

Utnapishtim or Why Stories Matter

Hespeler, February 18, 2024 © Scott McAndless – First Sunday in Lent

[Genesis 8:20-9-17](#), Psalm 25:1-10, 1 Peter 3:18-22, Mark 1:9-15

Once upon a time, a great city called Shurruapak was built on the shores of the Euphrates River. And as the city grew and filled with people, it became so noisy that even the gods began to complain about the din. The storm god Enlil was so upset that the city was disturbing his beauty sleep that he gathered all the gods and demanded that something be done about it. He persuaded them wipe out all the mortals in a great flood.

But the god Ea sent a warning in a dream to a man named Utnapishtim. With his children and hired men, Utnapishtim built an enormous boat with seven decks and filled it with supplies. The boat was launched, loaded with Utnapishtim's gold, children, wife, relatives, animals, and craftsmen.

The Great Flood

Early the next day, a black cloud appeared on the horizon, and a great storm came – a storm so powerful that even the gods cowered in fear. The storm raged for six days and nights, but finally, with the dawn of the seventh day, the rains stopped, and the sea became calm. Utnapishtim opened the hatch of his boat and saw that he was surrounded by an endless sea. But there, in the distance, he saw a mountain rising up out of the water.

He sailed towards the mountain for six days and six nights. On the dawn of the seventh day, Utnapishtim released a dove into the air. The dove returned, for it found no place to land. Then Utnapishtim released a swallow, and it too returned. But then Utnapishtim released a raven that did not come back. Utnapishtim then opened the hatches and made an offering of cane, cedar, and myrtle on a mountaintop in a heated cauldron. And the gods gathered like flies over the sacrifice.

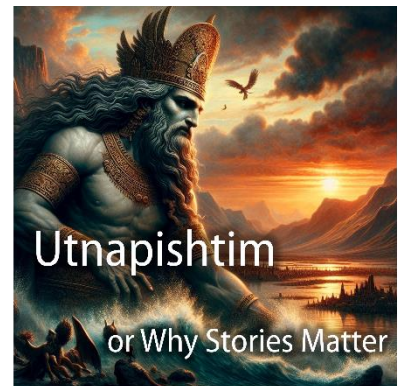
Babylonian Stories

When you live in a strange land, one of the best ways to get to know the people you are living among is to listen to their stories. These will tell you a lot about how they see the world and their place in it. And so, when the ancient people of Judah were taken away against their will and forced to live in the land of Babylon and work for the Babylonian people, they heard the stories of their captors, stories that taught them a great deal about this powerful and warlike people.

And the story of Utnapishtim and the great flood was one of those stories that they heard. We know that they heard it in the streets of Babylon because the story had been around for centuries before they ever got there. The story is found in the Epic of Gilgamesh and there are copies of that book that date back to 1800 BC – older than any of the writings in the Bible.

So what did the story of Utnapishtim teach the Judahites about their Babylonian captors? It taught them a lot about the kinds of gods they believed in – impetuous gods who were upset by things like the noise of a city. They were also gods whose default reaction when things weren't exactly as they liked, was to lash out in violence and destruction.

But the gods also didn't really think through these reactions. They clearly regretted it when they no longer received sacrifices



from the people that they had destroyed. They suddenly realized, in fact, how dependant they were on these filthy and noisy mortals for everything, swarming around Utnapishtim's act of worship as if they were starving!

The Babylonian Oppressors

And as the expatriate Jews heard these stories about the Babylonian gods, they looked knowingly at each other. These stories corresponded to everything they knew about their captors. The Babylonians were cruel and always ready to lash out in violence whenever anyone annoyed them or disturbed them. Indeed, they resorted to violence so quickly that they didn't even think through the consequences of their actions.

But as the Hebrews served the Babylonians together with other captives, they also knew how dependant they were. If ever the Babylonians carried through on their frequent threats to wipe out the people they called noisy vermin – the ones who served them – they would be starving and scrambling for resources within days! They were just like their gods.

Jewish Story of the Flood

The Jews at that time had their own stories of a great flood, probably based on some shared ancestral memory of a great cataclysmic event. In their stories, the hero was called Noah instead of Utnapishtim, but the stories were so alike in many ways that, when they heard the Babylonian epic, many things sounded very familiar. For example, their story of Noah ended almost exactly the same with Noah sending out birds to look for land and a final sacrifice when he was able to disembark.

The Hebrews didn't worship a whole bunch of gods like the Babylonians did; they believed that there was only one God worth worshiping. So, of course their story of Noah only featured one God who determined to wipe out humanity but also chose to warn and save the hero. It is, admittedly, a more difficult story to tell when you have to explain everything according to the will of the same God, but their story did somehow manage to make sense of it all.

A Better Hebrew Story

The Hebrew story was better, in some ways, than the Babylonian version. The Babylonian gods' decision to flood everything was basically a noise complaint that was taken too far. The God of Israel had a better reason. He saw how humanity had fallen into a horrible habit of responding to evil and violence with ever more, evil and violence. The flood, in their story, was a desperate attempt to break that never-ending cycle of ever-increasing violence.

