Excursus: Interpreting *Gilgamesh*

**The Tyranny of Dead Metaphors**

John Gardner and I used a good bit of Archetypal Criticism to make sense of *Gilgamesh* in the translation we made some decades ago. Prompted by Carl Gustav Jung’s theory of archetypes and the literary theory developed from it, notably Northrop Frye’s “Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths,” and his theory of genres, we argued for a certain understanding of the text that is not much different than what I have developed here. But Archetypal Criticism is largely ignored today, and this book grounds interpretation far more on the important Assyriological work that has appeared in the years since *Gilgamesh* appeared than the myth criticism that was based, in large measure, on Greco-Roman analogies.

It may seem odd, then, that so much is made here on an approach to interpreting *Gilgamesh* of biblical and especially Gnostic material. The Flood story in Tablet 11, of course, makes comparison almost inevitable. Nowhere else in *Gilgamesh* are parallels between Mesopotamian literature and the Bible more evident than in the Flood stories. Where the 19th century enthusiasm for such parallels was urged by the thought that the stories may point to an actual event in the past and would therefore support the truth of Bible, the differences between the biblical versions and other, earlier and later, stories today point more in the direction of what I have called countertexts. While certain Gnostic texts in The Nag Hammadi Library are Jewish rather than Christian, other texts provide unmistakable challenges to the most sacred parts of the Hebrew Bible. They claim explicitly that “Moses” got it wrong. The Flood story is one example. The accounts of the Fall and Repentance of Sophia are less obvious in this regard, but they, too, counter the Torah’s account of the Spirit in Genesis 1:2.

In some ways the investigation of versions of and commentaries on *Gilgamesh* stories appearing after the Standard Akkadian version and in different languages and cultures in addition to those thought to have been written before *Gilgamesh* (and therefore possible influences on the Standard text) follows rabbinical practice, where exegesis is complete only what comes before and what comes after a text are considered. (And a complete exegesis is probably impossible, as would be a definitive reading of a text.)

Hans Jonas attached an epilogue to his important study of *The Gnostic Religion*, “Gnosticism, Existentialism, and Nihilism,” where he explained the “circularity” of his procedure that led him to see comparisons between Gnosticism and the modern world. The viewpoints—he called them the “optics”—he had acquired in studying the Existential Phenomenology of Martin Heidegger, allowed him to see things in Gnosticism that he had not seen before. The Nihilism that is already announced in the subtitle he gave to his book, *The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, highlighted the Gnostic idea that what most Jews and Christians was a positive—possibly the most positive—act by God, Creation itself (marked by explicit comments that God saw the products as “good”), was by the Gnostics the act of an evil god, probably the most evil
figure in Gnostic thought. The evil that was brought into the world by humans, according to Genesis, was rather built into the very texture of an already fallen world. Where the Gnostics refer to the writings of “Moses” they find only dangerous error.

The recovery of Gnostic texts in the modern world, then, allowed Jonas to see in the Bible what was easily overlooked. One does not need to accept Jonas’s interpretations

**Dead Metaphors: The Microcosm**

Today an ancient analogy between the Larger World, the Macrocosm, and the Smaller World, the Microcosm, is found in sociology, where a microcosm is a small group of individuals that reflects a larger social body and a macrocosm is a social body made of smaller organs. The Microcosm in that ancient scheme was the human being. Da Vinci’s use of Pythagoras’s discovery of the golden ratio in his “Vitruvian Man” is perhaps the best visual representation of the Golden Mean widely available today. It was well known through the 17th century CE.

Even the latest versions of the Gilgamesh stories predate the idea of the human being as a replication of the Macrocosm. It is thought to have originated with Democritus or Pythagoras. The Great Chain of Being with its elaborate hierarchies was reflected in the Little World of humanity. As long as the UP/DOWN metaphor was thought to be derived from the Macrocosm, it might have implications for law, politics, and ethics, as well as medicine. The metaphor is certainly alive in *Gilgamesh*, but it does not fit the Greek idea of a Microcosm.

Consider a few instances of UP and DOWN in *Gilgamesh* that may have been prompted by the Sumerian division of the universe between AN (the Above) and KI (the Below).

**UP:** The council of the gods that leads to the creation of Enkidu, whose is thrown DOWN to earth. Enkidu is DOWN to earth in his sexual union with the *harimtu*.

**UP:** Ninsun climbs to the roof of the palace to plead with the Sun God, then descends.

**UP:** Gilgamesh and Enkidu cross mountains to reach Humbaba. He lies DOWN to receive dreams. Irnina, a proxy of Ishtar, lives on the mountain Humbaba protects.

**UP:** Ishtar in a rage flies UP to her father, Anu (UP itself). The Bull of Heaven is brought DOWN. Ishtar on the wall is insulted by Enkidu.

**DOWN:** Gilgamesh and Enkidu are in bed when Enkidu has a dream, presumably of a council of the gods above. As he is dying, Enkidu has a vision of descending to the Underworld.

**UP (?):** Gilgamesh’s journey to find Utnapishtim involves mountains, though it is not clear if he goes up or down as he walks through the mountain.

**UP/DOWN:** The Floodwaters come from Above and Below. Gods flee to the highest heaven, then descend to earth.
DOWN: Gilgamesh is purified in waters, then descends to the Abzu to seize the Plant of Rejuvenation. Then he ascends.

DOWN: Enkidu, in Tablet 12, descends to the Underworld. His spirit ascends to earth, temporarily.

In Mesopotamia, then, humans are largely in their “natural place,” on earth, but can move UP and DOWN. The gods are UP sometimes, but they are also BELOW, notably Enki, Ereshkigal, and the Anunnaki.

A *mes* tree has its roots in the deepest part of KI and its canopy in the highest AN.

The place of *kur*, which can mean mountain, may as a cosmic entity reach from BELOW to ABOVE.

“The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” has a hero who is a warrior with his “head held high.” He wears the same headgear as the goddess, his lover, Inanna. (Her name may include AN.) Inanna’s temple, EANNA, was once UP and is now on earth, in Uruk.

As long as UP/DOWN is generated by the healthy human body, upright, the metaphor works in the visual arts, once the body is seen in space, as well as in poetry. The human head is not the only locus of thought, but vision and hearing both depend on it. The earliest sign for “human” is a head with a small wrapped body.

**The New Philosophy**

John Milton notoriously failed to deal with the cosmography poet John Donne called the “new philosophy.” The overturning of the old Ptolemaic, earth-centered cosmos by a sun-centered model as much as anything pushed the West into a “modern” world.\(^\text{1918}\) Dante had had no trouble with a cosmos full of elements that, from top to bottom, had their natural places in a hierarchical order. While Milton welcomed the possibilities for shaking off old notions of church and theology derived from the ancient hierarchical universe and Greek philosophical thought, he found it difficult to visualize a decentered heaven, earth, and underworld. In “The First Anniversary,” Donne had written,

> And new philosophy calls all in doubt.  
> The element of fire is quite put out;  
> The sun is lost, and th’earth, and no man’s wit  
> Can well direct him where to look for it.  
> And freely men confess that this world’s spent,  
> When in the planets, and the firmament  
> They seek so many new; then see that this  
> Is crumbled out again to his atomies.  
> ‘Tis all in pieces, all coherence gone;  
> all just supply, and all relation:  
> Prince, subject, father, son, are things forgot,  
> For every man alone thinks he has got  
> To be a phoenix, and that there can be  
> None of that kind, of which he is, but he.\(^\text{1919}\)
Excursus: Interpretating Gilgamesh

Interpreting *Gilgamesh*: To a Hero Dying Young

For those who believe that *Gilgamesh* ends with the epilogue at the end of Tablet 11, the return of Gilgamesh to Uruk has special significance. The last two lines of Tablet 11 feature Ishtar and Uruk respectively. Benjamin Caleb Ray, in particular, emphasizes the connection between the epilogue and the First Prologue—the one that mentions Gilgamesh’s state of mind upon his return.

Ray introduced Assyriology to contemporary literary theory, much of it derived from modern Continental philosophy, in an attempt to find an answer to Gilgamesh’s persistent questions about life and death. In “The Gilgamesh Epic: Myth and Meaning,” Ray provides an excellent overview of critical interpretation into the mid-1990s. More recently, others, like Zaineb Bahrani and Keith Dickson, have applied modern and postmodern literary-critical theories to ancient Mesopotamian literature and culture. The widespread interest among theorists in sex and gender issues have had a particularly important impact on Assyriology. As we have seen, the relationship between the deities and their lovers (the “sacred marriage”), different aspects of Inanna/Ishtar, the goddess Companions of Ishtar, her differently gendered temple officiants, and, in *Gilgamesh* specifically, the developing intimacy between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, have made Mesopotamian studies an increasingly significant focus for reading texts, as the theorists have it, “otherwise.”

As I read Ray, Enkidu dies young, and Utnapishtim accounts for it at the end of Tablet 10. Ray sees Utnapishtim’s analogy of the brief life of a dragonfly to show that the always paradoxical issue—why young, strong, healthy persons die—is written into the nature of things. The young hero who dies in battle is, of course, a conspicuous exception. He at least gains fame, honor and respect. The gods or Fate decree the death of some young ones, since, according to Utnapishtim, the time of death is unknown to humans.

Enkidu’s death in Tablet 7 raises questions of cosmic justice. (Why does he, rather than Gilgamesh, pay with his death for the killing of Humbaba and The Bull of Heaven?) The death of Enkidu is narrated differently in Tablet 12. There he makes one mistake after another as he descends to the world of the dead and is seized by the underworld. Perhaps the most important point of Tablet 12 is to illustrate that many different kinds of death have to be sorted out in the underworld. Some fates are better than others. The one who leaves loved ones alive on earth can (at least temporarily) live well in the dark underworld.

The Hero’s Dilemma, on the other hand, is the special case of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh’s death is, of course, not narrated in *Gilgamesh*, though a Sumerian story of his death had raised the great questions of mortality itself. The “Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh” suggests a trade-off between the special status of the anointed one, Amaushumgalanna, and a short life. The Sumerian “Death of Gilgamesh” provides a theology of death, but Gilgamesh’s own death is a very special case.

Accepting the role of kingship does not itself make the fate of Gilgamesh a special case, as I see it. In a sense Gilgamesh’s acceptance of Shamash’s plan to have Humbaba killed (to remove “evil” from the land) is the fulfillment both of a king’s responsibility to his subjects
Excursus: Interpreting Gilgamesh 851

and the special “heroic” activity that traditionally gains certain persons a “name” that others, including other kings, do not achieve.

On the other hand, by rejecting Ishtar’s proposal of marriage, Gilgamesh, according to Ray, brings about the death of Enkidu. I have been pursuing an interpretation that relates Ishtar's proposal to the Hero’s Dilemma in a different way. Gilgamesh certainly rejects her selection of him as her lover. But as I read the text, it the story offers the possibility that in the “healing” of Gilgamesh his return to Uruk marks the acceptance of her offer. With his acceptance come the power and rewards of en-ship she has offered him—and the possibility of an early death. Central to this interpretation is Ishtar herself.

The Hero’s Dilemma, contrasting Enkidu as Everyman with Gilgamesh, with a special status as both king and en for Gilgamesh, is already anticipated in the First Prologue: the walls of Uruk represent royal responsibilities, especially for protecting citizens, widows and orphans, maintaining law and order, guaranteeing law, while the interior of the city emphasizes the relationship with Ishtar.

Ray follows Benjamin R. Foster in seeing Shamash’s advice to Enkidu in Tablet 7 as satirical (which I do not see; or rather, that the gods often present messages, dreams and otherwise, that require interpretation). Enki/Ea and Inanna/Ishtar are particularly known for their deceptive messages, as Tablets 6 and 11 show clearly. But whether this is a generalized skepticism, a countercultural deconstruction of conventional wisdom (about death, in particular), may be a stretch. Ray is right to emphasize Gilgamesh writing his story on a tablet that can be read by one who opens the deposit box. He notes the importance of the audience identifying with Gilgamesh (and Enkidu). In a sense we, being human, are more like Enkidu than Gilgamesh, who is 2/3rd god. He is presented as an Everyman, yet he like Gilgamesh has a special role to play. So we the readers of Gilgamesh are like both Gilgamesh and Enkidu, but we are also significantly not like them—as is usual in narratives of ordinary people (as in modern novels) as well as of special cases in traditional heroic stories.

Utnapishtim offers a perspective that no other human can give, since he was himself a part of the crucial historical event of the Flood but was also crafty enough to follow Enki’s deceptive speech.

Note re the possibility that Gilgamesh died young: The Sumerian King List gives him what to us is an impossibly long reign, but judging from those who came before him (especially his father Lugalbanda) his is quite modest. His longevity should not be judged on the basis of the puny (though reasonable) reigns of the kings in Uruk who followed him in the First Dynasty. They are much closer to ordinary folk like us than to famous figures who preceded them.
Gardner and Maier, “Introduction: The One Who Saw the Abyss,” 3-54.


Henshaw [personal communication]; see also Henshaw, [complete citation of article for Archie Chi Chung Lee], forthcoming.


Recall that only one of his progeny is mentioned in the text that identifies him (Ur-lugal) as restoring the Tummal, as Bilgames had done before (or with) him. Restoring the Tummal is the only noteworthy act attributed to the descendents of Gilgamesh in the First Dynasty. See Joachim Oelsner, “Aus der sumerischen Texten der Hilprecht-Sammlung Jena: Der Text der Tummal-Chronik,” *Literatur, Politik und Recht in Mesopotamien*, ed. Sallaberger, 215-16, 221. The chronicle begins with Enmerbaragesi of Kish and son Akka and ends with the Ur III dynasty. For Enmebaragesi, see Piotr Michalowski, “A Man Called Enmebaragesi,” in the same volume, 195-208; also Piotr Steinkeller, “An Ur III Manuscript of the Sumerian King List,” 267-92, for an interpretation of relationships among Kish, Akkad, Uruk, and Ur.
Excursus on Interpretation

Literary Criticism: The Abysmal Science

Introduction: The Abyss
It may come as something as a surprise that the ancient Mesopotamian (specifically, Sumero-Akkadian) terms abzu/apsû has reappeared in recent literary theory. Few of us who regularly use the English or French equivalents of the “abyss” knows its history beyond guessing that the Greeks had invented it or had picked it up from someone. (One suggestion is that it is a compound for “no bottom.” It is not a term that can be traced easily to Indo-European roots.) It is helpful to know that the Greek abussos was used in the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew “deep,” tehom (Genesis 1:2).

From the Hebrew Bible, where it meant a vast body of fresh water under the earth from which springs and fountains emerged on the earth, the term developed other associations. In later Judaism and in the New Testament, abussos came to mean the abode not only of the dead but also the place of demons, related to Hell and Abaddon, e.g., in Luke 8:31.

The English word abyss carries three related meanings, according to the American College Dictionary: 1. a bottomless gulf; any deep, immeasurable space; 2. anything profound and unfathomable; and 3. the bottomless pit; hell. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the earliest appearance of the word discovered so far in English is dated 1398, CE, when John Trevisa offered a good Middle English definition of the term: “The primordiall and fyrste matere in the begynnynge of the worlde not distinguyd by certayn fourme is callyd Abyssus...Abyssus is depnesse of water vnseen and therof come and sprynge welles and ryuers.” Even relatively recent etymological dictionaries, like Eric Partridge's Origins, A Short Etymological Dictionary of Modern English (1983), traces English “abyss” from Greek abussos to Latin abyssus to Old French abisme, thence to English.

What modern literary theorists would know is that, thanks to the witty Jacques Derrida, the abyss has entered into literary theory in a big way. (One of my students, a wag, now characterizes the whole literary industry as “abyosomal,” and he is not far wrong.) The branch of literary theory that makes use of the "abyss" is the notorious Deconstruction gang, and those in the group quickly borrow from one another. Some very important names in literary theory now use abysm (in two French spellings), en abyme, and mis en abisme fairly regularly. I will want to say how (if not the meaning) they use the French term and how some have come to anglicize it.

