broken up". It confirms that the greater volume of water came up from the oceans, rather than as rain coming down from the clouds. The rain was probably a preliminary due to the atmospheric disturbances accompanying the cataclysm.

These post-Flood cities are in South Mesopotamia, and accord with the biblical statement that a considerable time after the Flood, the descendants of Noah descended from the East, from the mountain plateau of Iran, to settle on the mud-flats of Mesopotamia. This means that the dispersion must have first migrated slowly along the plateau heights south eastwards from Armenia. There is evidence of grapevine-growing starting in Iran at this time as reflected in Gen. 9:20. "Noah the farmer was the first man to plant a vineyard. He drank some of the wine and became drunk". Elam the son of Shem (Noah's son) gives his name to that part of Iran (Elam. Gen. 10:22).

At Susa, the capital of Elam (Iran) traces of a cuneiform script on the oldest bricks was found to be in Semitic language. (i.e. the language of Shem)

The Ubaidian settlement of the marshes is regarded as an important phase in Near Eastern archaeology. Later, the population increased and city states were founded as mentioned in Genesis and on the Flood tablets.

The cities mentioned in Gen. 10:10, and 11:2 are correlated with archaeology as follows:-

Shinar — Sumer of the Sumerians.

Erech. Gen.10:10 — Uruk or Warka, whose king was Gilgamesh of the Gilgamesh epic.

Babel " — Babylon.

Calneh " — Nippur.

Accad " — gives its name to the Akkadian empire and language.

From South Mesopotamia one of the kings went north to rebuild the pre-Flood city of Nineveh. This is where excavation reveals a hiatus followed by a stratum of Ubaidian culture.

The Babylonian account is recorded in various tablets found in a number of the old city states of Mesopotamia. They should be referred to as the Akkadian accounts. They vary in their versions, indicating that as regards the Akkadian versions the Flood stories were told and re-told in their localities long before being recorded on the tablets.

It is evident that, relative to the original story, these tablets contain many deviations, accretions, and omissions, whilst a number of the historical personalities have become gods in the conception of the narrators. Thus Nimrod of Gen. 10:8-12 who features upon the hunter-palette, has become Ni-mur-rud the god to whom the Lagash temple is dedicated. He is also featured upon a mace-head. In all the tablets, the majestic monotheism of the Genesis tablets has become grossly polytheistic. In anthropology we see that monotheism is the more primitive conception, the supply of more and more intermediary gods or spirits between the High God and human beings being a later development. Even in Christianity this trend of human nature to add intermediaries, is seen in the addition of more and more saints and angels who are credited with controlling the various departments of natural phenomena.

Let us take, for example, the Akkadian tablets dated 2,000 B.C. The highly poetic description and romancing is typical of literary development rather than of an original account. There is a graphic description of the storm which is brought about by agency of the gods of wind, water, clouds, canals, the deep, and of lightning. According to these tablets the bringing of the deluge was an outcome of much quarrelling among the gods. Some opposed it, others wished it to wipe out mankind, and the god Enlil was particularly angry that the god Ea had warned Uta-napishtim (Noah) to build a ship in order to escape. "As soon as Enlil arrived from on high, he saw the ship and was wrath. The god Enlil was filled with fury against the gods, 'Who then has escaped, when no man was to live through the destruction?' Nimerth opened his mouth and spoke, he said to warlike Enlil, 'Who but the god Ea can imagine such schemes?'" When the supreme goddess Ishtar arrived from on high, she forbade Enlil to approach the sacrificial offering made by Uta-napishtim (Noah) when the flood was ended, "Let the gods approach the offering, but let not Enlil approach the offering because he did not consider, and brought on the deluge, because he consigned my people to destruction!"

There is in all this little conception of God's grief at the sin of mankind as in Genesis 6:5-14. This is the type of detail which would be unpopular and get left out of later secular accounts.

