

THE BIBLICAL FLOOD AND PARALLEL MESOPOTAMIAN MYTHS*

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Abstract: In every religious culture where it appears, the Flood myth implies the destruction of humanity, through the force of the unleashed waters, and its replacement with a new human race. Water is both the environment of the first creation and of its complete destruction followed by a resurrection. The best known version of this myth is represented by the Biblical Flood, a narrative that influenced the understanding of Creation and Re-creation in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In this paper we tried to explain the most important aspects of Noah's story and to show the main similarities and differences between this narrative and the Mesopotamian versions of the Flood myth (*Ziusudra, Atrahasis, Gilgamesh*).

Keywords: flood, myth, Noah, Israel, Mesopotamia.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the religion of Israel, the Flood represents an historical event with extremely important consequences well beyond history. For the redactors of the book of Genesis, but also for the Israelite and Jewish religiosity as a whole, the Flood is not only a vengeance of Yahweh / Elohim, determined by human sin; although the punitive component is present and even emphasized by the Biblical text, the final purpose of the Flood is the re-creation of the original integrity of the fallen human race. The Biblical narrative of the Flood has numerous similarities to the narrative of Creation. We can easily see the author's (or authors') intention to underline the fact that through the waters unleashed from the sky, Yahweh aimed to bring the entire creation back to its primeval, shapeless state, in order to re-create it on superior moral grounds, using Noah, his family and the creatures from the ark¹.

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¹ Barry Bandstra, *Reading the Old Testament: Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, Cengage Learning, Belmont (CA), 2008, p. 62.

In fact, for the Israelites, but also for later Judaism, the moral dimension of the Flood has an essential role. Yahweh's decision to proceed to a radical destruction of creation is not the consequence of the observation of technical imperfections, but of the increasing sinfulness of humanity, beyond the limits of divine tolerance². Nevertheless, the Flood is not a manifestation of an angry, impulsive god, with a harmed ego; after the waters retreat completely and Yahweh begins to talk to Noah, He is not explicitly sorry for his decision to destroy humanity. Although He promise that "never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life" (Gen. 9:15), Yahweh has no regret in respect to the victims of the cataclysm³. The death of the entire creation – except for those in the ark – was necessary for the process of re-creation on new premises. The Flood was the instrument through which Yahweh provided the framework of the new creation, a creation governed by another set of laws than those established in Paradise for Adam and Eve.

It is interesting to note that the Biblical text that precedes the observation of Yahweh concerning the increasing sinfulness of human race generated an important exegetical and hermeneutical debate. In the center of this passage are the "sons of God" (Hebr. *bēnē hā'ēlōhīm*), characters on whose identity various theories emerged⁴. These sons of God were strongly attracted by women's beauty and got to marry them⁵. Therefore, we can note an essential difference between the way that Yahweh "sees" humanity and analyzes the moral aspect of its existence, and the way the sons of God are more preoccupied with the bodily aspect, being interested in the beauty of the daughters of humans⁶. This contrast is another proof

² "The Lord saw how great the wickedness of the human race had become on the earth, and that every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all the time. The Lord regretted that he had made human beings on the earth, and his heart was deeply troubled" (Gen. 6:5-6).

³ Mircea Eliade, *Istoria credințelor și ideilor religioase*, vol. 1, Chișinău, Universitas Publishing, 1992, p. 178.

⁴ In the modern and contemporary exegesis we can find three major theories concerning the identity of the "sons of God". The first one identifies them with the angels who failed to obey the divine commandment and mixed with humans. The second theory considers that the sons of God are earthly rulers, a warrior class – most probably Cainites – who had significant authority on the community. Finally, the third theory states that the sons of Go were actually descendants of Seth, therefore representing the "good humanity", close to God, unlike the Cainites (a detailed description of these theories concerning the sons of God can be found in K. A. Matthews, *The New American Commentary*, Genesis, vol. 1A: Genesis 1-11:26, Nashville, B&H Publishing, 1996, pp. 325-330). Beyond these theories, which are focused on the Biblical narrative, we have to note the obvious similarity between the Hebrew *bēnē hā'ēlōhīm* and the *phr bn 'ilm* ("the assembly of the sons of El") from the Ugarit library. In the Canaanite religion, this assembly was in fact a pantheon, presided by the supreme God, El; Yahweh is also portrayed as such a supreme God, presiding an assembly: "God presides in the great assembly; he renders judgment among the gods" (Ps. 82:1) (see Aleksander R. Michalak, *Angels as Warriors in Late Second Temple Jewish Literature*, Tübingen, Mohr Siebeck Publishibg, 2012, pp. 18-19).