The “Science” of Criticism
The “science” in Science of Literary Criticism should be mentioned before we move too deeply into the abyss. We rarely call the study of texts, especially the interpretation of texts, “scientific.” The interpretation of texts is what, for the most part, distinguishes the Humanities from other academic disciplines. In the U.S. “science” is usually reserved to mathematical or empirical studies, to the hard sciences and the social sciences. I use the term to call attention to the European tradition of Wissenschaft, which covers the science and the humanistic study of texts. Better than “science” it ought probably to translated
as “learning” or “scholarship,” perhaps simply “knowledge.” The idea of “human sciences” was promoted when, beginning in the early 1960s, European thought began to influence Anglo-American universities. But the very fact that the term has not caught on tells us that the European influences are still considered quite foreign.

First I should briefly indicate the larger project of which the abyss is one (but ominously growing) part. I am trying to determine the extent and the meaning of a metaphor—or, I should say today, a figure—that is remarkably persistent in many otherwise unrelated fields, what I call the metaphor or figure of depth, a distinction between surface and an indeterminate depth.

It is used importantly not only in literary works like Paradise Lost, where it derives at least in part from an equally important source, the Bible. It is not only a mythological figure, as you know it to be in Mesopotamia. “Depth” figures importantly, sometimes centrally in a variety of modern scientific disciplines: in linguistics, where deep and surface structures are important to generative grammar; in psychoanalytic theory, itself called in various guises Depth Psychology. It functions in Marxist thought of a relationship between “base” and “superstructure;” in the “deep” space of astrophysics; and, of course, the depth of field in art and optics. Hydrology, with or without the derived social theory of Karl Wittvogel—Sumer as a Hydraulic Society (otherwise known as an “Oriental Despotism”)—of course makes use of it.

Of course, my interest here is in literary theory, which has made much of metaphor in recent years. Two seminal works, which take positions that I think can be reconciled but so far are not, are J. Christopher Crocker’s “The Social Functions of Rhetorical Forms,” one of many fine essays in the collection called The Social Use of Metaphor, Essays on the Anthropology of Rhetoric (1977); and linguist George Lakoff, who with Mark Johnson produced Metaphors We Live By (1980), a work discussed above.

(Lakoff proposes an experiential theory of metaphor that has been gaining adherents, even among biblical scholars. Lakoff offers a deceptively simple definition of metaphor: “The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another” (Metaphors We Live By, 5). An issue of Semeia, devoted to Women, War, and Metaphor: Language and Society in the Study of the Hebrew Bible (1993), drew heavily on Lakoff. For example, Claudia V. Camp’s introduction to the issue, “Metaphor in Feminist Biblical Interpretation: Theoretical Perspectives,” rests on the notion, from Lakoff, that metaphor is a “cognitive structure that grounds language in embodiment.”

Lakoff’s experiential approach is not readily compatible with the claims others make that there is “only language.” Within that issue, though, the deconstructionist Mieke Bal challenged any experiential theory of metaphor. (Bal titled her response to the articles in that Semeia issue, appropriately, “Metaphors He Lives By.”)

(I cannot claim that I have worked out a bridge between deconstruction and “experience,” but the person who accomplishes that will have made a major contribution to literary theory.)
Jacques Derrida uses two spellings of abyss, *abisme* and *abyme*, one an old spelling used in heraldry, to indicate a small representation of the heraldic shield itself on the shield, much the way the *apsû* was reproduced in miniature in the water basin of the Mesopotamian temple (CAD 1.2.197). From this one can see Derrida's relatively frequent use of the phrase, *en abyme*, “placement in the abyss,” where *abyme* means “endless regress.”

For example, in the article, “...That Dangerous Supplement...,” Derrida claims that “Representation in the abyss of presence is not an accident of presence; the desire of presence is, on the contrary, born from the abyss of representation, from the representation of representation, etc.”

In such an example, one sees certain persistent themes in Derrida: the desire for, but ultimate inability to reach “presence,” to have a sign actually re-present a signified. The abyss always undercuts the defining aim of Western metaphysics since the Greeks, what Derrida calls, after Martin Heidegger, “onto-theology.” The abyss subverts any ground, reason, or principle.

Like Heidegger, from whom he drew much of this thinking, and with whom he is often in dialogue and at odds, Derrida plays with language in order to expose and “deconstruct” intended meanings. (“Play” is an important term in his anti-metaphysical stand. He likened “play” not so much to the play in the theory of games, where play operates by the rules of the game, but rather to the “play” of a car steering wheel, an apparently useless element of an otherwise well-designed system.) In “The Principle of Reason...” Derrida discusses the Heideggerian notion of the *Abgrund*, a denial of “ground,” a hole that represents the “impossibility for a principle of grounding to ground itself.”

Heidegger refused to credit the Greek terms basic to metaphysics (*ousia, telos, logos* prominent among them) by using their German “equivalents” and then “destroying” them--using *Abgrund* to open the “ground” or “reason” (*Grund*) itself. Derrida, for his part, uses a phrase, *mis en abyme*, usually translated into English as the “scene of ruin,” to subvert a familiar French phrase, *mis en scène*, whose usual meaning in the theater is the properties on the stage and the position of actors in a given scene.

In a discussion of Martin Heidegger's analysis of a Van Gogh painting of peasant shoes, Derrida claims:

At the very moment when he calls us back to the Greek ground and to the apprehension of the thing as *hypokeimenon*, Heiddegger implies that this originary state *still* covers over something, falling upon or attacking it.... But as the “more” carries itself away, the thing no longer has the figure of value of an “underneath.” Situated (or not) “under” the underneath, it would not only open an abyss, but would brusquely and discontinuously prescribe a change of direction, or rather a completely different topic...[And] the *topos* of
the abyss and a fortiori that of the mise-en-abyme could also hide, or in any case dampen a little the brusque and angular necessity of this other topics [sic].”

In his essay, “To Speculate--on Freud,” he cautions against the very figure he has invented, lest it prove too powerfully to suggest the metaphysics of presence.

I have never wanted to abuse the abyss, nor, above all, the mise “en abyme.” I do not believe in it very much, I am wary of the confidence that it inspires fundamentally; I believe it too representative either to go far enough or not to avoid the very thing toward which it allegedly rushes.

Derrida suggests in that text that he derives the figure from the repetition-compulsion Freud had discussed in Beyond the Pleasure Principle.

Followers of Derrida and Deconstruction will see in this rejection of the “metaphysics of presence” the operation of a better known Derridian wordplay, his misspelling of différence as différence to mark the hidden play in the term, “differ,” to make a difference and to defer meaning endlessly.

While he may have been reading Freud, it is more likely that he derived the “abyss” from the “French Freud,” Jacques Lacan.

Perhaps the most amusing and enlightening exchange in contemporary literary theory is the debate between psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan and Derrida on readings of the Edgar Allan Poe detective story, “The Purloined Letter.” (Poe’s reputation, you may recall, has been higher in France than in America since the mid-19th century.) It is this exchange, I believe, that accounts for Derrida’s “abyss” entering into American literary criticism. The debate, opened with a 1956 essay by Jacques Lacan entitled “Seminar on ‘The Purloined Letter,’” highlighted two “scenes” in Poe’s story that, Lacan argued, allowed a “letter” to circulate among several characters and, though the contents of the letter is never disclosed to the reader, is shown to affect all the characters in a very profound way. Lacan used the reading to advance his psychoanalytic theory, grounded in Freud, beyond Freud. The two “scenes” in Poe’s story are a “primal” scene, which will certainly recall Freud’s important “primal scene,” and a later “repetition” of that same scene, with a different set of characters. As he introduces his analysis of the Poe story, Lacan claims that “the narration, in fact, doubles the drama with a commentary without which no mis en scene would be possible.”

The details of the debate this Lacanian seminar opened are not important here. I mention the debate only to underscore its importance in contemporary literary theory. Derrida responded to Lacan in an essay, published in 1966, called “Le Facteur de la vérité” (translated twice into English, each time with a different title). In it, Derrida countered Lacan’s mis en scene with a deconstructive mis en abyme, in the process claiming that Lacan’s reading of Poe reproduces the mistake of finding stable meanings in texts, of reintroducing the “metaphysics of presence.” In 1977, an issue of Yale French Studies on Literature and Psychoanalysis (55/56) included a retort to both Lacan and Derrida by Barbara Johnson, “The Frame of Reference: Poe, Lacan, Derrida.” Johnson and
Derrida continued to debate each other; other critics of various persuasions were brought in; a book--inevitably--was published that collected most of the major statements (*The Purloined Poe*), and the debate has continued after that, with anthologies of literary theory reprinting at least segments of what has become a small cottage industry of criticism.

The Lacan-Derrida debate and the *Yale French Studies* issue have become almost cornerstones in the amazing edifice of contemporary literary criticism. Barbara Johnson anglicized the Derridian *abyme* to “asymmetrical, abysmal structure” (410) and to the “scene of writing whose boundaries crumble off into an abyss” (416) and “the crumbling, abysmal, nontotalizable edges of the story’s frame” (417).

Another important bit of abysmal criticism can be found in J. Hillis Miller's influential 1984 essay, “The Search for Grounds in Literary Study,” where Miller discusses a passage in Immanuel Kant and writes,

> This is an example of a *mise en abyme* in the technical sense of placing within the larger sign system a miniature image of the larger one, a smaller one potentially within that, and so on, in a filling in and covering over of the abyss, gulf, of *Kluft* which is at the same time an opening of the abyss. Such a simultaneous opening and covering over is the regular law of the *mise en abyme.*

(Hillis Miller, much at home with the English literary tradition, connects the abyss with John Milton’s use of the image in *Paradise Lost.* There, you will recall, the poet/prophet Milton prays that he be inspired by the Holy Spirit to create an epic poet in the manner of the first creation: “Thou from the first/Was present, and with mighty wings outspread/Dove-like satst brooding on the vast Abyss/And madst it pregnant: What in me is dark/Illumine, what is low raise and support” (*Paradise Lost*, I.19-23).

Criticism, having returned to the ancient world notion of the abyss, is not soon likely to abandon it.

**The Possible Use of the Abyss as a Literary-Critical Term**

The coincidence of a word from the ancient Near East appearing in a new guise in modern literary criticism is in itself uneventful. The re-emergence of the abyss as a counter to Western metaphysics, though, opens what to us looks like an esoteric tradition, perhaps remembered only in Uruk before Hellenistic thought influenced the city during the Seleucid period, a tradition that was not yet marked by the excesses of “onto-theology” decried by Heidegger and Derrida.

This Excursus has so far had three related aims: first, to explain briefly how the “abyss” has come, largely through Derrida’s use of the term in “Le Facteur de la verité,” to be of interest to modern literary theory; second, to suggest that Derrida's *abyme* an important term in modern literary criticism and theory, and may become useful in the current debate about metaphor; and it remains to mention a third, to show that Derrida’s *abyme* may be useful for an understanding of the Sumerian *abzu.*
The irony is that early *abzu* is present in Sumerian writings from the 3rd millennium BCE, is represented in Mesopotamian art, and is repeated endlessly in the Mesopotamian temple, where are something very large pond, sometimes small basin stands before the Holy of Holies. (The Mesopotamian tradition of a representation of the *abzu* in the temple is long-lived. The First Temple, Solomon’s Temple in Jerusalem, is said to have contained a huge laver supported by twelve bronze bulls, a basin that contained 10,000 gallons of water.\textsuperscript{1941} The Tabernacle that existed before the temple itself had a smaller washing place behind the altar of sacrifice and in front of the Holy Place. The *mikva‘e* through which the faithful passed to become pure as they entered Herod’s temple may be related to it—as, indeed, are the holy water fonts and baptismal basins still to be found in Roman Catholic churches.)

In writings, in art, and in architecture, the *abzu* is associated with Enki/Ea. Scholars of the ancient Near East have not hesitated to describe a Sumerian cosmography in which the *abzu* was an important part: the cosmic waters, apparently sweet waters) underneath the whole earth.\textsuperscript{1942} But just as the name itself is of uncertain origin (as well as its synonym, the *engur*), the *abzu* has proven to be more complicated, impenetrable by light (according to Sumerian sources), a deep reserve in which the god Enki lives, guarded by his monstrous creations, a formless place—or unplace—from which, like a bag of tricks, the trickster god pulls out new things and new solutions to otherwise impossible problems. Assyriologist Jean Bottéro finds it murky indeed.

The ancient literary work that most conspicuously makes use of the *apsû* is, no doubt, the late, Akkadian *Enuma Elish*, often considered “The Babylonian Creation Epic.” That work is particularly important these days because it has been retranslated several times and made available to an increasingly large audience of nonspecialists.\textsuperscript{1943} Historians of religion, myth critics, philosophers and soon literary critics will join biblical scholars to examine what is now taken as a kind of fundamental creation myth. My aim is rather different. *Enuma Elish* is far too late a text to be immediately useful to my project. When the Babylonian hero-god Marduk defeats the Great Mother Tiamat, he slices her in half and separates the waters above and the waters below. (Tiamat is cognate with the biblical *tehom*, translated, as we have seen, in the Septuagint as *abussos*.) Even before that, though, in *Enuma Elish*, Ea had defeated the Great Father, Apsû, and having brought the Apsû-waters into some kind of frame, Ea established his temple at Eridu atop the *apsû*. The city of Eridu became a model for Marduk’s Babylon, so in a sense Ea’s dwelling is repeated in three places, in the waters below the ground, upon the waters, and above ground in Babylon.

More to the point is the Sumerian composition (BM 86535) Samuel Noah Kramer edited as “Enki and His Word: A Chant to the Rider of the Waves.”\textsuperscript{1944} The first *kirugu* of “Enki and His Word: A Chant to the Rider of the Waves” (*kirugu* 50 of the larger composition) calls attention to the “Song of Enki,” the “holy Master” (*en*), the “master of the Abzu,” and then addresses Enki as the god who rides the waves and as the “twin” of the Euphrates River that allows humankind as well as animals to proliferate.

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Kramer was much taken with a few lines of narrative in the *kirugu*, since the lines seem to suggest that, once humans had multiplied, they were brought into his “house,” where the powerful *me* could be found. Enki removed from the “house,” though, the “*me* of life,” and he fastened to his breast other *me* he had sought out. Humankind is commanded not to covet the *me*.

He made them come out to them in the house, 
the Master--to his *me*.

He made them come out to them, 
Master of the Abzu--to his *me*,
he made them come out to them in the house.

He took away the *me* of life from the house.

He hunted out, 
he hunted out the *me*

he fastened them about his chest.

Master he is of the plenteous *me*: 
for his *me* the *mulu* [humankind] must not long.\textsuperscript{1945}

In subsequent *kirugu*, humanity (lú) is mentioned, but is attacked by the “word” of Enki. The “word” is depicted as the venom of a viper and the venom of a lion (or scorpion), capable of paralyzing a human being (third *kirugu*). In the fourth *kirugu* the word of Enki is a “floodwave” that carries off humanity and inspires fear in the human body (*mulu*). There is some indication that Enki’s hostile attitude gives way to prosperity.

His word is a floodwave, 
a floodwave that breeds fear.
The word of Enki is a floodwave 
a floodwave
The word of Damgalnunna is a floodwave, 
a floodwave.
The word of the Master of the Abzu is a floodwave, 
a floodwave.\textsuperscript{1946}

I have long suspected that, even without the repeated association in Mesopotamia of Enki/Ea and “wisdom,” that Enki and the images/figures connected with the representation of that god provide a distinctly non-metaphysical understanding of language. Ancient Near Eastern scholars have long pointed to an understanding of the
“word” in ancient Semitic languages very different from our modern Western languages, an understanding that combined signification with behavior and with power that we have difficulty following. The connections between Sumerian words for word, concept, hearing and the like (inim, me, geshtug) tie the word to Enki and the abzu in a manner that seems to make sense in Sumerian narratives, but which I find difficult to explain. Enki, as a god, has a certain persistence or perdurance, a kind of timeless essence that attaches to the naming of gods. The portrayal of Enki/Ea in texts and in cylinder seal impressions reflects that persistence: figured as male, contesting with goddesses, solving problems, dispensing living waters clearly mark Enki/Ea as part of an orderliness that makes a history of Mesopotamian religion (or literature) possible. Similarly, the abzu has a kind of topographical or even cosmic persistence. Reproduced endlessly in miniature, the abzu seems to as much a thing, principle, reason, ousia, nature or essence as one is likely to find outside Greek philosophical thought: a god, a place--a kind of primitive narrative ontology.