The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And the Lord was sorry that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart. So the Lord said, 'I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground, man and beast and creeping things and birds of the air, for I am sorry that I have made them.' But Noah found favour in the eyes of the Lord. These are the generations of Noah. Noah was a righteous man, blameless

in his generation; Noah walked with God. And Noah had three sons, Shem, Ham, and Japheth. Now the earth was corrupt in God's sight, and the earth was filled with violence. And God saw the earth, and behold it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted their way upon the earth. And God said to Noah, 'I have determined to make an end of all flesh; for the earth is filled with violence through them; behold, I will destroy them with the earth. Make yourself an ark of gopher wood; make rooms in the ark, and cover it inside and out with pitch'.

The deluge, according to the Akkadian tablet, was so terrible that even the gods trembled and sought refuge. They crowded in a heap like a dog in his kennel and the gods and goddess wept for pity: "The gods were afraid at the deluge and they fled. They ascended the heaven of Anu. The gods cower like dogs and lie down in the open. The goddess Istar cries out like a woman in travail... The Anunnaki-gods weep with her, the gods howl, they sit down in tears."⁶

The description of details such as the shape of the Ark is more mythological in the Akkadian account than in Genesis. In the Akkadian epic the ark is cube-shaped, 120 x 120 x 120 cubits, and is divided into seven stories. Food in the form of bran in the morning and wheat in the evening was rained down from heaven, and was brought into the ship with beer and wine. Slaves and concubines were also brought on board.

The dimensions of the Ark given in Genesis are more realistic — 450 by 75 by 45 feet. These figures have a similar ratio of length to breadth of the most seaworthy vessels in the 19th. century, when large liners began to be built. Filby gives some details.⁷ In contrast the Akkadian cubic vessel would spin around constantly. Again, the Akkadian account Uta-napishtim sent out a dove, a swallow, and then a raven. This order is rather pointless; the non-return of the raven, which might feed upon the corpses, would prove nothing. In the Genesis account the dove with its homing instincts was sent last and returned with an olive branch.⁸ This indicated that the flood had receded from the lower slopes of hills which are the habitat of the Olive tree.

Thus the evidence points strongly to the priority of the OT account over the Akkadian. Here even the sceptical F.H. Woods admitted that "some few particulars in the Bible story may be actually more original than in the Akkadian version, while K.A. Kitchen of the School of Oriental Studies, Liverpool University comments as follows:-

"The contrast between the monotheism and simplicity of the Hebrew account and the polytheism and elaboration of the Mesopotamian epic is obvious to any reader. The common assumption that the Hebrew account is simply a purged and simplified version of the Babylonian legend (applied also to the Flood stories) is fallacious on methodological grounds. In the Ancient Near East, the rule is that simple accounts or traditions may give rise (by accretion and embellishment) to elaborate legends, but not vice versa. In the Ancient Orient, legends were not simplified or turned into pseudo history (historicized) as had been assumed for early Genesis." Kitchen gives reference to a number of examples.⁹

Modern anthropology has learnt to be cautious of subjective theories which are founded in isolation from empirical investigation. It has learnt how easy it is for the best minds to become so impressed by plausible theories simply because they sound good to Western ears. When field-work has revealed the theory to be contrary to fact, there has often been reluctance to think again.

A case in point is the readiness to accept that the story of the Flood in Genesis ch. 6 to 9, is a compilation from two separate sources, sometimes contradictory, called "J" and "P". This theory was completely subjective. It was framed without reference to archaeological investigation, and has for some time resisted correction. Theological Colleges and schools should abandon it in the face of what is now known of the literary methods of the Ancient Near East. It is a fact that among all the thousands of tablets there is no known example of several accounts having been carved up and pieced together to make one record.

The compiler of Genesis is obviously anxious to preserve all the words of the tablet as they are too sacred to be lost, and so includes the recapitulation of the colophon which might be separated from the body of the text either by a line, or on the edge of the tablet, or on its baked clay envelope.¹⁰

Further evidence that the tablets which the compiler of Genesis included, were more archaic or original than the Akkadian tablets or even those of the Sumerians comes from the archaic nature of words in these sections, and also of the description of the topography when they were written.