⁵ Gen. 6:2: "The sons of God saw that the daughters of humans were beautiful, and they married any of them they chose".

⁶ Craig A. Evans, Joel N. Lohr, David L. Petersen, *The Book of Genesis: Composition, Reception, and Interpretation*, Leiden, Brill Publishing, 2012, pp. 75-76.

for the fact that Yahweh does not unleash the Flood to correct an error in His creation: humans were increasing in number (Gen. 6:1), fulfilling the initial divine commandment (Gen. 1:28), and their daughters were so beautiful that they drew the attention of the sons of God, becoming their wives (Gen. 6:2) The Flood was a consequence of moral decay, which could have been caused, in its turn, by the mixture between the divine sphere (represented by the sons of God) and the human sphere (represented by the daughters of humans).

2. THE TWO REDACTION STRATA OF THE BIBLICAL NARRATIVE

The research on the Biblical narrative of the Flood has to take into account the fact that the Scripture text is not uniform, the version found in Torah and in the Pentateuch being the result of centuries of redactions. Many authors, from different eras and various schools of thought brought their contribution to the text that we read and analyze nowadays. As with the narrative of Creation, in respect to the Flood we also have two different stories, which are essentially similar, but do present some differences that can be explained only if we accept subsequent redactions or at least rearrangements of the original material. The modern and contemporary research underlined the existence of at least two redaction strata in the narrative of the Flood: the Priestly stratum (P) and the Yahwist stratum (J)⁷.

The differences between the two redaction strata are not everywhere obvious. Even if both the Yahwist and the Priestly story are consistent and coherent, in several situations it is impossible to establish what was the source of the respective passages⁸. There are, though, some clear differences, both in respect to the unfolding of the cataclysm and to the events that followed its end. For example, in Gen. 6:5-8 we deal with the Yahwist source that describes how God made His decision to unleash the Flood, while the next passage (Gen. 6:9-13) shows once again, in an abrupt manner, the story of Noah's life and the reasons that God decided to send the Flood for. This passage, Gen. 6:9-13, is without doubt from the Priestly source, such as the rest of Chapter 6, which includes the instructions of God (Elohim) concerning the construction of the ark and the selection of creatures to be embarked on it. There are several differences here, too, between the Priestly and the Yahwist sources: firstly, Elohim commands Noah to take into the ark "two of all living creatures, male and female, to keep them alive with you" (Gen. 6:19). In the Yahwist source, though, which includes the divine commandments in the beginning of the seventh chapter, Yahweh asks Noah to take "seven pairs of every

⁷ A parallel between the Priestly and the Yahwist narratives can be found in Norman C. Habel, *The Two Flood Stories in Genesis*, in Alan Dundes (editor), *The Flood Myth*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 1988, pp. 13-28.

⁸ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation and Notes. (The Anchor Yale Bible)*, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1974, p. 54.

kind of clean animal, a male and its mate, and one pair of every kind of unclean animal, a male and its mate” (Gen 7:2)⁹.

As for the Flood itself, the Priestly source description is more detailed and frightening than the description of the Yahwist redactors. Thus, in Gen. 7:12 and 7:17 we read, from the Yahwist source, only that it rained for forty days and forty nights and the water increased enough to lift the ark high above the earth. Therefore, it is only about a flood caused by the fall of rain. In the Priestly source, however, rain is accompanied by another factor that determines the flooding, namely the subterranean waters, described in Gen. 7:11: “In the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, on the seventeenth day of the second month – on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened”. The terminology used by the Priestly source provides an obvious link to the narrative of Creation. The Flood is, in fact, an inversion of the creative process. In the narrative of Creation, life appears as a result of the separation of waters¹⁰, while in the Flood narrative the entire creation is destroyed through the mixing of the subterranean and heavenly waters. The humanity was born because God tamed the chaotic forces of the abyss, which opposed the creation of life, and was destroyed through the Flood, when God no longer opposed these forces. Given freedom, the chaotic forces unleashed in order to recreate the original deep (*tehôm*, Gen. 1:2)¹¹.