M. E. Vogelzang emphasizes the Ea as a god who acts when the “existing order” is threatened, a basic theme of Mesopotamian epic literature. “Something” appears that “cannot be classified,” and is often amorphous, powerful but vague. Ea acts (through speech and through creating odd beings) to “restrain an opponent or nuisance.” Such narratives connect Ea with an existing order, and he brings new things into being. But the narratives emphasize, as much, the oddity of the creations and often the ambiguity in Ea’s actions, including the advice he gives to others.

The abzu is associated, by way of the god Enki, to the Sumerian word for “word” itself (rather like the earliest understanding of dabar or logos); and the word, inim, is intimately connected with the untranslatable Sumerian term, the me.

The word, especially the me, is also something like an essence, but as the scholars, especially Gertrud Farber-Flügge, have noticed, the me is marked especially by plurality. Though the me can be carried on the arm like a bracelet or worn as a pendant on the chest, that kind of figuration suggests “mere” metaphor (in the old sense of the term), a decorative embellishment to something else.

I rather think, though, that plurality of the me and the movement and power of the word discloses a terrible instability, just as it uncovers a “ground” of existence. Within the stability that is offered by naming the names (as Adam is figured as doing in the Yahwist narrative of Genesis) everywhere opens an abyss, as Derrida would have it. The setting, so solid, is both a mis en scene and its ruin, the mis en abyme. I think it is a mistake to insist only on the stability of the Mesopotamian abzu. Where is it located, after, all, if not “below,” reflecting a primordial division of an and ki--but where is in? The impenetrable abzu, imaged as an underwater temple guarded by powerful primitive beings, where light itself does not enter, is not a place in that way humans regard places.

For this reason I suggest that we attend, not to Derrida’s mystification of writing and speaking--Susan Handelman makes a good case that Derrida’s écriture should better be translated as scripture than writing--but to the abyss opened up by language: in
Derrida's though, *différance*. What the Enki narratives and hymns open up is not simply a subversion of, say, Enlil's plans (to destroy humankind, for example), but the infinite regress of language itself.

It is possible that the invention of writing aided in this, but that is a very complex problem I am incapable of solving. In any event, the *abzu* operates as a figure in ancient Mesopotamian texts largely the way modern literary criticism now wants it to operate, as the possibility that any order can be reproduced endlessly and subverted. In that sense, it can be said to have finally produced, as a way of subverting the Western tradition of onto-theology and the metaphysics of presence, its own abysmal criticism.

**Radical Orthodoxy**

The abyss of Derrida has been raised as an issue yet again, in largely a negative way. A movement calling itself Radical Orthodoxy claims that Heidegger and Derrida are nihilists in a line of modern secularists going back at least to Nietzsche. Beginning with John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Policy: Beyond Secular Reason* (1990) radical Orthodoxy challenged modernists, with Catherine Pickstock characterizing Derrida’s admitted interest in death as “necrophilia.” This is not the place to enter the debate—where the “void” of Derrida is opposed to the *pleroma* or “fullness” important to, e.g., the Gospel of John.

According to Hugh Rayment-Pickard Derrida’s concept of “impossibility” is “crucial to Derrida’s theology.” He cites Derrida’s explanation of “impossibility.”

Every time I say: X is neither this nor that, neither the contrary of this nor that, neither the simple neutralization of this nor that with which it has nothing in common, being absolutely heterogeneous to or incommensurable with them, I would start to speak of God.

Catherine Pickstock, on the other hand, considers Derrida’s indeterminacy and impossibility to be “an empty, abyssal middle realm that that confirms deconstruction in its abject nihilism.” Rayment-Pickard challenges that view. He offers considerable evidence that Derrida did not find “impossibility” nihilistic; rather, it “marks the ambiguous space between all and nothing, life and death, plenitude and emptiness.” However this debate over Derrida’s nihilism is resolved, the abyss opens as a key interpretive principle.

Rayment-Pickard points to a problem in Radical Orthodoxy’s reading of texts. We have seen that Flood story continually generates different variations. Even if a “first” or proto-Flood story were to be discovered, strong interpretations, either in the form of narratives or commentaries, find novelties back and forth. Rayment-Pickard deconstructs the very ritual text at the heart of Radical Orthodoxy: the Eucharist, as interpreted by the medieval Roman Ritual. Rayment-Pickard points out in some detail that the four New Testament texts that form the basis of the Roman Ritual (the four gospels and Paul's First Corinthians) are inconsistent with one another—and with the much later Roman Ritual.
Excursus on Interpretation

Just as creeds like the Nicene Creed go far to turn a theological narrative of cosmic history into a ontological structure of Being, liturgies like the Roman Ritual gloss over inconsistencies in the biblical stories thought to institute the sacrament of the Eucharist also bend narratives into a harmonious metaphysical unity. (Pulling pieces of biblical text out to construct the “Apostles Creed” is an even more obvious example of the tendency to harmonize narratives into unified conceptual structures.)

The “abyss” today challenges such harmonizing in the same way that the *abzu* retained a power in ancient Mesopotamian thought to overcome any conceptual order and to disclose new possibilities.

**The Flood in its Literary and Cultural Contexts**

**Noah Today**

The Flood has fascinated the curious since ancient times. In Hellenistic times Berossus reported that people were scraping off pieces of bitumen from what they thought were remains of the boat in the mountains of Armenia. As often as not the interests have turned controversial. The most obvious new interest is the search for remains of the boat itself. If one takes the biblical location of the boat literally, some parts of it may still be found on Mount Ararat, in what is now eastern Turkey. If “Ararat” means the range of mountains, then the search becomes something like finding a boat in the Appalachian Chain, an altogether more difficult task. One pull of this fascination is the fact that relatively few biblical stories speak of material objects that could have survived the several thousand years from the composition of the texts.

**Evidence of a Flood: Recent Cases**

Searches for evidence of the flood described in the Bible continue apace. Beyond the desire to prove naturalistically what many people accept by faith, the search for remains of the flood is often prompted by the paucity of biblical references to physical items that could possibly have survived for thousands of years. Christians looked for the cross on which Jesus died. Fragments of texts written on perishable papyrus (as opposed to the durable clay tablets) are eagerly studied. Since the Bible describes a large boat and describes the materials used in its construction (using a term, alas, that appears only once in the Bible and is a matter of some controversy), many have sought its remains in the Ararat range in what is now Turkey.

Thor Heyerdahl tried a different tack. The results were published in 1980. In another of his famous adventures, Heyerdahl had a boat constructed, mainly of reeds from southern Iraq, and showed that it was indeed seaworthy. The boat was the Tigris. What was striking about the Tigris was that it followed the lines of a Sumerian boat and it was unlike the tradition that imagined a large wooden structure. The Tigris was made of massive reed bundles. It was constructed near Uruk and Ur (where evidence of an ancient great flood was found in the 1920s), launched in 1977, sailed through the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman to Karachi, to show that the Sumerians had indeed traveled by sea.
to the Indus Valley region. Heyerdahl then took his crew across the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Aden to Djibouti, altogether a journey of 4200 miles in a little over four months.

Imagine, then, the shock and surprise David Fasold registered when he found what he thought were the remains of a Sumerian reed boat of the dimensions appropriate to the biblical flood story. Fasold’s reconstruction of a boat was based on the outlines of a structure on Mount Mahşer Dağ in Turkey. Turkish officials have made the site a national park. Fasold, a former merchant marine officer with decades of marine salvage experience was able to deal with the complicated technical questions involving such a ship. He was even able to find a reasonable explanation of the mysterious Stone Things Gilgamesh smashed before he journeyed to the place where Utnapishtim was living. He discovered drogue stones, or anchor stones, buried in the earth. The stones were used as anchors, Fasold thought, and he was impressed that the design indicated a vessel could “waggle or veer out like a trawl door on a shrimp rig” (152). The carver of the stones had completed a difficult job beautifully.

The site was reexamined by Fasold’s friend, David Deal, who was of the opinion that structure Fasold had studied was not a reed boat but a boat made of wood. He accepted Fasold’s identification of the site. Deal went on to associate the site, “Mesha,” with the twin Mashu mountains mentioned in Gilgamesh.

Robert M. Best, on the other hand, took a very different approach in his Noah’s Ark and the Ziusudra Epic: Sumerian Origins of the Flood Myth. A physicist by profession, Best examined the different accounts of a great flood, but, not satisfied to see them merely as versions of an ancient myth, he set out to establish the possibility that a local flood in Sumer could have been so unusual and remarkable that an actual incident could have given rise to the different versions of the story in antiquity. His reconstruction is very different from those who have sought to find evidence of the biblical flood.

Best thought that the Flood story derived from a local river flood on the Sumerian floodplain, a flood powerful enough to carry a boat into the Arabian Gulf. He dated the flood to about 2900 BCE. Rather unlike the tradition that developed around the ark, Best thought it was a commercial river barge. Based on an Ur III text that listed four species of animals (cattle, oxen, sheep and goats), Best estimated that the barge could carry no more than 280 animals. His reconstruction of the boat is very different from any other in the tradition. The barge, about 200 feet long and 33 feet wide, carried beer and wine below deck, had animals and grain in the middle and hay on the upper deck. An awning covered the upper deck.

In addition, Best examined six surviving Flood texts, separating “myth” from “legend” in each case. (Gilgamesh contains about equal parts myth and legend, e.g., references to Shuruppak and details about the boat’s construction, in Best’s analysis. In addition to Genesis, Gilgamesh, Atrahasis, The Sumerian Flood Story, and Berossus, Best considers a short retelling of the story by Moses of Khoren.
One of the most interesting sections of Best’s book is his series of 60 conclusions, weighed with Best’s confidence that there may be some truth to the stories. He is 100% confidence, that, for example, the ancient flood stories are mostly myth; that no one lived to be 900 years old; and that there was no global flood a few thousand years ago. He is about 50% sure that Noah was a real person who saved animals on a barge. If Noah was a real person, Best is 100% certain that Agri Dagh played no role in the flood. He is slightly less sure (95%) that the river carried the barge into the Persian Gulf; about 80% sure that Noah offered a sacrifice at the top of a hill; that Noah was a merchant or trade official before becoming king of Shruppak (60%). Many features of the story, though, are unlikely, according to Best. That some of the “gods” of the story were actually priests rates only 30% probability of being true. The lowest (20%) rated probability was, for Best, that a priest of Enki made Noah and his wife “honorary gods.”

Ethical Principles
Since the biblical Flood is addressed primarily to humanity and only secondarily to the division of peoples into descendents of the three sons of Noah, Noahide and Noahite societies exist today to follow the ethical principles articulated in the story. Corresponding to what I have called “Ea’s turru,” the principles that map the new order, are the “Seven Laws of Noah” or Noahide Laws that, according to the Talmud, were given by God to Noah as laws binding all humankind. The Laws, for modern Noahides, provide a place for Jews and non-Jews in the new order previous to the Laws given Moses on Mount Sinai. The Seven Laws are: the Prohibition of Idolatry; the Prohibition of Murder; the Prohibition of Theft; the Prohibition of Sexual Promiscuity; the Prohibition of Blasphemy; Dietary Law regarding the eating of flesh taken from an animal while it is still alive; and the requirement to have just laws.

Modern Ecumenism
Attempts to find a meaning of the Flood for modern readers—Jewish, Christian, or Muslim (since Noah, or Nuh, is prominent in the Qur’an)—often lead to very sunny and upbeat retellings of the story. Lucy Cousins’s illustrated “Noah’s Ark” is one such retelling. Like the vast majority of contemporary versions, Cousins’s is clearly meant for children. It was awarded a Parents Magazine Best Book of the Year 1993. The illustrations are uniformly colorful and bright. For most of the story the heavily bearded Noah is smiling. There is a great emphasis on the happy animals that are saved. No bodies float on the waters or are anywhere to be seen.

Cousins’s retelling is very brief, appropriate to the level of the audience, very young children. Almost every page focuses on Noah. One page hints at a theme that has become almost mandatory in recent years: expanded coverage of Noah’s wife. (For the vast majority of Christian retellings the wife is highlighted while the sons are largely ignored.) The text has become, “Noah and his family worked for years and years and years to build the ark. At last it was finished.” The boat itself dominates the illustration, with Noah happily standing at a precarious position at the bow of the ship. A white haired and ruddy-cheeked wife stands beside the boat. She and her three children hold hands and present
a tableau of the happy family. Curiously, the three sons are very young children, not married men with their wives. Since the Women’s Movement the wife is increasingly prominent and more active than in this particular version. Often she is shown helping not only to care for the animals aboard the ark but working with the men in the actual construction of the boat.

A close parallel is Siddiqa Juma’s children’s book, *Nuh (Noah) (Peace be upon him)* in the Tahrike Tarsile Qur’an series. Perhaps out of the traditional Islamic reticence to visualize the prophets, Nuh is represented several times but his face is largely a blur. Even though this, too, is addressed to young children, there is a notable emphasis on the unbelievers who were “unkind,” and “worshiped idols and did not believe in Allah.” They laugh at Noah. Only a few (unnamed) people believed in the prophet and got into the boat with him. On the next page we read that they are warned that unbelievers will be drowned. The scene where the sun has come out and a rainbow is visible to those on the becalmed boat again makes the point: “Everybody drowned except for those on the ark.” The dead are not, however, visible in the picture. Nuh and “his companions” watch the rainbow and are filled with joy “to breathe the cool fresh air and see the wonderful creations of Allah.” No women are mentioned or depicted. As we shall see, the wife is one of a few women mentioned in the Qur’an. Unlike Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is praised as a model for women, Noah’s wife is condemned for unbelief and treachery. But in this version she is simply ignored.

The Islamic retelling is as typical in its representation of a Noah who is a staunch believer as the Judeo-Christian is of representing Noah as a righteous man. Neither tradition makes him into the wisdom figure of Mesopotamian tradition.

Not all retellings of the Flood are all that sunny. Bill Moyers’s *Genesis, A Living Conversation* has a discussion of the Flood as “Apocalypse” involving Karen Armstrong, Byron E. Calame, Alexander a. Di Lella, Carol Gilligan, Blu Greenberg, Samuel D. Proctor, and Burton L. Visotzky. The group includes a wide range of secular and religious perspectives (though in this particular chapter, no Muslims). After a stage-setting remark by Moyers, parts of the *Schoken Bible* translation of Genesis 6, 7, 8, and 9 are presented. The wide-ranging discussion moves from comments about the text to modern problems like slavery and the Holocaust.

One of the last problems discussed is the role of women. Bill Moyers himself opens with a question, “Does it concern you that the women in the story of Noah have no names? We never hear their voices. We don’t know anything about Ms. Noah. They are simply there as passengers on the ship” (145). One member opines that, “Somebody has to clean up the ark.” The women in the group are, of course, bothered by the patriarchal order, not just for women today but for everyone who reads the Bible. Karen Armstrong reminds the group that Mrs. Noah was comic figure in the medieval play of the Flood. “She is a truly ill-minded woman who refuses to get into the Ark. She’s busy gossiping. They have to drag her on by force. So one of the first appearances of a woman in history is as a figure
of fun. The serious people are men” (146). They even try to assign a name to the anonymous Mrs. Noah (148-49).

The illustrations in Moyers’s chapter are as hard-hitting as the discussion itself. An Iranian portrayal from 1577 shows Noah with his three sons and their three wives, two boatmen—and no wife of the prophet. Other visuals range from an11th century Christian ivory through a 1990 painting in six panels, from Hans Baldung Grien’s 1516 The Flood through Marc Chagall’s 1960s Noah and the Rainbow. Grien’s painting states in visual form the problematics that the Moyers group develop. At the height of the Flood an hermetically sealed and beautifully crafted box floats above a terrified group of humans and animals in the throes of agony. A child in the cradle is about to be overwhelmed. Horses are depicted in the terror of impending destruction. Several figures try desperately to hang onto the locked box.

The Flood in its Literary Milieu

Stories of great floods—and universal Deluges such as we have been considering—have been found in many places, many periods, and many cultures. Some are like Mesopotamian and biblical Flood stories; many are not. It is clear, though, that the biblical Flood story has been retold in surprising ways over millennia—and is being retold today, and not just in the stories for children, with their happy faces and a white-haired grandmotherly wife for Noah. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions highlight the Flood and in doing so provide different interpretations that cast light on differences among the religions themselves.

