Tips for Tablet 11

Tips for Reading of Tablet 11
A Darker Wisdom: Tablet 11

Early and Late Versions
The very earliest Gilgamesh poem, “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” appears to end with a journey, a meeting with a “wise” physician, a Plant of Life, which is lost, and the existential insight: that power is given to the one seeking Life, but not forever. There is still a question if the heroic search for Life was an essential feature of the Gilgamesh legends, or if it was inserted (or reinserted) later in the process.

Tablet 11 contains what the 19th century CE discoverers of Gilgamesh valued more than anything else in the story: an account of the Flood. More than that, the Gilgamesh Flood story has many parallels with the biblical account in Genesis. One passage is as close as any Mesopotamian text so far discovered to the Hebrew of the Bible. (The languages of the Hebrew Bible, Hebrew and Aramaic, are close relatives to Akkadian in the Semitic family of languages.)

Parts of a Sumerian Flood story have been recovered. It shares some features with one of the latest Mesopotamian versions, in Greek, written by a Babylonian priest, Berossus, in the time of Alexander the Great.

The most important parallel to the Gilgamesh Flood story is a longer work in Akkadian called Atrahasis, after the name of the Noah-like survivor of the Flood. It is an Old Babylonian text from about 1700 BCE. The work is attributed to a certain Nur-Aya, who probably lived in Sippar, where the tablets are thought to have originated. (Sippar is prominent in Berossus, though not in any other Mesopotamian versions of the story.) In Atrahasis the flood is the third attempt by the gods to destroy humankind.

Gilgamesh is, then, “late,” later than Sumerian or Akkadian versions, but not as late as Berossus, whose account shows a strong influence of Babylon and its holy city of Sippar.

Episodes: What Happens in Tablet 11

Tablet 11, Lines 1-205: Utnapishtim Tells the Flood Story
Gilgamesh has traveled the dark road to find the one human (and his wife) who survived the Flood. The wisdom of Utnapishtim, if it is to be found, is embodied in his first-person account of the Flood. The story takes up roughly two thirds of the 11th tablet.

Tablet 11, Lines 206-245: The Sleep Test
The sleepless one is now exhausted and is challenged to stay awake for one week, to show that he is worthy of the kind of immortality lived by Utnapishtim and his wife. Gilgamesh falls asleep immediately and only awakens after a week.
Tablet 11, Lines 246-269: The Cleansing of Gilgamesh
Gilgamesh is able to remove the grime of the long journey, wash his hair, and put on a new garment. He is prepared to leave without find the Life he has sought.

Tablet 11, Lines 270-285: The Wife’s Advice
The wife of Utnapishtim urges her husband to act as a proper host and give Gilgamesh a gift. Gilgamesh and the boatman return to shore.

Tablet 11, Lines 286-313: The Plant of Rejuvenation
Gilgamesh is given a secret of the gods, instructions to find and possess a plant that will rejuvenate humans. He finds the plant, then loses it to a serpent.

Tablet 11, Lines 314-328: Return to Uruk
Gilgamesh returns to Uruk and, in words that repeat the Prologue to Tablet 1, proudly describes his city to the boatman.

Key Words in the 11th Tablet
Size or shape of Utnapishtim: Gilgamesh expects to see a much larger person.

Shuruppak, a city on the Euphrates River.

Son of Ubara-Tutu: Utnapishtim is identified through his father’s name.

Ea resorts to ambiguity to avoid directly leaking the gods’ plan (and violating his oath): rain, birds, fish, cakes of bread, wheat. Utnapishtim uses the device to trick the citizens into building the boat.

On board the boat: the seed of all living things, wild and domesticated animals, relatives of Utnapishtim, and skilled craftsmen.

Puzur-Enlil, the boatman, is given Utnapishtim’s palace and wealth.

Gods who bring the Flood: Adad, a Storm God, Shullat and Hanish, Errakal, and the group known as the Anunnaki, here possibly representing the lower world.

The Heaven of Anu, the highest heaven.

The Mother Goddess who mourns the loss of her children is identified as Ishtar (IŠ.TAR = “the goddess”) and Bēlet ılı, “Lady of the Gods,” that is, Ishtar as a Mother Goddess.
Seventh Day, the Flood lasts one week.

Mount Nimush, or Niṣir, is a mountain in the Zagros.

Birds sent out by Utnapishtim: dove, swallow, then raven.

Utnapishtim offers incense, reed, cedar, myrtle (not animals) to the gods.

The Goddess’s Necklace, made of precious lapis lazuli, refers to a story that is otherwise unattested in the literature.

Igigi, as opposed to the Annunaki, a group of gods associated with the upper world.

Ea charges Enlil with acting irrationally, without talking through the plan for destroying humankind.

Ea establishes a way to limit human population growth (instead destroying all with a flood): lions, wolves, famines, and plagues.

Atra-hasīs, something like “Super Wise,” identifies Utnapishtim as the Noah-like hero of an Old Babylonian story of the Flood.

Enlil changes the fate of Utnapishtim and his wife, making them “like” the gods (that is, immortal, but not equal to the gods).

Enlil places the couple at the “mouth” of rivers.

The wife of Utnapishtim, though important to the story, is not given a personal name.

The Plant of Rejuvenation is called “The Old Man Grows Young Again.”

The Snake is called the “Lion of the Earth.”

For critical and philological notes on these texts, see George, BGE, II, 878-97.