The mixing between the waters from above and those from below is the reason why water continued to increase on earth for another one hundred and ten days, although the rain itself lasted for only forty days. As Gen. 7:24 notes, the entire Flood, with the two aforementioned phases, lasted for one hundred and fifty days¹². The scope of the flooding was huge and this is why the complete retreat of the waters was only possible after a year (Gen. 8:14). Therefore, the entire process of destruction and return of the creation to its initial state lasted a full year; in this respect, the Flood narrative resembles the Ancient Near Eastern myth of the annual conflict between order and chaos, concluded with the victory of the creator god, a

⁹ Despite the fact that in the Biblical text there is an obvious difference between the expression “two of all” from Gen. 6:19 and “seven pairs of every kind” from Gen. 7:2, some authors think that in the second situation we are dealing only with an explanation of the first instruction. In other words, God first tells Noah that he has to take two creatures from all species – male and female – and then He specifies that Noah will take seven such pairs (Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, Dallas, Word Books, 1987, p. 177).

¹⁰ Gen. 1:7: “So God made the vault and separated the water under the vault from the water above it”.

¹¹ K. A. Matthews, *op. cit.*, p. 376.

¹² That the one hundred and fifty days include the forty days of proper rain is obvious from the corroboration of the data concerning the beginning of the cataclysm (“in the six hundredth year of Noah’s life, on the seventeenth day of the second month”, Gen. 7:11) with the data concerning the moment when the ark came to rest on the Ararat mountains (“and on the seventeenth day of the seventh month the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat”, Gen. 8:4). Therefore, we have five months or one hundred and fifty days.

victory that was celebrated as the New Year¹³. The similarities stop here, because in the book of Genesis God guarantees that the Flood was a unique event and Noah is assured that the primeval waters will not be allowed anymore to interfere with the creation¹⁴.

We should note that there are two redaction strata as far as the events following the Flood are concerned. The first stratum can be seen in Gen. 8:20-22, a passage that constitutes the short version of God's commitment to the humanity represented by Noah. Following the sacrifice that Noah offered to God after leaving the ark, Yahweh looks upon the remaining humans and decides not to send anymore such radical punishments over humanity: "As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease" (Gen. 8:22). The terminology used here indicates a Yahwist redaction: God smells the burnt offering of Noah, considers the Flood a curse over the earth because of humans and reasserts the evil nature of the human heart as the main reason why it was necessary to unleash destroying forces of such magnitude¹⁵.

The covenant of God with the new humanity, represented by Noah, is contained in its extended form in the first part of the ninth chapter of Genesis (Gen. 9:1-17). We don't see here a negotiated covenant, because God is the only one who talks and establish obligations for both Him and humanity. The Biblical text can be split in two: in the first part (Gen. 9:1-7) we read a renewal of the original instructions that God gave to the first humans, while in the second part we find the covenant proper between God and Noah. After the divine blessing from Gen. 9:1 – "Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the earth" – there are two laws for the new creation: the first one concerns the killing and eating of animals (Gen. 9:4) and the second one concerns the killing of humans by other humans or beasts (Gen. 9:5-6). Given that these laws precede the covenant from Mount Sinai, they apply to the entire humanity, not only to the chosen people¹⁶. This is why "the covenant that God concludes with Noah, after the Flood (Genesis 9:8-17) represented for Jews the basis for natural religion, a reason for rabbis to use even nowadays the expression 'children of Noah' to designate the entire humanity. Based on this covenant, Judaism promoted the concept of 'Noahide laws', which include the fundamental elements of human religiosity and ethics"¹⁷.

¹³ The myth of the combat between Baal and Yam, the personification of the unleashed sea, a combat concluded with the victory of Baal, was recited in Ugarit at the New Year celebrations (Mircea Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 168).

¹⁴ Norman C. Habel, *op. cit.*, pp. 24-25.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

¹⁶ K. A. Matthews, *op. cit.*, p. 399.

¹⁷ Our translation from the Romanian original: "legământul pe care Dumnezeu îl face cu Noe, după Potop (Geneza 9:8-17), a constituit, pentru evrei, baza religiei naturale, motiv pentru rabini să folosească, și astăzi, sintagma de «copii ai lui Noe», pentru desemnarea întregii umanități. Pe baza acestui legământ, iudaismul avea să promoveze conceptul de «legi noahice», cuprinzând elementele fundamentale ale eticii și religiozității umane" – Mihai Valentin Vladimirescu, *Fenomenul globalizării din perspectivă antropologică și religioasă*, Iași, Muzeul Național al Literaturii Române Publishing, 2013, p. 16.