A small sampling of those retellings is given here, in roughly the order in which we think they were written down. How much of the different traditions has been carried by the streams of oral storytelling can hardly be fathomed, but the written texts show how many of the mythemes present in Mesopotamian Flood stories, either present or absent in other traditions, compose stories from different perspectives.

Flood Mythemes

George Smith and his contemporaries read harimtu shamhat in Tablet 1, line 62, as Assyriologists do today. Both words refer, as we have seen, to roles women play in the service of the goddess Ishtar. (Sometimes they refer to women of different social ranks who perform sexual services.) Today the second term is taken as a personal name, Shamhat, and the first her title. This is a little unusual, since we might expect the title or epithet to appear after the name. Possibly the sequence pointed to a specific hierodule named Shamhat: find a harimtu, the one called Shamhat. Smith and his contemporaries, however, thought the line referred to two women. Early on in the reconstruction of Gilgamesh, then, scholars tried to find a place in the narrative for two different people, Sam-kha and her companion.

A somewhat similar problem faced the early readers of Enuma Elish. In one section the primordial figure Tiamat, who is eventually slain by the divine hero Marduk, is referred to by a very different name, Mother Hubur. Tiamat represents, on one level, the powerful
and chaotic waters of the great Ocean. Mother Hubur appears to represent another, but
different kind of water, the great river Khabur in what is now Syria, which empties
into the Euphrates at Terqa. One is salt water, the other fresh water. The names are
sometimes not read as variations of the type we have seen in Akkadian poetry, where one
line is followed by another, parallel line (or a series of parallel lines) with a synonym
instead of an exact repetition of the term. In the case of Enuma Elish, Tiamat and Mother
Hubur are not used in successive lines but as the beginning and end of an elegant chias-
tic structure.1969

There were many retellings of the Flood story in antiquity, in the Middle Ages, and in the
Early Modern Period, and most of them point back to the earliest written versions. This
is not surprising. The biblical Flood directly influenced storytellers and commentators in
Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions. It still influences artists as well as writers and,
even more frequently, speakers who give sermons on the topic. It is fairly easy to see the
stories that reflect the Atrahasis-Gilgamesh-Genesis tradition, since all three version use
the familiar narrative design where episodes are narrated in chronological order.

The cases of the harimtu Shamhat and Tiamat/Mother Hubur in some ways complicate
the chronological scheme. Poetic variation, especially when the parallels happen at a
distance, as it does in elaborate chiasitic patterns, can retard and sometimes confuse the
straightforward narrative development.

Atrahasis Tablet III, Gilgamesh Tablet 11, and Genesis together include the major
mythemes of the Flood story in chiasitic fashion. The presence or absence of a mytheme
in any version can provide a basis for interpreting one differently than another.

Schematically, then, the major mythemes are:

The Old Order
   Context (no death; long life; overpopulation and the like)
   Cause: who or what is responsible (Enlil, humans, Powers Above, archons)
   Who or what opposes the order (Enki, Ea, Sophia)

Human Agency (survivors like Atrahasis, Ziusudra, Utnapishtim, Noah, Norea, Shem)
   Other Survivors (wives, sons, sons’ wives, pilots, animals, seeds)

   Command to Build a Boat: how is the order given, and by whom?
      Plans for Construction
      Constructing the Boat: who is involved?

   The Flood Begins: who/what brings about the Flood?
      Entering the Ark
      Storm above and Waters below
      Waters rise
      Suffering and Destruction
Repentance or Recollection (Nintu/Mami, Ishtar, God, Sophia)

The Flood Recedes
- Sunlight
- Birds
- Opening the Ark and Exit
- Sacrifice: what kind? By whom?

Location of the Boat’s Landing

Blessing of the Survivors: By whom? What blessing? Repentance?

The New Order: Change in the Universe
- Ethical and Legal Principles
- Life Precious but Limited for Humans

**Versions of the Flood: The Ancient World**

We begin with Mesopotamian versions and move to those stories and commentary influenced by the biblical Flood story.

**The Sumerian Flood Story**

A version of the Flood story in Sumerian has survived, but barely. Five fragments of the story from Nippur are reasonably complete in the upper parts of the tablet, but are now missing thirty or more lines at the bottom of each column. Enough of the story remains, though, to allow a preliminary comparison and contrast with the Akkadian versions of the Flood story.

The Nippur text shows a number of “northern” Mesopotamian features, and it is thought to be closer to Berossus’s Babylonian summary of the story than to the Akkadian versions. The major deities are involved: An, Enlil, Enki and Ninhursag (the original formula for the Sumerian pantheon), and the Mother Goddess Nintu (Nintur), who may be another name for Ninhursag in this piece. The four major gods fashion “the black-headed people” (the Sumerians) and also many four-legged animals. Kingship descends from heaven, much as it does in *The Sumerian King List*. The first cities are Eridu, given to Nudimmud (Enki), Bad-tibira, Larak, Sippar, and Shuruppak. The Babylonian context of the list is clear from the importance given to Enki’s Eridu and Utu’s Sippar, and possibly Shuruppak, which is given to the Nippur goddess Sud.

The Flood part of the story shows Inanna making a lament for the people. (The motif is mentioned in a single line. It may be related to the fragmentary line before it, which mentions Nintu. Significantly, Enki takes counsel with himself. But he and the other major deities take an oath, so Enki will use deception as he does in *Atrahasis* and *Gilgamesh*. A “northern” feature that appears throughout the brief tale is the emphasis on kingship. Not only has kingship descended from heaven, but the human hero of the piece, Ziusudra (Zi-ud-sura) is a king. (He is also a gudu priest.) While Atrahasis and Utnapishtim are probably keepers of Enki’s temple, the Akkadian version avoid referring
to him as a king. Someone speaks to Ziusudra through a “side-wall.” (The poem says that something appeared, though not a dream.) Another feature is the relative importance of the Sun God Utu. At the end of the flood, of seven days and seven nights (and described in very few lines), Utu comes out, illuminating heaven and earth. Ziusudra drills an opening in the “huge boat” and Utu enters the boat “with his rays.” Ziusudra prostrates himself before Utu. He sacrifices oxen and sheep (unlike Utnapishtim, who sacrifices fragrant plants, not animals).

There is, apparently, a concern that Enki has betrayed the oath he had taken in speaking surreptitiously to Ziusudra, but Enlil is reconciled with Ziusudra, as he is in other versions of the story. Another motif in the Sumerian version is that An is implicated with Enlil in bringing on the Flood. An and Enlil treat Ziusudra kindly, granting him and his wife “life like a god,” bringing down “eternal life” (zi-darî₂) to them. Because he had preserved animals and “the seed of humankind,” An and Enlil settle “king” Ziusudra “in an overseas country, in the land Dilmun, where the sun rises.”

Approximately 39 lines are missing at the end of the story. Very possibly Enki would have a chance, then, to establish a new order, as he does in Atrahasis and Gilgamesh, but there is simply not enough of the column to make that case.

Atrahasis

The Flood story in Gilgamesh 11 contains a passage that is the closest parallel yet discovered to the biblical Flood in Genesis. The Gilgamesh Flood story is almost certainly an addition inserted by the author of the standard version. It has its closest parallel in a version of the story that was carefully dated to the early 2nd millennium BCE, a story known today as Atrahasis. The title is derived from the Noah-figure in the story. Ea himself calls Utnapishtim atra-hasis in Gilgamesh (11.196). We have seen hasîsu before, the kind of “wisdom” associated with the ear (Sumerian geshtu), and especially with Enki/Ea—and Gilgamesh himself. The atra part suggests an “extreme” form of wisdom, an exceptional insight, something beyond common sense or rational thought.

The Flood itself is found in the third of three tablets that make up Atrahasis. Each tablet contains eight columns (unlike Gilgamesh, written on tablets of six columns). It is the culminating episode in an extraordinary story that has the god Enlil try three different times to wipe out humanity. Each time he is thwarted by Enki through his extra-crafty human assistant Atrahasis.

Atrahasis is already mentioned by the end of Tablet I.

Now there was one Atrahasis
Whose ear was open (to) his god Enki.
He would speak with his god
And his god would speak with him. (I.vii)

Enki calls on Atrahasis to subvert the attempt to destroy humanity by plague. Enlil has ordered that humans be wiped out by the shuruppû-disease. Disease will be followed by famine and then the Flood as Enlil is upset by the “noise” (rigmu) of humans as they
rapidly procreate. At each point Enki finds a way to keep humans alive, and at each point Atrahasis helps him. The Flood is, of course, the most devastating of the three destructions ordered by Enlil, and it calls upon the limits of Enki’s and Atrahasis’s “wisdom” to keep humanity alive.

Since Utnapishtim does not provide Gilgamesh with a context for Enlil ordering the Flood, it may be that the Atrahasis version was so well known to Mesopotamian audience that explanations were not needed. Beginning the story as Utnapishtim does has the effect of underscoring Enlil’s arbitrary and capricious command to flood the world. Atrahasis, on the other hand, begins, as the first lines indicate, “When the gods instead of man/ Did the work, bore the loads.” While Anu was king of the gods and Enlil (or Enlil) was (ironically?) a “counselor” and warrior, the gods of “the Above,” the Anunnaki, made the gods of “the Below,” the Igigi do the work. For the Sumerian south especially the work of the gods was obvious enough: digging canals and keeping them clear. The Igigi dig out the Tigris and Euphrates beds and work exhaustively for some 3600 years before they grumble and set fire to their tools. As the “rabble” approaches Enlil’s house, the high gods are warned and meet in council.

Enlil wants a show of strength: take one god among the Igigi and destroy him. Anu tries to explain that the work is indeed too hard. Someone—the Old Babylonian version and two later versions do not make it certain who makes the suggestion—comes up with the scheme to take one of the gods and use him to create another figure to do the work of the gods. The new creation will be humanity. Quite unlike the biblical creation story (or stories), Atrahasis reflects a long-standing Mesopotamian account of the place of humanity in the universe: humans are to do the work of the gods, relieving the gods to a restful and effortless existence. The work is, of course, agriculture and animal husbandry, to provide food for the gods.

The clearest version has Ea as the one who comes up with the plan. The Mother Goddess, called Belet-ili, Nintu, and Mami, is present in all versions. Ea’s plan is to have the Mother Goddess create a mortal being to bear the load of the gods.

In the Old Babylonian versions, Nintu, “the midwife of the gods,” tells the council that it is not proper for her to make the new creature; that belongs to Enki. (One version uses Enki, the other Ea.) If Enki provides the clay, she will do it.

Enki then specifies the process, which involves purification by washing on the first, seventh and fifteenth of the month; then the slaughter of one god. Nintu will mix clay with the flesh and blood of the god. “Then a god and a man/ Will be mixed together in clay.” The assembly gladly accepts the proposal.

The god chosen for slaughter is, significantly, named Geshtu-e, “a god who had intelligence.” (Again, note the geshtu “ear” and “wisdom.”)

The scheme works for some 600 years, when the (over)population troubles Enlil. The rígmu of humanity leads Enlil to order the first slaughter of humanity.
It should be noted that *Atrahasis* takes considerable interest in reproduction and in the relationship between male and female. The ritual by which humanity is created and develops over months—the pattern for human reproduction—is very complicated. Enki and the Mother Goddess act together, he “trodling the clay” and she continually reciting an incantation. Fourteen pieces of clay are put down, seven and seven womb-goddesses produce seven males and seven females. The Mother Goddess then lays out rules for humans. Several lines are lost, but one indicates that “the mother of the baby shall sever herself.”

The emphasis is clearly on the divine plan that involves male and female in the process. What is perhaps surprising is the repetition of a line that says, “A wife and her husband choose each other” (17). Whatever else this may mean, the line suggests parity between man and woman, and that marriage is not merely a matter arranged by the family, especially by patriarchs.

Ishtar is not identified with the Mother Goddess as it appears she is in *Gilgamesh*. While there are gaps in the text, especially in the crucial Tablet III, it does not appear that Ishtar has a particularly important role in the story. She is, however, mentioned in the context of setting up rules for human conduct. Just as the man and the woman are to choose each other, Ishtar “shall rejoice in the wife-husband relationship” (18). A celebration of the marriage is to take place in the father-in-law’s house and last for nine days. Ishtar is to be called Ishhara, the name of the goddess of weddings we have seen in *Gilgamesh* Tablet 2.

Enki and Atrahasis foil Enlil’s commands to destroy humanity by plague and famine. (The description of human suffering in a time of famine is particularly grim.) The great problem is the Flood. By the end of Tablet II Enlil has ordered the Flood and demanded that the gods swear themselves to participate in the flood. Enki wants to know why he should swear the oath. He makes it clear to the assembly that a flood is Enlil’s kind of work, not his.

The final line in Tablet II says, Enlil “performed a bad deed to the people.” It is not entirely clear who is speaking. Some thirty-five lines are missing or broken before that line, but it is most likely Enki accusing Enlil.

The Flood and its consequences take up the whole of Tablet III. Much of it will be familiar from *Gilgamesh*. It is a much longer account than in *Gilgamesh*, but the narrative structure is much the same. The colophon to Tablet III sums up the lines in *Atrahasis* (1245 lines), 390 of which make up Tablet III. Tablet 11 of *Gilgamesh*, on the other hand, has a total of some 328 lines; the Flood itself takes up just under 200 lines.

Still, the overall design is the same. Enki provides Atrahasis with advice through a wall (thus craftily avoiding the oath he has sworn). The advice is much the same as in *Gilgamesh*. Atrahasis speaks to the elders, though he does not say exactly what Enki has told him. The people are conned into building the boat.

In Tablet III.i, Enki gives (in a broken context) Atrahasis instructions for the boat:
“Wall, listen constantly to me!  
Reed hut, make sure you attend to all my words!  
Dismantle the house, build a boat,  
Reject possession, and save living things.”

After a break of three lines, Enki tells Atrahasis,

“Roof it like the Apsu  
So that the Sun cannot see inside it!  
Make upper decks and lower decks.  
The tackle must be very strong,  
The bitumen strong, to give strength.”

The golden lie includes what is given in *Gilgamesh* as Utnapishtim’s very ambiguous words he is to use with the people: “I shall make rain fall on you here,/ A wealth of birds, a hamper (?) of fish.” Atrahasis’s speech to the people does not contain those lines, but it does include the motif that Atrahasis’s god is out of favor with the god of the people, that is, Enlil; and that Atrahasis has been driven out of his house. He cannot set his foot on Enlil’s territory, and it appears that he tells the people he must go down to the Apsu. The lines seem to lack some of the ambiguity we find in the parallel passage in *Gilgamesh*, but it has something of its deceptive quality.

At the beginning of III.ii, it appears that the elders, carpenter, reed worker, a child, and even the poor helped to build the ark. Enki had given him the clever speech to involve the community, and the people ate and drank when the job was completed. *Atrahasis* includes two intriguing details. As the people feasted, Atrahasis himself was very agitated.

They were eating, they were drinking.  
But he went in and out,  
Could not stay still or rest on his haunches,  
His heart was breaking and he was vomiting bile.

All of column ii is devoted to preparations for the Flood.

The Flood itself is narrated in III.iii. At the change in the weather, the door of the boat is mentioned.

Adad bellowed from the clouds.  
When (?) he (Atrahasis) heart his noise,  
Bitumen was brought and he sealed his door.  
While he was closing up his door  
Adad kept bellowing from the clouds.

The Flood is so terrifying that the midwife of the gods, “wise Mami” (Nintu) wails and repents her decision in the assembly. The lament continues in III.iv. (Details of the end of the flood are missing.)
In *Gilgamesh* Tablet 11, as we have seen, in the midst of the storm, the gods lament their participation in the decision to bring the Flood. A chiastic pattern has the gods generally, then the Great Goddess (identified with Ishtar) specifically, then the Anunnaki gods collectively responding to the event. This comes at the center of the narrative, and the repentance of the Great Goddess is the center of the chiastic structure. (The large chiastic structure of the Flood in Genesis has God “remembering” Noah and the animals, after which the Flood subsides.)