The word translated "Ark" in the Hebrew is *Tebah*. Its original meaning has been lost. It can only be guessed that it meant something like "chest" or "box". After the Flood accounts of Gen. chapters 6 to 10, it does not appear anywhere else in the Bible. As the Babylonian accounts do not use the word, but use the ordinary word for ship, we naturally conclude that the latter

were written long after the Genesis account. Even the word in Exodus 25:10 for the ark of the Covenant is the different word, *Aron*. In contrast the word *Tebah* occurs in the Genesis Flood tablets 26 times. Very significantly it appears equally in the supposed "J" and "P" section (eleven¹¹ times in "J" and 15 times in "P"), yet it never occurs again even in those passages of the Old Testament which are supposed to belong to "P" document.

In Genesis the ark is said to have been made of *Gopher* wood. Again this word is never again used in the Old Testament, so that no-one knows its meaning. The word was old even by Moses' time. Similarly the meaning of *Tsohar* (Gen. 6:16) has to be guessed at. Translated "windows" it probably means ventilator judging from its cognates, because the word for "windows of heaven" (Gen. 7:11) is a different one.

Incidental topographical remarks are sometimes revealing. The territory of the Canaanites is described as extending to Sodom and Gomorrah in terms which shewed they still existed when the sixth tablet was written. Gen. 10:19. Sodom and Gomorrah ceased to exist in Abraham's time so he must have received it from an ancestor. Again, *Egypt* is still the name of the ancestor who migrated from Mesopotamia to found the land of Egypt (10:13).

A unique feature of the Genesis account is its succession of dates and periods with repeat phrases. It is as if they were copied from original diary entries or ship's log, perhaps recorded by a primitive mnemonic system of symbols. Renfrew makes some interesting references to such proto-writing which would have been in use before the time of the Flood.¹² He refers in particular to the Tartaria tablets of Vinca chalcolithic period following the Starcevo neolithic. These three baked tablets were found in Romania, but some scholars think that their style shows Near Eastern influence.

He also refers to the mesolithic village of Lepenski Vir in the Balkans 5,500 BC. These religious symbols indicate an economy based upon fishing in the Danube, and are therefore a diffusion of the Danubians from the Near East. The symbols serve as aids to prompt the memory for a chant which probably constituted an oral tradition.

In conclusion, present evidence points increasingly to the view that the Genesis account of these early times pre-dates all other accounts known to us.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Despite the doubts recently expressed by Magnus Magnusson (BBC1, TV, 20 Jan. 1977).
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- 3 Gen. 6-9 S. Langdon. *Oxford Editions of Cuneiform Texts*. Ashmolean Museum. Oxford. (a) 11, Bk1 IV, 8-21.
- 4 Deanery Lecture on the excavations of the city gate of Ahab's Samaria. (Unpublished Lecture, given in Leek, 1958)
- 5 S. Langdon. *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Soc.*, 1923. p. 256.
- 6 F.H. Woods. *Flood. Hastings Dictionary*. Vol. 2. T & T Clark. 1903.
- 7 F.A. Filby, *The Flood Reconsidered*. 1970 p80.
- 8 On Noah's Birds, see this JOURNAL, 1975, 102, 102.
- 9 K.A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and the OT* Tyndale Press. 1966.
- 10 V. Pearce, *Who Was Adam?* Paternoster, 1976 p19.
P.J. Wiseman, *Discoveries in Babylonia* 1946. Chap.5.
- 11 Ref 7, p93 and P.J. Wiseman, *op.cit.* Chap.6.
- 12 C. Refrew, *Before Civilization*, 1973, pp.177, 182.

[According to press reports G. Pettinato who is studying the Ebla tablets has found one which states that the heavens, earth, sun and moon were created in that order - the same sequence as in Genesis. However, concerning the sun and the moon, the Hebrew perfect tense meaning completedness signifies that they were created earlier but only observable on the fourth day when the atmosphere cleared. This would indicate that the less precise Ebla tablets were a later derivation from the Genesis source.]