In the Judeo-Christian spirituality, the sign of the covenant between God and Noah is considered to be the rainbow. The Bible translations in modern languages support this: “I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth” (Gen. 9:13). In the Hebrew Bible, the term used is *qēšēṭ*, which has the primary meaning of bow with arrows. The corresponding noun from the Septuagint, *τόξον*, has the same meaning¹⁸. In both cases, therefore, the meaning of rainbow is only secondary. In order to explain this situation, some exegetes suggested that Yahweh sealed the covenant by abandoning his weapon, his bow with arrows. In contemporary exegesis, though, this kind of explanation was rejected, because it is considered that the Priestly redactor of this passage really referred to the rainbow, a universal natural symbol for the restoration of order¹⁹.

Despite the divine promise, some authorities of Hellenistic and Rabbinic Judaism noted that this promise concerns only the water flood, not any kind of flood: “Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life” (Gen. 9:15). According to Flavius Josephus, Adam himself predicted that humanity will be destroyed by both a water flood and a fire flood. This is why his descendants built two pillars, one of stone and the other of brick. On these pillars they wrote all their knowledge, in order for the information not to be lost because of the Flood²⁰. Some rabbis, such as Eliezer of Modium, are convinced that an eventual flood of fire does not violate the covenant between God and Noah, while others rabbis, such as Rabbi Azariah, consider that only if God forces the interpretation of the covenant, He can send a flood of fire to destroy the humanity²¹. The New Testament took up the idea of the flood of fire and gave it a meaning strongly connected to the second coming of Christ. Thus, the water of Noah’s Flood and the fire from the Judgment Day are extremities for the existence of the new creation: “By the same word the present heavens and earth are reserved for fire, being kept for the day of judgment and destruction of the ungodly” (2 Pet. 3:7).

3. THE STORY OF KING ZIUSUDRA AND THE EPIC OF ATRAHASIS

The Biblical Flood has parallels in the mythical and religious thought of the Ancient Near East, mainly in the Mesopotamian literature, where we find several versions of the flood myth. All these versions have common elements and they

¹⁸ James Swanson, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Hebrew (New Testament)*, Logos Research Systems, Inc., Oak Harbor, 1997, 8008; Idem, *Dictionary of Biblical Languages with Semantic Domains: Greek (New Testament)*, Oak Harbor, Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, 5534.

¹⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

²⁰ Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* I, iii, 3, in W. Whiston, *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, Peabody, Hendrickson Publishing, 1987, 1.67.

²¹ Jack P. Lewis, *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature*, Leiden, Brill Publishing, 1968 (reprint 1978), p. 180.

present some similarities to the Biblical narrative. Some of these texts were discovered in the 19th century and they were found to be older than the book of Genesis. This finding created the framework for thorough research in Semitic compared mythology. For some researchers, the existence of older Semitic versions of the Flood, prior to the Biblical narrative, represented the best proof of the fact that the Flood cannot be considered a historical event, being just a Hebrew interpretation of an Oriental myth. For others, though, the presence of various narratives of the Flood all over the Ancient Near East was a further proof that the event really happened, as it remained in the conscience of so many nations²².

The oldest version of the Flood myth in the Mesopotamian world is the Sumerian version, whose main character is King Ziusudra from Sippar. This version was not known to the academic world until 1914, when the German-American orientalist Arno Poebel (1881-1958) published some fragments written on a clay tablet found at the University Museum from Philadelphia. These are, in fact, the only known references to the Sumerian flood myth²³. According to the clay tablet discovered by Poebel, the pious king Ziusudra is informed – most probably by god Enki²⁴ – that humanity is close to be destroyed through a flood sent by gods. Given that the text starts abruptly, with this warning, we cannot determine why the gods had decided to destroy the entire human race. We also lack the fragment that could have included the description of the ark, but we understand from the remaining fragments that there was such an ark, because after the flood the god of Sun, Utu, sent his rays over the huge vessel²⁵. Unlike the Biblical narrative of the flood, in the Sumerian version there is only one survivor, king Ziusudra, who is transferred to the land of Dilmun, to continue his life in a semi-divine style²⁶.

Much richer information on the Flood we find in the *Epic of Atrahasis*, which has an Akkadian version, dated around 1700 B.C.²⁷. According to the list of the Sumerian kings, Atrahasis was either the ruler of the city of Shuruppak, or the son

²² Alan Dundes, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

²³ S. H. Hooke, *Middle Eastern Mythology* (unabridged version), Mineola, Dover Publications, 2004, p. 30.