In *Gilgamesh* the Flood rises, then after the gods lament, the Flood recedes. In *Atrahasis* the Mother Goddess is also the center of the narrative. The lament is much longer than in *Gilgamesh*. The gods are “parched and famished” when Nintu/Mami asks herself how she could have ordered such destruction in the Assembly of the Gods. Enlil gave a “wicked order.” Anu, too, comes in for criticism. It was his order that the gods obeyed. She describes the horrible situation of her offspring. As in *Gilgamesh*, the image of dragonflies is used. She imagines the people “clogging the river like dragonflies.” She keeps weeping for them.

She wept, she gave vent to her feelings.
Nintu wept and fueled her passions.
The gods wept with her for the country.
She was sated with grief, she longed for beer (in vain).

The Flood continues for seven days and seven nights.

There is a large gap at the end of III.iv. When III.v opens, Atrahasis is making an offering. The gods smell the fragrance. The gods “like flies” consume the offering. Once again the Mother Goddess accuses Enlil and other gods—but Enlil in particular. Nintu specifically mentions a “smoke offering.” She promises never to forget what has happened and raises a symbol in the form of a lapis lazuli necklace in the form of flies.

Enlil and Enki exchange angry words, with Enki taking credit for defying the powerful Enlil. “I made sure life was preserved.”

Much of Enki’s speech is, alas, missing. A line that also appears in *Gilgamesh* is Enki’s principle, “Exact your punishment from the sinner.”

Enlil’s response is not perhaps as satisfying as his acceptance of guilt that leads, in *Gilgamesh*, to reconciliation with Ea and the blessing of Utnapishtim and his wife. (There is no evidence in the extant materials that Atrahasis’s wife is even mentioned, let alone given the important roles the “mate” plays in *Gilgamesh*.)

Enlil’s acceptance of the situation is, however, evident in his request (order?) to Enki to have Nintu join with the other gods in an assembly where the problem caused by the Flood is apparently to be resolved.

Enki, then, presumably speaking in the assembly, addresses the Mother Goddess as one who decrees the destinies of people. Many lines of Enki’s long speech are missing. A third
of the population—as humanity again develops—will one fate; another third will have a
different fate, neither of which is clear.

The lines are broken or missing until the fate of the last third is decreed. That one-third
will include those who will keep the population down.

In addition let there be one-third of the people,
Among the people the woman who gives birth yet does
Not give birth (successfully);
Let there be the pashittu-demon among the people,
To snatch the baby from its mother’s lap.
Establish ugbabtu, entu, egisitu-women:
They shall be taboo, and thus control childbirth.”

The last third is mentioned at the beginning of III.vii. The final 26 lines of that column
are missing. Some eight lines are missing at the beginning of III.viii.

Tablet III.viii ends with, apparently, Enki still speaking. If this is the case, we have an
ending much as in other Enki contest myths, where Enki “wins” or “loses” the contest but
where he is reconciled with his opponent. He speaks of the Flood and of a man surviving
the catastrophe. He is certainly addressing Enlil (ironically?) as the counselor of the gods
and admitting that he, Enki, created conflict when Enlil ordered the Flood. But the final
lines of Atrahasis speak of “this song,” which the Igigi will listen to and all the people will
learn of the greatness of Enlil.1983

Altogether, Enki’s turru might have extended to eighty six lines.

Tablet III.viii includes the colophon that mentions the tablet was written by a certain Nur-
Aya, “junior scribe,” in a year when Ammisaduqa was king.

**Berossus, Babyloniaca**

A Chaldean priest in the service of the chief god of Babylon Marduk, Berossus provided a
summary of the Flood story in Greek early in the Hellenistic period. According to
Berossus, Cronus—using the name of a Greek god for the Mesopotamian Ea1984—appeared
in a dream to a certain Xisouthros and revealed that on a certain day of a certain month
humankind would be destroyed by a flood.1985 Since much of Berossus is known to us
second hand from other sources, it is remarkable how much his Flood account points back
to the Sumerian Flood story and how much of it reflects a specifically Babylonian
ideological orientation.

Xisouthros (a version of Ziusudra) is ordered by Cronus “to bury the beginnings and the
middles and the end of all writings in Sippar, the City of the Sun.” Sippar (now often
called Zimbir) is, recall, the “northern” replacement of the holy city of Nippur for the
Babylonians. Berossus ends his account by having the writings dug up in Sippar and then
transferred to Babylon itself. One could hardly find a version less amenable to Uruk.
The dream tells Xisouthros to build a boat, place “his kin and his closest friends” in it, with food and drink—and with animals. “He was to load into it also the winged and four-footed creatures and to make everything ready to sail.”

A very telling remark passes to the West something of the advice Ea gives in earlier accounts to deceive the people. “If asked where he was sailing, he should reply, ‘To the gods to pray for good things for men.’”

Berossus pays little attention to details of the boat itself. It was “five stades in length and two stades in breadth.” Then the Noah-figure took with him his wife, children and closest friends. Stanley Mayer Burstein, who reconstructed and translated the Greek text, calls attention to a very Greek and rather un-Mesopotamian motif added to the account: “straightaway the things from the god came upon him.”

The birds Xisouthros employs to check for dry land take a bit more space in Berossus. When the birds do not return, Xisouthros “tears apart a portion of the seams” and disembarks with “his wife and his daughter and the pilot.”

Xisouthros then, “after performing obeisance to the earth and setting up an altar and sacrificing to the gods, he and those who had disembarked from the ship with him disappeared.” When the others on board find them missing, they disembark and search for Xisouthros. They could not see him, but “a voice from the sky ordered them to be reverent. Because of his piety, he had gone to live with the gods; and his wife and the pilot were to share the same honor.”

It is at this point that the voice from the sky tells the survivors to dig up the writings in Sippar “and distribute them” to humankind. When they do that, Berossus says, they returned to found anew Babylon, found many other cities, and rebuild shrines.

Berossus includes in his account a number of interesting details. The boat came down in Armenia, from which the survivors “proceeded to Babylon on foot.” He notes that the ship remains in “the mountains of the Korduaions of Armenia,” and that people still scrape off bitumen and use them as talismans.

The account in Berossus, then, largely follows the chronological narrative of his sources, but with a number of interesting asides that relate the Eastern material to his Greek readers.

He tells us little about the boat itself. A few details are given: that the dimensions are five to two length and breadth; that a portion of “seams” was torn apart in order to allow the Noah-figure to see outside the boat. The tearing of the seam comes after he had already released birds three different times.

Berossus tells that the blessing given the Noah-figure and his wife (and pilot) involved translating them into life with the gods. The motif is highlighted in Berossus, given greater length and depth. The transformation of the humans—their becoming invisible, the voice in the sky—is somewhat closer to Greek traditions, e.g., Oedipus in Sophocles’s *Oedipus at Colonus*, than to Mesopotamian accounts of the flood.
As, reportedly, a priest of Marduk in Babylon, Berossus displays a thoroughgoing respect here for Babylonian, as opposed to Sumerian (especially Urukean), traditions. Bel Marduk is implicitly assimilated to Zeus for the Greek audience. (Cronus, father of Zeus, is assimilated to Enki or Ea.) There is no hint of a conflict between Marduk and Ea, which makes sense in light of the Sumerian tradition that emphasized the relationship between Enki and Asalluhi, which Babylon claimed as its ideological source for the overlordship of the “Good Son” Marduk. Since Mesopotamian Flood stories usually emphasize the conflict between Enlil, the King of the Gods who ordered the destruction of humans, and Enki, the savior, Berossus appears to be taking the line already seen in the “Creation Epic,” Enuma Elish, where Marduk of Babylon has replaced Enlil as King of the Gods. But Marduk is not blamed here, as Enlil is elsewhere, for the flood. Indeed, no reason is given for the flood.

The theology of Babylon’s Marduk is also shown in the two sites that are mentioned. Instead of Shuruppak, the city of the Noah-figure in other versions of the story, the northern city of Sippar is highlighted. Sippar is the City of the Sun because its main deity was the sun god Shamash. Sippar and Babylon were closely connected politically from the Old Babylonian period on. Since the all writings were to be buried in Sippar, their recovery—and transfer to Babylon—allowed the restoration of civilization itself. Among the “many cities” founded and shrines rebuilt the only one mentioned by name is Babylon. Importantly, this city, the center of empire and ideologically the center of the universe, as Enuma Elish makes clear, is not founded after the flood, but “founded anew,” since it was the original city. Elsewhere Berossus claims that the first king, a certain Aloros, was from Babylon. The Sumerian King List, in contrast, assigns priority to Eridu (or, in a different version, Kish). All of this places Babylon and Marduk at the beginning of history as well as central to the event that Mesopotamia often saw was the transformation of history. But Marduk is nowhere accused of complicity in the flood. The voice from the sky could presumably have been Enki’s, but it is more likely Marduk’s. The tradition indicates that Enlil, who brought about the flood, is reconciled to the survival of humankind, and it is Enlil who then rewards Noah and his wife. For Berossus there would be no reason for Marduk to repent an action in which he was not complicit.

A Classical Instance: Ovid’s Deucalion

Among Flood stories that have survived from Classical times, the lengthy poem by Ovid (43 BCE-17 CE) in his Metamorphoses proved to be the most influential. An earlier version, in Greek, attributed to Apollodorus of Alexandria, provides no clear motivation for Prometheus’s challenge to Zeus’s decision to destroy humanity, but Prometheus does advise the Noah-figure, Deucalion, and his wife, Pyrrha, to construct a chest. And Zeus ultimately accepts the sacrifice of Deucalion and repopulates the earth with Deucalion and Pyrrha tossing stones over their heads. A later version, by Gaius Julius Hyginus, in his Fabula, also referred to Deucalion and Pyrrha. In their loneliness after the Flood they persuaded Jupiter to relent, and they tossed stones, which turned into humans. Both make explicit the pun in Greek where stone is laas and people are laos. Ovid develops the story in much greater detail and in a poetic style that influenced later Western poets.
The Flood story is told, appropriately, in Book I (of fifteen books) of *Metamorphoses*. As such, it fits in the context of Creation, seen as bringing Order out of Chaos, and the creation of humankind. The creation of humans is attributed by Ovid either to the Creator or Prometheus. Why there should be any doubt about it is not stated. But as in Mesopotamian stories some element of the divine is mixed in with earth and rainwater to produce humanity in “the image of the all-governing gods.” The ambiguity may be related to the absence in Ovid of a conflict between Jupiter and Prometheus over the Flood. Ovid follows the creation stories with the Four Ages—Gold, Silver, Bronze and Iron—during which Titans fought against the high gods and humanity became progressively violent. When one is so corrupt and cruel that he serves up humans as food, he is turned into a wolf, and the Father, King of the Gods, demands the destruction of all humans. The gods in council, though “all were grieved at the thought of the destruction of the human race,” agreed with the King of the Gods. (Some shouted approval; others were “silent supporters.”)

The gods were as much concerned that they would have no one to bring incense offerings to them. At this point, as in the biblical text, the King of the Gods guarantees “a new stock of men,” different from the ones who would be destroyed. This assurance, like God’s covenant with Noah before the Flood, reduces the conflict seen in the earlier Greek versions of the Flood. Prometheus, who was considered the son of the Titan Iapetus, largely disappears from Ovid’s account, though *Prometheus’s* son Deucalion preserves something of Prometheus special intelligence. (The relation between Prometheus and Deucalion has some similarities to Ea and Utnapishtim.)

Jupiter first considers destroying humanity by fire, then opts for flood. As a god of the heavens, he brings storm; Neptune, God of the Sea, contributes water from below. A few humans escape the Flood by climbing to higher ground. Those who were not swallowed up by the waters died from lack of food, “overcome by long-continued famine.”

Deucalion is not warned of the Flood by Prometheus in this version. Indeed, he and his wife, Pyrrha, are not mentioned until their “little boat” runs aground on the mountain Parnassus (a mountain like Mashu with twin peaks). The place where the boat comes down is different in different Classical versions.

The sudden appearance in the story of Deucalion and Pyrrha in their little boat initiates one of the more curious innovations in Ovid’s treatment of the Flood. No sooner are they mentioned, but the two humans are identified as the “most upright” and reverent of humanity. Jupiter will be moved by their purity and proper worship of the gods. The moment is akin to God’s remembering Noah. Jupiter then brings about the end of the Flood. The waters withdraw.

What is new and unexpected in this sequence is that Deucalion and Pyrrha pray, not to Jupiter, but to one of the famous Titans, Themis. As Mary M. Innes translates the passage,
When the waters had covered all the rest of the earth, the little boat which carried Deucalion and his wife ran aground here [on Parnassus]. Of all the men who ever lived, Deucalion was the best and the most upright, no woman ever showed more reverence for the gods than Pyrrha, his wife. Their first action was to offer prayers to the Corycian nymphs, to the deities of the mountain, and to Themis, the goddess who foretold the future from its oracular shrine. (37)

It is Jupiter, however, who “saw the earth all covered with standing waters,” and perceived that one man and one woman alone survived, and that they were guiltless. In Ovid’s account, though, it will be Themis and the intelligence of Deucalion that will fulfill Jupiter’s prediction that another human race will emerge. Themis, like other Greek deities who are in many ways personifications of abstractions, is associated with divine justice. She had the ability (like Prometheus, or “Foreknowledge”) to see the future. Themis was credited with building the Oracle at Delphi, and she provided oracles to humans. It is this facet of the divine, not Jupiter’s actions, that bring about the New Order.

When Deucalion and Pyrrha pray “to the god in heaven” and seek help from the “holy oracle,” it is Themis “who pities them and tells them what to do.” They are to throw the bones of their “great mother” behind them. Pyrrha is appalled at the advice and will not obey the goddess, but Deucalion figures it out the oracle. His intuition tells him that the bones of the mother are the stones in the body of earth. They follow the oracle, and the stones turn into humans. In this Ovid is developing the pun on stone/people in the Greek versions of the story.

The result of their actions are figures “like marble images, begun but not yet properly chiselled out, or like unfinished statues….So it comes about that we are a hardy race, well accustomed to toil, giving evidence of the origin from which we sprang.”

If Pyrrha could not figure out the oracle while her husband could, it was not for lack of empathy with the people who had been lost in the Flood. One of the most striking features of Ovid’s version of the story is the increased emphasis on the loss of humanity. Before they pray to the gods, they see only emptiness. Rather than seeing their survival as a blessing, they lament that they could not live without the other. As a famous 18th century CE English translation of the Latin describes their response, there is only weeping.

At length the world was all restor’d to view;
But desolate, and of a sickly hue:
Nature beheld her self, and stood aghast,
A dismal desart, and a silent waste,
which when Deucalion, with a piteous look beheld, he wept, and thus to Pyrrha spoke:
“Oh wife, oh sister, oh of all thy kind
the best, and only creature left behind,
by kindred, love, and now by dangers join’d,
of multitudes, who breath’d the common air,
we two remain; a species in a pair:
the rest the seas have swallow’d; nor have we
ev’n of this wretched life a certainty.
The clouds are still above; and while I speak,
A second deluge o’er our heads may break.
Should I be snatch’d from hence, and thou remain,
Without relief, or partner of thy pain,
How couldst thou such a wretched life sustain?
Should I be left, and thou be lost, the sea
That buried her I lov’d, should bury me.
Or could our father his old arts inspire,
And make me heir of his informing fire,
That so I might abolish’d Man retrieve,
And perish’d people in new souls might live.
But Heav’n is pleas’d, nor ought we to complain,
That we, th’examples of mankind, remain.” (Book I.348-64)

Note that Deucalion thinks of their father, Prometheus, and his “informing fire,” as a way to restore humankind—though it will be Themis who provides the enigmatic key.

Ovid goes on to treat the animals that are generated spontaneously from the burning hot mud. Earth produces countless forms of life, old forms and new ones. She gives birth to the huge Python, who is killed by the archer Apollo. To remember the feat the god established the Pythian games.

Nothing more is said of Deucalion and Pyrrha.

The poetic account of the Flood, then, as elsewhere in Ovid, introduces considerable pathos into the story. We are given the thoughts and words of both Deucalion and Pyrrha. Deucalion’s superior intelligence is probably derived from his father, Prometheus. (Pyrrha is the daughter of Epimetheus, who represents a different form of intelligence, retrospection.)