That seems like a better motivation, even if the strategy is more than a bit questionable. Because the fact of the matter is that you can never solve the problem of violence and slaughter with more violence and slaughter.

The End of the Story

The Hebrew story also ended with a scene very reminiscent of the Babylonian tale with Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews, smelling the pleasing odour of Noah's sacrifice and regretting the wholesale destruction of the flood. Perhaps that was a dim echo of the more ancient Babylonian tale.

It also ended with a new promise that God made to the survivors, a promise that is very much focused on the spiraling problem of violence that had led to the flood in the first place. **"I will never again curse the ground because of humans, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth; nor will I ever**

again destroy every living creature as I have done.” Yes, human nature may not change, but God has learned that responding to slaughter with more slaughter doesn’t solve anything. Isn’t it time that we learn that as well?

An Inspired Priest

So, the Hebrews already had their own flood story, but that story was also influenced by its encounter with the Babylonian tale. One of them, we do not know his name, but he was probably a member of the priestly class, had an extraordinary experience as a result of encountering the Babylonians and hearing their stories. He was inspired by God.

I don’t know how it happened. It might have happened in a dream or vision. Or it may have come in the form of a deep conviction that the Babylonian way of relating to the world was wrong and that God wanted the people of Judah to see things in a very different way. But somehow, he came to see that God had laid it on him to add to their story of Noah.

A New Way of Seeing God

The priestly author had a very important insight into how the experience of the flood changed God’s approach – an insight that was truly brilliant and plainly inspired. You see, he added to the story the detail that God didn’t just like the smell of the sacrifice, but that God did something about the regret for the flood. God decided to make a covenant.

“As for me,” God said to Noah, “I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.”

A God Who Cared

Now what did this newly inspired ending of the story do? It made something very clear to the Jews who had experienced the devastation of the Babylonian exile. It showed in unmistakable terms that the God that the people of Israel served was not like the gods of Babylon. Their God was not in it just for the smoke of the sacrifices. Their God was not just tolerating them, at least if they weren’t too noisy, for the payoff of receiving their worship.

No, this was a God who cared, who was in relationship with humanity and indeed with every living creature on earth. You only make covenants with people you are in a relationship with. What a remarkable contrast to the kinds of gods who were featured in the story of Utnapishtim.

But think about what that means for a moment. Because they had heard the Babylonian tale, because they had experienced living as exiles in the land of Babylon and seeing how the Babylonians lived out their relationship with their gods, the people of Israel were left with a new deeper and better understanding of who their God was, a God who made a covenant with them and indeed with the whole world and everything that lived upon it.

An Edited Story

That is the fascinating thing about the story of Noah in the book of Genesis. There are clear layers in its development. There is one version of the story for example in which Noah takes two of every kind of animal into the ark. And there is another story in which Noah makes a point of taking seven of every kind

of clean animal into the ark. Somebody then intentionally edited those two stories together and we can still trace the seams between the stories.

The story developed over time. And I don't have any problem with observing that. I don't necessarily see a contradiction between observing that and believing that the Bible is an inspired book. After all, if God is truly that powerful, why wouldn't God decide to inspire a series of authors over a long period of time to develop the various layers of the story.

And so we come to see the Bible developing over time as a living document of a people who are coming to discover who their God is through a great variety of experiences, including their contact with people like the Babylonians. What an amazing thing! And it is something that I think is much more helpful to us as we seek to work out our relationship with God than a story that was written once and remained fixed ever since.

Today's Flood Story

Today we are being told a new version of the story of the flood. It is the story of a coming disaster. And I know you've all heard it. It's not a story about gods, but it is a story about consequences for the excesses of human beings.

And do you know what the problem with the humans is according to this story? It's not exactly that our cities are too noisy, nor is it really that human beings are too prone to violence, though honestly, we really haven't gotten very far in terms of solving either of those problems. No, the problem is apparently that we have been burning too much carbon for too long, mostly because of our endless pursuit of more and more wealth.

And what is the consequence of this? The modern story is that the consequence is, among other things, that the glaciers will melt, and the flood waters will rise to devastating effect. That is one of the key and very frightening stories of our modern age. And we hear it all the time. And the question is what do we as people of faith and people who take the Bible seriously, do with that?

What Do We Do with Our Story?

Do we simply take the story of Noah's flood as we've always understood it and leave it unadapted to this new threat? I do hear some Christians doing that. They say, "Oh, God promised at the end of Noah's flood that he would never destroy the world again using water, so obviously what the scientists are predicting will never happen. The Bible says it, I believe it and that settles it."

But I'm not sure that is what our response should be. The priestly writer heard the story that was being told in Babylon in his day, and that led to him being inspired by God to tell his old story in a new way. I think that is what we are being called to do as well today. This new story is challenging us all to rethink our relationship with God and this world that God created and all the things that live upon it.

How exactly should we tell and understand the story in new ways? I'm not necessarily going to tell you that. I think we need to live with this story in new and challenging times. If we do that, I believe that God will inspire us to new insights and new understandings of the commitment of our God to us and to this world. That is the amazingly fun thing about having a living book of stories like the Bible that helps to guide us into a deeper relationship with our God.