²⁴ In the Sumerian pantheon, Enki was the god of sweet waters, his force being behind the emergence of subterranean waters: torrents, rivers, sweet lakes. In the Sumerian literature, Enki is portrayed as a benevolent god, who helps humans, such as in the case of Ziusudra's story (Tamra Andrews, *Dictionary of Nature Myths: Legends of the Earth, Sea, and Sky*, Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 66).

²⁵ Daniel Hämerly-Dupuy, *Some Observations on the Assyro-Babylonian and Sumerian Flood Stories*, in Alan Dundes (editor), *The Flood Myth*, Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, University of California Press, 1988, p. 56

²⁶ Mircea Eliade, *op. cit.*, pp. 64-65.

²⁷ There are some other fragments, too, in Akkadian and Late Assyrian, dated up until the 6th Century B.C. (W. G. Lambert, A. R. Millard (editors), *Atra-hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1969, p. 31 sq).

of a ruler of this city (a man also called Shuruppak)²⁸. There is a wisdom writing from the third millennium B.C., entitled *The Teachings of Shuruppak*, containing the advices given by Shuruppak to his son, Ziusudra²⁹. Therefore, we are dealing with one and the same legendary hero, named both *Ziusudra* and *Atrahasis*, depending on the version of this myth.

In the *Epic of Atrahasis*, the gods observe the overcrowding in the world and decide to take measures in order to reduce the number of humans. Enlil, the god of storm, is the first to react and he addresses the higher gods:

“The noise of mankind has become too much.
I am losing sleep over their racket.
Cut off supplies to the people!
Let the vegetation be too scant for their hunger!”³⁰.

But famine and the other measures do not manage to reduce the overcrowding and please god Enlil. Consequently, he makes the decision to destroy humanity through a flood. As in Ziusudra’s epic, in the *Epic of Atrahasis*, too, god Enki is the one who saves humans. He asks Atrahasis to demolish his house, to build an ark and embark of it living creatures. The hero fulfills these commandments with help from several old men, a carpenter, a reed worker, a child and poor people. Once the ark was built, the weather worsened and Atrahasis and the others took refuge in the vessel, sealing the door with bitumen. The text describes the events that followed in frightening words:

“The Flood roared like a bull,
Like a wild ass screaming the winds [howled]
The darkness was total, there was no sun”³¹.

The flood ends as expected, with the complete destruction of humanity. Seeing the terrible consequence of the cataclysm, the higher gods regret the decision and lament. Atrahasis, though, offers a sacrifice and calls all the gods to have a meal together. On this occasion, Enki presents the other gods his solutions to prevent the reappearance of overcrowding in the world. He invokes Nintu, the goddess of birth, and asks her to create a new humanity, making sure that only two thirds of women will be able to give birth. Likewise, a demon will wander in the world and will steal children from their mothers. Finally, a third measure of birth

²⁸ Stephanie Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh and Others*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000 (1989¹), p. 1.

²⁹ The writing is representative for the Sumerian wisdom and had a wide circulation in Mesopotamia, a proof for this being the large number of manuscripts conserved. See Richard J. Clifford (editor), *Wisdom Literature in Mesopotamia and Israel*, Society of Biblical Literature, 2007, p. 4.

³⁰ *Atrahasis*, Tablet II, I, in Stephanie Dalley (editor), *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, the Flood, Gilgamesh and Others*, revised edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000 (1989¹), p. 20.

³¹ *Atrahasis*, Tablet III, III, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

control and prevention of overcrowding is the consecration of three categories of women – *ugbaltu*, *entu* and *egisitu* – as servants to the temples, removing them from social life³².

Even though the reasons behind the decision made by the Sumero-Akkadian gods to destroy humanity are different than those that were on the basis of the analogous decision made by Yahweh / Elohim, in both cases the gods reach the same conclusion: humanity must have clear laws of existence, in order to prevent a critical situation that asks for radical solutions. In the book of Genesis, Yahweh / Elohim establishes the *Noahide laws* to prevent the increase of human sinfulness, while in the *Epic of Atrahasis* the laws set by Enki are aimed to prevent the reappearance of the cause that led to the Flood – the overcrowding of the world³³.