Nothing specific is given about the boat or its construction. And the poem is silent on the ultimate fate of the Noah-figure and his wife.

Robert Graves points out that besides Apollodorus, Ovid, and Hyginus, the story of Deucalion was told by, Pausanias, the Scholiast on Euripides’s Orestes, Servius on Virgil’s Eclogues; the Scholiast on Pindar’s Olympian Odes, and Plutarch.

**Beyond Genesis: Biblical Flood References**

Debates about dating the written Torah continue to make it difficult to determine when exactly the biblical Flood story was revealed and whether parts (Yahwist and Priestly versions) were revealed at different times. There is little question, though, that unlike references to Moses and the Patriarchs, especially Abraham, which are very numerous throughout the Hebrew Bible and Apocryphal or Deuterocanonical books, very little of Noah and the Flood appears beyond Genesis.
Brief references to Noah occur in the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel and the few others are later. The historical Ezekiel, who was ministering to the people before and well into the Babylonian Exile (from 593 to ca. 563 BCE), associates Noah with two other righteous men, Daniel and Job (Ezekiel 14:14 and 14:20). The passage (14:12-23) in which these references occur warns that God will bring “four deadly acts of judgment” against the faithless. The four acts are repeated in a slightly different sequence: famine, wild animals, the sword, and pestilence. Where *Gilgamesh* refers to wild animals, famine and pestilence (but not the sword), the Flood is not on the list in either case. In *Gilgamesh*, as we have seen, Ea sees these three as ways the gods will keep the population low—instead of the Flood. In Ezekiel, the Flood is only indirectly but obviously connected with Noah. The righteousness of Noah, Daniel and Job would keep them alive but would not allow even their closest family members to survive. The passage explains the “evil” God brought down upon Jerusalem in the destruction of the temple and the exile in Babylon.

The part of Isaiah usually considered Second Isaiah includes a song of God’s assurance to Israel:

> “This is like the days of Noah to me:  
> Just as I swore that the waters of Noah  
> Would never again go over the earth,  
> So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you  
> And will not rebuke you.” (Isaiah 54:9)\textsuperscript{1994}

Second Isaiah is usually dated at just before the fall of Babylon, 539 BCE. Biblical poetry from the period of Exile in Babylon shows more influences of Mesopotamian poetry than do earlier periods. Again the Exile is seen as God’s judgment on a faithless “wife,” Zion, but is one with the “steadfast love” and “covenant of peace” God in his compassion maintains for his people.

1 Chronicles, dated perhaps to the 5\textsuperscript{th} and 4\textsuperscript{th} centuries BCE,\textsuperscript{1995} includes Noah in the long list of names that opens the work (1 Chronicles:1). The list begins with Adam. Noah is mentioned with his sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Psalm 29:10 uses the term for the Flood (*mabbul*) rather than other Hebrew terms for floods and flooding to show God, in the words of *The New Oxford Annotated Bible*, as God of the Storm. The whole of the psalm is directed to God manifested in the thunderstorm, but “the LORD sits enthroned over the flood; the LORD sits enthroned as king forever.”\textsuperscript{1996} That is, God is above the storm, reigning in peace.

The apocryphal book of Sirach, or Ecclesiasticus, is even later than the other references, written in Hellenistic times (ca. 180 BCE). Noah is prominent in the “Praise of Famous Men” catalogued in Sirach 44:1-50:24. After Enoch, Noah is praised as “perfect and righteous.”

> Noah was found perfect and righteous;  
> In the time of wrath he kept the race alive;  
> Therefore a remnant was left on the earth when the flood came.  
> Everlasting covenants were made with him that all flesh should never again
be blotted out by a flood.\textsuperscript{1997} Noah is followed by (much longer) tributes to Abraham, Isaac, Moses and Aaron—and many others.

\textbf{The Flood in Early Jewish Literature}

What is striking about Noah is that the great interest in him we see in modern times is not reflected in early biblical writings. It is true that in the Primeval History (Genesis 1-11) the story of the flood is as prominent as the account of Adam and Eve. Modern scholars like E. A. Speiser have demonstrated the possible influence of Mesopotamia,\textsuperscript{1998} where several versions of the flood story have been found. In Mesopotamia the Flood (Sumerian \textit{amaru}, Akkadian \textit{abubu}) is a frequently encountered metaphor for the ultimate of wrath, aggressiveness and destructiveness.\textsuperscript{1999} There the Flood is personified and mythologized as the ultimate monster.

In sharp contrast to its frequency in Mesopotamian writings, outside Genesis the Flood as a cosmic event is rarely encountered, and the name Noah is also seldom mentioned. In fact the names now recognized by children and by people who may never have read the Bible—Adam, Eve, Cain, Abel and others in the Primeval History—are almost never seen outside Genesis. (Contrast the frequency with which the Patriarchs, Moses, David and Solomon are cited in places other than where their stories are told.) Noah is named almost forty times in Genesis 5-10 and merely 13 times elsewhere in the Bible, including the 8 allusions in the New Testament. Apart from Genesis Noah is mentioned in the prophets Isaiah (54:9, significantly in Second Isaiah) and Ezekiel (14:14, 14:20), and in 1 Chronicles 1:4. All of these would seem to have come from the period of the Babylonian Exile or the Second Temple Period. (Much of the Mesopotamian materials, especially those attributed to the Priestly Source in the Primeval History may have come from the time of the Exile, when, naturally, the Babylonian materials would have been encountered by the exiles.)


It is hard not to conclude that Noah’s Flood was of little interest to biblical authors until the Exile. Its popularity in modern times may come in part from its promise that, for many seekers, actual physical remains of the ark could be found. Or as a cheerful children’s story, with every sort of visual representation and an increased emphasis on the role of Noah’s wife, it continues to gain wide popularity. The “Living Conversation” on Genesis directed by Bill Moyers is somewhat of an anomaly, then. His Chapter IV, which deals with the problematic of the Holocaust among other terrible events in history, is titled “Apocalypse.”\textsuperscript{2000} In that discussion the Flood is tied to the violence of the End Times.
In linking the Flood to the Apocalypse Moyers restored the terrible destructiveness at the heart of the Flood. And he also reconnected the Flood to apocalyptic literature of the Second Temple period, when Noah came into his own.

Noah’s Name, Birth and Early Activities

In her study of Noah’s biography in Early Jewish Literature Devorah Dimant distinguishes three periods in Noah’s life: leading up to the flood; the period of the flood itself; and the aftermath of the flood. The brief references to Noah in Tobit, The Book of Wisdom and Ben Sira’s Wisdom praise him for his righteousness, but add little detail to the flood itself. (The three works, from the Second Temple period, were, of course, not included in the canon of the Hebrew Bible.)

Although the few references are relatively brief, they illustrate the point made often today by literary theorists, that all tellings of a story are retellings. All add some details not found in Genesis that suggest a new or at least different ideological slant from the earlier source. Tobit 4:12, for example, notes that Noah, like Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—“our ancestors”—took wives from their own kindred. Whatever this means in the case of Noah, it certainly is introduced to make a point that was not emphasized until after the Exile: that Jews should “not take a foreign wife outside your father’s tribe, because we are the sons of the prophets.” Similarly, the Book of Wisdom not only credits Wisdom with saving the earth after it was “drowned.” In two lines of poetry Wisdom pilots “the virtuous man,” Noah, “on a paltry piece of wood” (10:4). Why paltry? Other versions of the story emphasize the boat’s sturdy construction. Ben Sira’s “Praise of Israel’s Ancestors” opens with Enoch, with whom Noah becomes increasingly associated in Early Jewish Literature, and Noah before turning to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and others. In four verses Noah is praised as a man “perfectly virtuous” through whom an everlasting covenant is made that living beings will never perish from such a flood. Ben Sira adds that because of Noah a “remnant” was preserved for the earth (44:18), giving the motif an importance it did not have in Genesis.

For the most part Devorah Dimant details the biography of Noah from The Dead Sea Scrolls and the literature dealing with Enoch. Various sources specify the transgressions that brought about the flood: murder, idolatry, and fornication. As a counter to the widespread evil stands the virtuous Noah. The literature even considers his birth miraculous. One story, 2 Enoch, even parallels the birth of Noah with that of an otherwise unknown brother, Nir, who is later renamed Melchizedek.

The Ark and the Flood

The Enochic literature, like The Book of Wisdom, considers the ark a “paltry” piece of wood. Dimant suggests that this motif allows for a striking contrast with the enormity of the waters from above and below that reduce the world to a pre-creation state of chaos and with job of reordering the earth. “The mightiness of the upheaval highlights the fragility of the ark, the miraculous character of the deliverance, and the enormity of the
task of rebuilding a new world” (134). The literature is not as much interested in the construction of the boat, however, as it is the exact chronology of the flood. The stages of the flood move according to a 364-day solar calendar so prized by the Qumran community. And the flood is seen as a “first end” that foreshadows the eschatological era.

The Enoch literature does not seem to deal with the aftermath of the flood, but writings from Qumran do. For our purposes the most significant new emphasis is on Noah as a priest. Jubilees 6:1-3, for example, has the altar and sacrifices following the ceremonies of the Torah. “Acting as a priest, Noah brings sacrifices ‘to atone for the land.’”2005 Noah is seen as figure much like Moses; the Noachide covenant foreshadows Moses on Mt. Sinai. These aspects of Noah’s life clearly veer away from the Mesopotamian stories of the flood toward viewing Noah as one of Israel’s patriarchs, as we have seen in Ben Sira.

The New Testament is, of course, later still. It contains even fewer allusions to Noah and the Flood. Those few references, though, encapsulate some key Christian points of theology—and the interpretation of certain passages in the gospels has taken on greater significance in our times than it had earlier.

Like the Hebrew Bible, which has a variety of terms for “flood” and “flooding,” The New Testament Greek contains references to floods, e.g., that take down a house built on sand (Matthew 7:25,27; Luke 6:48) and Revelation 12:15-16, where an “ancient serpent, who is called the Devil and Satan,” pours water from his mouth to drown a woman who had given birth to a male child. (The earth opens up to swallow the river and saves her.) The flood or river in Revelation is potamos. The flood that destroys the house built on sand is plēmmura.

Translators then prefer “Deluge” for the Flood (kataklu).

From the Old Testament references to the Flood it would appear that the Flood is remembered in times of crisis. This is certainly the case in the only gospel references. Matthew 24:37-38 and Luke 17:26-27 are almost identical, as is often the case with the Synoptic Gospels. In Matthew Jesus leaves the temple and moves to the Mount of Olives where he instructs his disciples. One topic is the End of the Age (24:4-51). The apocalyptic time of the End is likened to the Flood.

“But about the day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”
The passage itself gives little hint of the devastation the coming of the Son of Man will involve, but the frame makes the point in considerable detail. There will be “weeping and gnashing of teeth” (24:51), as in the parable that ends the sequence. Not surprisingly, the reference to one who is taken and the other left has led many to see in the passage a reference to the modern idea of The Rapture.

According to The Jesus Seminar, the saying about Noah in Matthew and Luke derives from Q, the reconstructed sayings source thought to have been used in compiling the gospels. Matthew mentions Noah; Luke adds a reference to the destruction of Sodom. The saying about the two men in the field and the two women grinding at the mill, however, has its source in the Gospel of Thomas (Th 61:1). In contrast to the parallel in the Gospel of Thomas, though, Matthew and Luke give the saying a marked apocalyptic context absent in Thomas. The saying in Thomas reads, “Jesus said, ‘Two will recline on a couch; one will die, one will live.’” The Jesus Seminar suggests that two on a couch likely refers to a dinner party, where one does not expect death to occur. It is a saying about death, but without any apparent apocalyptic meaning.

The Letter to the Hebrews has a brief reference to Noah much like the catalogue of famous men praised in Sirach. Chapter 11 opens with the often-cited definition of “faith,” “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). The famous men are marked by their faith. Abel and Enoch precede Noah on the list. Abraham and his family follow. “By faith Noah, warned by God about events as yet unseen, respected the warning and built an ark to save his household; by this he condemned the world and became an heir to the righteousness that is in accordance with faith” (Hebrews 11:7).

The two letters attributed to Peter contain references to Noah as well. 1 Peter 3:20 compares Noah with the death of Christ. Christ suffered for the sins of all. “He was put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit, in which also he went and made a proclamation to the spirits in prison, who in former times did not obey, when God waited patiently in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were saved through water. And baptism, which this prefigured, now saves you— not as a removal of dirt from the body, but as an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Jesus Christ, who has gone into heaven and is at the right hand of God, with angels, authorities, and powers made subject to him.” In 2 Peter as in Luke, Noah is the righteous man like Lot, saved in the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah (2 Peter 2:5). God did not spare the angels who had sinned. Nor did he spare the ancient world, “when he saved Noah, a herald of righteousness, with seven others, when he brought a flood on a world of the ungodly.”

Noah and Norea

Gnostic texts, which often provide alternative readings of both Old Testament and New Testament stories, are sometimes more Jewish than Christian or more Christian than Jewish—and can be neither. Biblical accounts are not so much expanded as they are challenged. Moses, as the author of the Torah, is sometimes rebuked for errors in his
accounts of events. The most striking innovations in the flood story come not with the exaltation of Noah but with the emergence of the powerful wife. Or rather the re-emergence, perhaps unwittingly, of the wife in Sumerian and Akkadian accounts of the flood.

In the Gnostic “The Hypostasis of the Archons” discovered among the works in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, Norea is the daughter of Eve and the wife of Noah. In that work Noah invites all his family except his wife aboard the ark and even refuses her request to come aboard. For that slight she burns down the ark and Noah is forced to build another to accommodate her. Because she is the center of the story and her survival—she is the one who comes to know the truth—is key to preserving gnosis through human history, “The Hypostasis of the Archons” does not bother to continue the flood narrative beyond this expression of her power.

Patristic writers who considered Gnosticism a dangerous heresy, saw it otherwise.

Irenaeus, writing in opposition to the heresies of a group of Sethian Gnostics called Ophites or Ophians, claimed they believed Norea was the sister of Seth. Norea was born through the providence of a certain Prunikos, and Norea and Seth then became the parents of the rest of humanity.

Another name for Norea is Horaia. The name appears in another Patristic source, and while we can never be sure that the heresy-hunters got their opponents’ stories right, Epiphanius provides a most interesting switch on the Flood. According to Epiphanius, certain Sethian Gnostics saw the “Mother” on high as the one who brought about the flood. It was at the behest of the Mother that Seth was born—as was Horaia, in this instance the wife of Seth. The flood was sent to destroy the wicked race of Cain, and the Mother saw to it that the offspring of Seth would survive. Cain’s offspring managed to survive as well by sneaking Ham onto the ark. That trick explains why the unrighteous live on after the flood.

Early Jewish sources deal extensively with Noah, but do not apparently give Norea anything like the privileged position that the Gnostiics do, even though Norea seems clearly to have derived from Jewish stories about Noah’s wife. She is often identified with Naamah in Genesis 4:22. There she is simply listed as the sister of Tubal-cain, son of Lamech and Zillah.

**Philo on the Flood**

For subtle interpretations of the Genesis Flood story it would be hard to beat Philo Judaeus, or Philo of Alexandria (ca. 20 BCE-50 CE). Philo introduced Greek philosophical thought and methods of allegorical interpretation into the study of the Bible. The Flood story raised profound questions for Philo, and he answered them at considerable length in his *Questions and Answers on Genesis*, II.

Fortunately, his questions and answers follow the narrative sequence of Genesis, which mainly parallels the sequence in *Gilgamesh*. His method is to establish something like
the literal meaning of the text and then to reveal “inner” meanings. To the modern reader this method takes Philo in surprising interpretations, but medieval and Renaissance writers drew heavily on just such methods of interpreting texts.

Many of the “inner” meanings draw on Hellenistic Greek thought, especially in the hierarchical orders of reality that were articulated by Plato and the schools that drew on Platonic thought. The nature of God, and relationship between men and women (and animals), soul and body, and the ethical norms that the Chain of Being require are key issues discussed in Philo’s analysis of the biblical text.

Anthropomorphisms are a major concern for Philo. Very early on he deals with the representation of God as one who thinks about and changes his mind about humans. When God sees the wickedness of humanity, “the LORD was sorry that he had made humankind on the earth, and it grieved him to his heart” (Genesis 6:6). Philo claims first that the people who think God repented “are very wrong to entertain such an idea, since the Deity is unchangeable.”2011 On the other hand the agitation in God’s mind is no indication that God is repenting; rather it is God’s “kind and determinate counsel.” Since Philo, like many of his contemporaries, believed “this earth is a place of misery,” and that humanity, compounded of “soul and body,” is a “slave of the body” from birth to death, it is not surprising that the Deity would “meditate and deliberate on these matters.”

Already this reflects Philo’s hierarchical thinking: God is beyond change; humans should be guided by the soul, not the body that enslaves it; and that the corruptible body, placed in “the terrible situation of the earth, which is the lowest of all places”—it is understandable that wickedness rules rather than virtue on this “lowest” place. Philo’s thinking leads him to a question that probably few today would ask: why should the animals die along with humans in the Flood? His answer, on the literal level, is that animals were made for humans and to act as the servants of humanity. The “inner” meaning, though, is that animals symbolize the “outward sense” of humans that drags the intellect, symbolized by “man,” into corruption.

A similar analysis follows the next biblical verse, where the LORD says he will blot out the humans he had created because he is “sorry” that he made them (6:7). Philo points out that Moses, whom he considers the author of Torah, tells the story as if God were “speaking of some illustrious action of man, but, properly speaking, God does not feel anger.” God is “exempt from, and superior to, all such perturbations of spirit.”2012 Later he adds to this theological principle another, that “God is the cause, not of all things, but only of good things and good men.” Quite unlike the polytheism of Mesopotamian religions, where Enlil can be depicted as feeling emotions and acting in a very human way, as the biblical parallels also depict God, Philo’s monotheism is strongly influenced by Hellenistic philosophical thought about the nature of God.
The Names of God
Philo’s theology leads him to two other insights that would have considerable influence in later ages. The beginning of modern biblical scholarship can be traced to a great extent to the observation in the 17th century that the different names of God, the LORD (covering for the tetragrammaton, YHWH) and God (Elohim), are employed in a systematic way in the Torah. Philo noticed that in Genesis 7:5, where he read LORD God, “the sacred writer has here carefully employed both names, the LORD God, as declaratory of his superior powers of destroying and benefiting.” LORD is the name for God as king and punisher of injustice; God is the name for his beneficent, merciful side. These are aspects of God; Philo would be horrified to think of them as two gods talking to each other.

The hierarchical principle applies here as well. In response to Genesis 8:20, which Philo reads as Noah building an altar to God after the Flood, Philo asks why he built the altar to God and not to the LORD. The answer returns to the two names of the Deity, contrasting attributes.

In passages of beneficence and regeneration, as at the creation of the world, the sacred writer only refers to the beneficent virtue of the Creator, by which he makes everything in its integrity, and he implies this by concealing the royal name of LORD, as one which bears with it supreme authority; therefore now also, since what he is describing is the beginning of the renewed generation of mankind, he borrows for his description the beneficent virtue, which bears the name of God; for he used the kingly attribute, which declares his imperial power, by which he is called LORD, when he was describing the punishment inflicted by the flood.

Image and Logos
Another comment on the nature of the Deity was to have considerable impact on early Christianity. He noticed that in Genesis 9:6 that God, not the LORD, made humankind in his image (tselem in Hebrew). This led Philo to the Greek logos, the Word that became such an important concept in Christian thought about the Son’s relationship to the Father. Philo thinks it was appropriate that God, not the LORD, made humanity after his image.

Very appropriately and without any falsehood was this oracular sentence uttered by God, for no mortal thing could have been formed on the similitude of the supreme Father of the universe, but only after the pattern of the second deity, who is the Word of the supreme Being; since it is fitting that the rational soul of man should bear it the type of the divine Word; since in his first Word God is superior to the most rational possible nature. But he who is superior to the Word holds his rank in a better and most singular pre-eminence, and how could the creature possibly exhibit a likeness of him in himself? Nevertheless he also wished to intimate this fact, that God does rightly and correctly require vengeance, in order to the defense of virtuous and consistent men, because such bear in themselves a familiar acquaintance with his Word, of which the human mind is the similitude and form.
The principle of hierarchy reflected in distinctions between God and the LORD and between the “supreme Being” and the Logos is, not surprisingly, applied to male and female. Noah’s wife virtually disappears in Philo’s lengthy commentaries on the Flood. Her absence in one biblical verse and her presence in another, however, reveal Philo’s thought about what might be called a patriarchal universe. (Note that he refers to the LORD as “Father of the universe.”)

**God Remembers Noah**

In what may be the central and key verse (Genesis 8:1), when God “remembers” (zakar) Noah, Philo is less interested in the anthropomorphism of the deity’s “remembering” than in whom God remembered. He noted that God remembered Noah and the animals, both wild and domesticated, in the ark. Why, Philo asks, is there no mention of Noah’s wife and family? The short answer is that, for Philo, there is no need to mention them. That is, there is no need to mention more than one, because by naming Noah the Bible is mentioning the whole family. There is, however, need to explain why “one” is sufficient to account for “many.” This familiar Hellenistic motif is explained in terms of the father maintaining harmony in the family.

By naming Noah he, in effect, names all those who were with him of his family, for when husband, and wife, and children, and relations are all agitated by discord, then it is no longer possible for such to be called one family, but instead of being one they are many; but when harmony exists then one family is exhibited by one superior of the house, and all are seen to depend upon that one, like the branches of a tree which shoot out from it, or the fruit upon a vine branch which does not fall off from it.

The rule of the universe extends through all orders of being and explains ethical norms and cultural practices. The most instructive comment is Philo’s on Genesis 8:13 and 8:18, when the family enters and later exits the ark. Philo asks why, when they entered the ark, the sequence was Noah, his three sons, Noah’s wife, and then the sons’ three wives—note that the men are named in the text but the women are not named—but in their exit the sequence is different. Then Noah went out with his wife, followed by the sons and their wives.

This is the kind of apparent anomaly that Philo likes to consider. The verses have a literal and an inner meaning. Philo notes that the “sacred writer” gives an “obscure intimation” that sexual activity was inappropriate in the ark. “Propagation of seed” goes away, but the order of egress from the ark implies that the process of generation now continues. “While they are entering, the sons are mentioned together with their father, and the daughters-in-law with their mother-in-law, but when they are going forth the wives are all mated again, the father being accompanied by his wife, and each of his sons also by his wife.” Where the sacred writer was circumspect in this regard, Philo thinks that the writer used “express words” about the commandment that “the men, as they were about to enter the ark,...they should keep themselves with connection with women.” It goes without saying the for Philo the purpose of sexual activity is to propagate the species “in accordance with nature.” And indulging in pleasure while all that destruction is going on
outside the ark would, moreover, not be “decorous.” While in the ark, “to ascend up into
the marriage bed with your wives would be a proof of being devoted to lasciviousness.”

Philo does suggest that it would have been natural for them to be “moved with
compassion” for the dying human race, but “being warm at an unreasonable time, and
burning with an inopportune desire” would be unacceptable. When God relented in his
anger, the couples would apply themselves to procreation. So them men exited the ark
with their wives, not with the other men.

The inner or allegorical meaning of the verses takes up even more space in Philo’s
commentary. He uses the analogy of men in battle. They must keep order so that they
are not “mingled in confusion.” This differentiates the superior male order of intellect
versus the softness and confusion (in the similitude of a deluge) that characterizes the
female.

But with respect to the inner meaning of this fact, we must say this, that when the mind
is about to wash off and cleanse away its sins, then it is fit for male to live with male, that
is to say, for the intellect, the chief part of the man, to be as a father, united to each
separate thought, as a father to his sons, without any admixture of the female race, which
is in accordance with the outward sense.

Men cannot allow “the female race,” that is, “the outward senses,” to flood the intellect
with confusion. “When the ceaseless invasions of lawless counsels are repressed, then the
soul produces virtue and excellent works, as the most fertile portion of the earth, when
dried, produces fruit.”

The LORD God Repents  8:21
After distinguishing between the two aspects of God in his commentary on Genesis 8:20,
where both aspects accepted Noah’s sacrifice, Philo confronts one of the most difficult
verses to explain.

And the LORD God said, repenting him, “I will not again proceed to curse the
earth for the works of man, for the thoughts of the mind of man are toward, and
are diligently and ceaselessly exercise in, wickedness from his youth up; therefore
I will not now proceed to smite all living flesh as I have done at other times.”

Obviously the anthropomorphisms concerned Philo. That God would change his purpose
is “an affection not usual nor akin to the divine virtue.” What appears to suggest that
God intended a creature who would wallow in wickedness from his youth on, then brought
about the Flood—and then said he would not destroy the creature again, although the
same evils still exist in the mind. Philo takes expressions of this sort are “by law,
connected with learning and the utility of instruction rather than with the nature of truth.”
God, not being human, expresses himself in what others would call an accommodated
sense.
Philo is less worried about expressions like “God observed in his mind,” since that indicated a “superior degree of constancy,” while the will in humans is inconsistent and vacillating. Philo claims that humans do not, properly speaking, think with their minds.

But Philo turns the expression, “I will not any more smite all flesh,” to mean essentially what Ea in *Gilgamesh* demanded in the new order. God will not destroy all of humankind, “but only single individuals.” Philo adds that the individuals, “in ever such great numbers,” will “perpetuate unspeakable wickednesses.” And, according to his original design, God will leave no wickedness unpunished. “Indulging his care for the human race on account of his original design, he of necessity fixes destruction as a punishment for sinners.” That extension to an original design of the cosmos goes far beyond the vision offered by Ea in *Gilgamesh*.

**The Ark 6:14-16**

We are not surprised, with this kind of analysis, that the ark itself reveals inner truths as well as literal meanings. In his first question in section II, “What is the preparation of Noah?” (Genesis 6:14), Philo offers an allegorical key to the description of the ark:

If any one should wish to make an examination of the question of that ark of Noah’s on more natural principles, he will find it to have been the preparation of the human body, as we shall see by the examination of each particular respecting it separately.

Among the specifics he discusses is the door in the side of the ark (Genesis 6:16). That door in the side very plainly betokens a human building, which he has becomingly indicated by calling it, “in the side,” by which door all the excrements of dung are cast out. In truth, as Socrates says, whether because he learnt it from Moses or because he was influenced by the facts themselves, the Creator, having due regard to the decency of our body, has placed the exit and passage of the different ducts of the body back out of the reach of the sense, in order that while getting rid of the fetid portions of bile, we might not be disgusted by beholding the full appearance of our excrements. Therefore, he has surrounded that passage by the back and posteriors, which project out like hills, as also the buttocks are made soft for other objects.

In a lengthy discussion of the “lower part of the ark” (Genesis 6:16), Philo develops further the analogy between the ark and the body.

Moreover, the ark itself appears to me to be very fitly compared to the human body: for as nature is exceedingly prolific of living creatures, for that very reason it has prepared an opposite receptacle similar to the earth for the creatures corrupted and destroyed by the flood; for whatever was alive and supported on the earth, the ark now bore within itself in a more general manner, and on that account God ordained it, being borne upon the waters as it was, to be as it were like the earth, a mother and a nurse, and to exhibit the fathers of the subsequent race as if pregnant with it, together with the sun and moon and the remaining multitude of the stars, and all the host of heaven; because men beholding by means of that which was made by art, a comparison and analogy to the human body,
might in that manner be more manifestly taught, for this was the cause of the various disputes among mankind; since there is nothing which has so much contributed to keep man in a servile condition as the essential humors of the body, and the defects which arise in consequence of them, and most especially the vicious pleasures and desires.2023

Regarding the measures of the ark, Philo asks why the ark was raised to a point, rather like an obelisk. His answer relates the ark to the body, seen hierarchically, e.g.,

But again, it was with great wisdom and propriety that God ordained the summit to be completed in one cubit; for the upper part of the ark imitates the unity of the body; the head being forsooth as the citadel of the king, having for its inhabitant the chief of all, the intellect.

But those parts which are below the head are divided into separate portions, as for instance into the hands, and in an especial degree into the lower parts, since the thighs, and legs, and feet are all kept distinct from one another, therefore whoever should wish to understand these matters, on the principle which I have pointed out, will easily comprehend the analogy of the cubits as I have related it.2024

Philo’s interpretations of the Flood in Genesis, both literal and allegorical, came to have a considerable influence on Christianity. Far more passages and details of the Flood are found in his Questions and Answers on Genesis than are cited here. Because Philo combined the Jewish study of the Bible with Hellenistic philosophical and literary analysis, he provided a powerful vehicle for moving Mesopotamian thought into Alexandria and the West. Hellenization reached Uruk centuries after Gilgamesh was composed. It made an impact on, e.g., the gigantic size of the temple and ziggurat dedicated to Anu and Antum, but it apparently had less of an impact in Uruk than in the north, with Babylon and especially Seleucus-on-the-Tigris. Control by the Seleucids did not dislodge Ishtar and her Companions, to whom another large temple was dedicated even while Eanna was maintained.

Even when Philo approaches the thought of more than one god, as when he distinguishes between the LORD and God and between the supreme Being and the Logos, he carefully avoids giving the compassionate and merciful side of the Deity, i.e., Elohim, the Creator, any tinge of the feminine. The wife of Noah is both anonymous and silent; the few times she is mentioned emphasize only her inferiority to Noah and her reproductive capabilities. God’s thinking, remembering, and changing his mind are largely explained away. No Mother Goddess appears in his account of the Flood.

Many of the Hellenistic sources, literary and philosophical, show up again in Gnostic thought. There, however, a similar philosophical basis finds positive and active elements in the very motifs Philo either ignored or explained away.

**Josephus on the Flood**

Josephus (ca. 37–95 CE) provides much less analysis of the Flood than does Philo. His Antiquities of the Jews Book 1, Chapter 3, retells the story in Genesis. The bad conduct
that brings about the Flood is attributed to the offspring of angels and women. Josephus reminds the reader that the sons resembled what the Greeks called giants. Following Genesis (in contrast to the Mesopotamian stories), Josephus calls attention to Noah’s call for the unjust sons to repent. Fear of the men causes Noah to leave the land.

But Noah was very uneasy at what they did; and, being displeased at their conduct, persuaded them to change their dispositions and their acts for the better;—but, seeing that they did not yield to him, but were slaves to their wicked pleasures, he was afraid they would kill him, together with his wife and children, and those they had married; so he departed out of that land.

The age of Noah at the time of the Flood and establishing a date for the Flood interest Josephus. The Flood itself is retold in a few paragraphs. The wicked men were destroyed, and “Noah alone was saved,”

... for God suggested to him the following contrivance and way of escape:—That he should make an ark of four stories high, three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits broad, and thirty cubits high. Accordingly he entered into that ark, and his wife and sons, and their wives; and put into it not only other provisions, to support their wants there, but also send in with the rest of all sort sorts of living creatures, the male and his female, for the preservation of their kinds; and others of them by sevens. Now this ark had firm walls, and a roof, and was braced with cross beams, so that it could not be any way drowned or overborne by the violence of the water; and thus was Noah, with his family, preserved.

The place where the ark landed receives a good bit of attention.

When the rain ceased, the water did but just begin to abate, after one hundred and fifty days (that is, on the seventeenth day of the seventh month) it then ceasing to subside for a little while. After this the ark rested on the top of a certain mountain in Armenia; which, when Noah understood, he opened it; and seeing a small piece of land about it, he continued quiet, and conceived some cheerful hopes of deliverance.

According to Josephus, the Armenians call the place *Apobaterion*, the Place of Descent, and credits Berossus with the information that people were carrying off pieces of the bitumen and use them for amulets. Josephus mentions other “barbarian” writers on the subject, notably Hieronymus the Egyptian, Mnaseas, and Nicolaus of Damascus.

Another topic developed by Josephus is the sacrifice Noah makes after the Flood. Noah is afraid that the drowning of the earth would occur ever year. He also sought permission to rebuild cities, which would allow his offspring to enjoy life as before—including the old age people had attained before the Flood. God’s response is a set of laws, especially prohibiting the shedding of blood, and the “bow,” that is, the rainbow, as a sign that God left off his anger.