4. THE GILGAMESH EPIC

A Mesopotamian version of the flood myth that presents numerous similarities to the Biblical narrative is contained in the *Gilgamesh Epic*. This masterpiece of Mesopotamian literature was conserved, in its standard version – as considered by specialists – on twelve clay tablets, written in Akkadian. The epic narrates the adventures of Gilgamesh, the king of the city-state of Uruk, who becomes a friend of his rival Enkidu and leaves with him in search of immortality³⁴.

One of the episodes of Gilgamesh's adventures is when the main character, deeply troubled by the death of his friend Enkidu, reaches Utnapishtim³⁵, a legendary hero from the times before the Flood. On this occasion, the author of the epic narrates, through the words of Utnapishtim, the events that preceded the cataclysm, as well as the unfolding of the Flood itself. The similarities between the story of Utnapishtim and the epics of Ziusudra and Atrahasis determined some researchers to assert that this narrative was inserted into the Gilgamesh Epic by later editors, being an independent Sumerian legend³⁶. Regardless of how things really stand, we have to emphasize the significant similarities between the narrative of Utnapishtim and the Biblical account of the Flood. Like Noah, Utnapishtim is asked by the gods to build an ark and embark in it the seed of all living creatures. During the seven days of flood the sea rises its level (cf. Gen. 7:18: "the waters rose and increased greatly on the earth") the rain stops and Utnapishtim sends a dove that quickly returns to the ark (cf. Gen. 8:8-9). Then, he sends a raven, which sees that the water level is lower and flies in circles, waiting for the land to dry

³² *Atrahasis*, Tablet III, VII, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

³³ Tikva Frymer-Kensky, *The Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for Our Understanding of Genesis 1-9*, in "The Biblical Archaeologist", vol. 40, no. 4 (Dec. 1977), pp. 150-151.

³⁴ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, Waucond (IL), Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, Inc., 2002, pp. 3-4.

³⁵ The name Utnapishtim is an approximate translation, into Akkadian, of the Sumerian name Ziusudra (Stephanie Dalley, *op. cit.*, p. 2).

³⁶ Stephanie Dalley, *op. cit.*, p. 43.

(f. Gen. 8:7). In the end, Utnapishtim leaves the ark and, like Noah, offers a sacrifice to the gods, who smell it, like Yahweh did (Gen. 8:20-21)³⁷.

The similarities between the Biblical account and the story of Utnapishtim are so striking that we find it difficult to maintain that the two narratives are independent myths. In the same time, though, we cannot assert with certainty that the redactors of Genesis had simply copied the Akkadian myth. In fact, the story of Utnapishtim itself is similar in many ways to the other Mesopotamian versions of the myth, such as those of Ziusudra or Atrahasis. Consequently, we could say that all these narratives – Mesopotamian and Israelite – had a common, archaic Semitic source. Although the Flood is not a creation of Israelite religion, the religious genius of the chosen people had an enormous contribution in the selection and critic of such archaic myths, a contribution through which “it transformed the relation between God and the chosen people into a ‘sacred history’ of a previously unknown type. From a certain point, this ‘sacred’ history, exclusively national in appearance, proved to be the exemplar model of the entire humanity”³⁸.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the general framework of Israel’s religion, the Flood represents a crucial moment in the sacred history. This history has two major phases: before and after the Flood. In fact, this was the purpose that Yahweh had in mind when he decided to unleash the waters: to destroy the initial creation and to re-create the world from a “healthy seed”. For the Israelites, but also for the later Jewish and Christian thought, the Flood itself is a unique event in history, firstly because God promised not to destroy again humanity and secondly because He established a set of law that are aimed to prevent the reappearance of such a moral decay like the one that triggered the Flood.

In many ways the Biblical narrative is similar to the Mesopotamian versions of the flood myth. But this is not enough for us to conclude that the book of Genesis, being more recent, simply copied a preexistent myth from Mesopotamia. On the other hand, we can’t be sure that the spreading of the flood myth all over the Ancient Near East represents the ultimate proof for the historicity of this event. All we can do is to understand the correlations between the Flood and Creation and to point the similarities and differences between the Biblical account and the other Semitic versions of the myth; beyond this lies the “trap” of the investigation of origins, which lead to interminable and fruitless debates.

³⁷ Barry Bandstra, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

³⁸ The Romanian text by Mircea Eliade, *op. cit.*, p. 179: “a transformat raporturile lui Dumnezeu cu poporul ales într-o «istorie sacră» de un tip necunoscut până atunci. Pornind de la un anumit moment, această istorie «sacră», aparent exclusiv «națională», s-a relevat drept modelul exemplar al întregii umanități”.