The anthropomorphisms that bothered Philo do not elicit comments from Josephus. He was concerned about the great age of humans before the Flood and the shortness of life thereafter. As in his comments about the Place of Descent, Josephus cited a series of
pagan authors who also claimed that the ancients lived a thousand years. Among the authors are Berossus and Manetho, but also Hesiod. Josephus accounts for the longevity of the ancients that they were beloved of God; that their food made them more fit to live such a long life; that they were virtuous; and that they made good use of astronomical and geometrical discoveries (which would have taken centuries to make).  

Jewish and Christian Literature

Jack P. Lewis’s *A Study of the Interpretation of Noah and the Flood in Jewish and Christian Literature*, still a standard source on this popular topic, appeared too early to incorporate the Gnostic texts from *The Nag Hammadi Library*. Lewis does, though, mention the Gnostics, at least what was known from their opponents. The Valentinians connected the thirty cubits of the ark’s height with the thirty aeons in which divinity descended to have contact with the world, and the eight persons who were saved in the ark (Noah, his wife, his three sons and their wives) represented the first eight aeons, the Ogdoad. The Ophites, for their part (again, according to their opponents, but now confirmed by the rediscovered texts), attributed the flood to the Mother, the power of all powers, to destroy corruption in the world. Certain angels frustrated the plan and sneaked a few persons, especially Ham, onto the ark.

Where Lewis is particularly useful is his careful survey of rabbinical and early Christian thinking about the flood. As this has been considered more recently, only a few items need our attention here. Some rabbis were concerned that Noah begot his first son at a much later time of life than had his predecessors. One thought that he did not wish to have children because he saw the wickedness of his generation—and so neglected the command to be fruitful and multiply. According to this view Noah did not marry until 20 years after the first warning that the flood was coming. Another view had it that God had made Noah sterile until very late so that he would not have to build many arks to save his many children.

Noah’s wife receives little interest from the rabbis other than the well-known identification of the wife as Naamah, daughter of Enoch (or sister of Tubal-Cain); and there is some interest in the meaning of her name.

The rabbis were more interested in the ark itself. The door in its side, its chambers, and the levels of the ark were matters of discussion. Early Christian thinkers also speculated about the three levels. Was the lowest level for garbage? For unclean animals? Were unclean animals on the same floor as humans? The rabbis also wondered about the “gopher wood” thought to have been used in the construction of the ark. What sort of caulking was used? (Since the Hebrew word for “ark,” *tebah*, was the same used for Noah’s boat and the vessel used to protect the infant Moses in Exodus 2, as opposed to the “ark”—*aron*—of the covenant, the rabbis thought there would be a difference in the caulking. Where Noah’s would use pitch inside and out, Moses’ ark would have had slime inside to keep both water and the smell of pitch away from the child.)
The raven and the dove sent out from the ark received a great deal of attention from both rabbis and Christian writers. The raven comes in for special denigration. Some rabbis thought that God and Noah both hated the bird, God because it was unclean, and Noah because it posed a risk that, in an accident, a species would be lost. Not only was the raven good for nothing; it showed a lewd interest in the female raven, and it fed on the dead bodies of the flood victims.

The dove, on the other hand, was a very positive figure. A symbol of Israel, which could find no resting-place in exile, the dove would return to the ark.2036

Not surprisingly, Christian writers found important, though often different, symbolism in the raven and the dove. Some followed Philo in seeing the raven as symbolizing folly in the mind, sin, wickedness, even the devil—whatever was expelled by baptism.2037 The raven could be seen as a type of impure men and apostates who were anathematized by the Church. For Augustine and others, the raven represented impure desire.

The dove, on the other hand, came to represent the Holy Spirit, which had descended in the baptism of Jesus. As a symbol of peace, the dove and its olive branch represents the Holy Spirit and the possibility of reconciliation with humankind. Where rabbis had seen the dove as a figure of Israel, Christian writers tended to see it as a figure for the church.2038

**Early Christian Commentary on the Flood**

By the 2nd century CE Christian authors had picked up the kind of allegorical interpretation of scripture Philo had employed. Justin Martyr, for example, argued that Noah was a “figure” of Christ, who regenerated humanity “by water, and faith, and wood” (that is, the mystery of the Cross).2039 He finds this not only in Genesis but in Isaiah, where God is said to have saved humans in the Flood. The number of those saved in the ark, including Noah’s wife, is interpreted by Justin as “a symbol of the eighth day, wherein Christ appeared when He rose from the dead.”

For Christ, being the first-born of every creature, became again the chief of another race regenerated by Himself through water, and faith, and wood...even as Noah was saved by wood when he rode over the waters with his household.2040

Theophilus, on the other hand, argued against the pagans, including Plato, who had given different accounts of the Flood. Those who claimed that there were more than one Flood are “miserable, and very profane and senseless persons.”2041 Theophilus is particularly concerned with those who wrote of Deucalion and Pyrrha and the way they produced “people” by flinging stones behind them. Against the pagan fables Theophilus sets many of the details in Genesis, especially the eight persons (only) who survived the Flood.

Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, found the symbolism in the Bible an argument for accepting four gospels, not just one. Against Marcion, Irenaeus argued that the Gospel of Mark referred to Isaiah on the prophetical spirit coming down from on high to humans, a “winged aspect” of the gospel that revealed, among other things, the “celestial Spirit” that protected the earth with its “wings.” And the Son of God, in the “form of living creatures,”
which are “quadriform,” also descended. The Gospel, then, is quadriform. To clinch his argument, Irenaeus, point to the “four principal (katholikai) covenants given to the human race: one, prior to the deluge, under Adam; the second, that after the deluge, under Noah; the third, the giving of the law, under Moses; the fourth, that which renovates man, and sums up all things in itself by means of the Gospel, raising and bearing men upon its wings into the heavenly kingdom.”

Irenaeus was no friend to the Gnostics, but, as we have seen, he did mention some of their “heretical” beliefs. Until The Nag Hammadi Library was recovered in the 20th century, his summary of Gnostic beliefs was a major source of information about the different groups of Gnostics. The followers of Valentinus and others, for example, recognized the Mother as a member of the Trinity. The Mother was considered also eternal Silence, Grace and Wisdom (Sophia). The Fall of Sophia is a major theme in Gnostic thought. Her repentance, mainly for her attempt to create figures by herself, allowed her to regain her position in the highest heavens. Irenaeus passed along a Gnostic view of the Flood that connected Wisdom with Noah. The Creator became angry.

Because they did not worship or honor him as Father and God, he sent forth a flood upon them, that he might destroy them all. But Wisdom opposed him...and Noah and his family were saved in the ark by means of the sprinkling of the light that proceeded from her, and through it the world was again filled with humankind.

Irenaeus identifies the Creator, in this case, as Ialdabaoth. The name is a corruption of the God of Genesis. In Gnostic thought he is creator only of the lower, material world, the chief Archon who, among other evil activities, attempts to create forms by himself and rape the goddess and the humans like Eve and Norea who keep gnosis from being lost in the world.

Later (Nicene and Post-Nicene) commentators made occasional references to the righteous Noah, but the Flood was not a major theme for those writers. The one who arguably influenced Western Christianity more than the other Fathers, Augustine, though, returned to the allegorical method of interpretation. The method, elaborated in medieval and Renaissance times, came to involve as many as four levels of meaning, as it does, e.g., in Dante. Augustine saw Noah’s ark, with his family and animals, as “certainly a figure of the city of God sojourning in this world; that is to say, of the church, which is rescued by the wood on which hung the Mediator of God and men, and man Christ Jesus.” Further, the ark itself reveals complex symbolism.

For even its very dimensions, in length, breadth, and height, represent the human body in which He came, as it had been foretold. For the length of the human body, from the crown of the head to sole of the foot, is six times its breadth from side to side, and ten times its depth of thickness, measuring from back to front....And therefore the ark was made 300 cubits in length, 50 in breadth, and 30 in height. And its having a door made in the side of it certainly signified the wound which was made when the side of the Crucified was pierced with the spear; for by this those who come to Him enter; for thence flowed the sacraments by which those who believe are initiated.
Augustine continues to interpret the details of the ark allegorically, in an attempt to read
the text better than did Faustus the Manichaean, “who denies that there is anything
prophesied of Christ in the Hebrew books.” Among the details, Augustine considers
the three stories of the ark. One possibility is that the two stories represent Jews and
Gentiles (circumcised and uncircumcised), and three representing the nations
replenished from the three sons of Noah. The three stories can also mean the “three
graces” of faith, hope, and charity. Even better, the three stories can represent the “three
harvests” in the gospel, i.e., “chaste marriage dwelling in the ground floor, chaste
widowhood in the upper, and chaste virginity in the top story.” Note that he does not
insist on one (only those better than Faustus’s), and “any better interpretation may be
given, so long as the reference to this city is maintained” and that different explanations
“must all agree with the one harmonious catholic faith.”

Gnostics on the Flood
Noah, Norea and the Flood do not appear all that often in the collection of Gnostic texts
known today as The Nag Hammadi Library, but the collection does include the most
stunning reversals of the biblical tradition. Rather than simply comment on the biblical
texts, the Gnostics retold the accounts in a way that, in many cases, directly challenged
the Hebrew Bible, Moses (considered as author) included. In retellings of the Flood
especially, God is recast as the evil creator of the material world, the Chief Archon who is
closer to Mesopotamia’s Enlil than to the biblical account of the LORD God. (Unlike Enlil,
the Chief Archon does not repent.) Noah himself is slighted as his wife Norea is shown to
be a key figure in the survival of gnosis in the world.

The Apocalypse of Adam
“The Apocalypse of Adam” is probably the closest of the flood stories in the collection to
the biblical text. The flood is retold by Adam to his son, Seth, who figures prominently in
Second Temple Judaism. The revelation to Seth is particularly important in Gnostic texts,
for the special child of the “heavenly” Eve—as opposed to the tainted “earthly” Eve—and
the human Adam is one of only a few humans who will pass gnosis through human
history. The Gnostic idea that Seth was conceived by the heavenly Eve as the likeness of
the heavenly Adam (Adamas, or Pigeradamis) through the activity of the Mother on high
has at least some contact with the biblical traditions of Eve’s children in Genesis 4 and
5. Mixed in with the creation of Seth is, ironically, the weakness of a rather bumbling
human Adam. When he feels a “sweet desire” for Eve, “the vigor of our eternal knowledge
was destroyed in us, and weakness pursued us. Therefore the days of our life became few.
For I knew that I had come under the authority of death.” The sharp contrast between
heavenly and earthly, spirit and flesh, so basic to Gnostic thought, is carried forward in
history as the distinction between those who know, who possess gnosis, and the other,
lesser beings.

Within this apocalyptic narrative the Flood comes directly after the creation of Seth. God
the almighty sends “rain-showers” to destroy all flesh from the earth. Once his wrath has
ended, god rests, “casts his power upon the waters” and gives power to “his sons and their
wives by means of the ark along with [the animals], whichever he pleased, and the birds 
of [heaven], which he called and released upon the earth.”

Only at this point does god speak to Noah. An allusion to the Greco-Roman myth of 
Deucalion points to the influence of Hellenism on the text.

And God will say to 
Noah—whom the generations will call Deucalion--, “Behold, I have protected 
you. In the ark along with your wife and your sons and their wives and their 
animals and the birds of [heaven], which you called [and released upon the 
earth]. Therefore I will give the [earth] to you—you and your sons. In kingly 
 fashion you will rule over it—you and yours sons.

Once Noah and his people are safe, God demands of him an answer to the continued 
existence of corrupt humans, and Noah is forced to explain that they did not come from 
him. His people will then be send to a land where a “holy dwelling-place” will be built for 
them. There they will remain six hundred years “in a knowledge of imperishability,” with 
the angels. Only then will Noah divide the earth among his three sons. “The Apocalypse 
of Adam” strains to accommodate the literal history of humans found in the Bible with 
the overlaying of the persistence of gnosis in the world.

This Gnostic apocalyptic text is interesting in that it appears not to include Christian 
themes.

**The Concept of Our Great Power**

In some ways “The Concept of Our Great Power” (VI,4) is also close to the tradition, even 
the Jewish tradition found in Josephus, for example, of dividing history into epochs. The 
flood brings an end to the first epoch, “aeon of the flesh.” Noah is a pious man who 
preaches piety for 120 years, but no one listened to him. The single detail about the ark 
is that it is made of wood. Noah and his sons are saved. (There is no mention of Noah’s 
wife or the sons’ wives.)

The narrative is difficult to follow, especially in determining who is acting. The one who 
brings about the flood is “the father of the flesh,” but he appears either to be identified 
with the Great Power or one who acts for the Great Power. Where some Gnostic texts 
consider the Old Testament God as a fallen, wicked Demiurge, “the father of the flesh” 
seems to be positive force not only in purifying the world but moving gods, angels, and 
powers (and Noah?) into a permanent place above the destruction. The Gnostic view of 
the “flesh” places it (and therefore its “aeon”) in the lowest plane of existence. The flood 
ends the aeon of the flesh and ushers in a new and higher plane, the “psychic” aeon. The 
third phase of this salvation history is the eternal aeon of the future.

What is not immediately clear is the role Noah plays in the event. He is pious and 
presumably he is the one who preaches for 120 years, but a commentator on the piece, 
Francis E. Williams, reads the ambiguous pronouns in the narrative in such as way that 
the “father of the flesh” not only intervenes in history but actually builds the ark for Noah 
and the others.
The world, of course, had become corrupt. As Frederik Wisse translates the passage, the pronoun referents toggle between the father of the flesh and Noah.2055

For when they had been corrupted and had entered into the flesh, the father of the flesh, the water, avenged himself. For when he had found Noah, who was pious and worthy—and it is the father of the flesh who holds the angels in subjection. And he (i.e., Noah) preached piety for one hundred and twenty years. And no one listened to him. And he made a wooden ark, and whom he had found entered it. And the flood took place. And thus Noah was saved with his sons. For if [indeed] <the> ark had not been meant for man to enter, then the water of the flood would not have come. In this way he intended (and) planned to save <the> gods and the angels, and the powers, the greatness of all of these, and the <nourishment> and the way of life. And he moves them from the aeon (and) nourishes them in the permanent places. And the judgment of the flesh was unleashed. Only the work of the Power stood up.2056

Reference to a revealer appearing in the second, or psychic aeon, clearly points to Christ, though there are no details of the revealer’s life, e.g., that he was crucified. Unlike “The Apocalypse of Adam,” then, “The Concept of Our Great Power” appears to be a Christian, not Jewish apocalyptic, as would be suggested in portraying the Old Testament God as the “father of the flesh.”2057

The Apocryphon of John

“The Apocryphon of John,” like “The Concept of Our Great Power,” is a Christian work, and it is shocking in its explicit challenge to key concepts in the Hebrew Bible. The rewriting of the Flood is but one small example in a thoroughgoing repudiation of the sacred text. The one who brings about the flood is the “chief archon” or ruler of the lower, material world, a lion-faced serpent conceived by the heavenly Sophia without the consent or cooperation of the male, the Father of Everything. While she repents her action, Sophia unwittingly unleashes the power that will wreck havoc upon humankind. The Chief Archon, called Yaldiboath (as we have seen in Irenaeus’s hostile account), begets upon a false image of Eve two sons, Eloim and Yave, two sacred names of God in the Hebrew Bible.

The flood comes about when Yaldiboath himself repents of everything that had come into being through his actions. Rather like the Mesopotamian flood stories but unlike the biblical account, the chief archon (like Enlil) sets about destroying everyone; but a higher power (like Enki), “the greatness of the light of the foreknowledge,” informs Noah of the plan. There is only one detail of the boat and it, significantly, is mentioned only to counter the biblical text. While Genesis does not report what had become a traditional motif by the time “The Apocryphon of John” was written, that Noah tries but fails to reform the “sons of men,” “The Apocryphon of John” credits Noah with some success. “Many other
people from the immovable race” (i.e., Gnostics) followed Noah. Moses, taken of course as the author of Genesis, got it wrong.

But those who were strangers to him did not listen to him. It is not as Moses said, ‘They hid themselves in an ark’ (Genesis 7:7), but they hid themselves in a place, not only Noah but also many other people from the immovable race. They went into a place and hid themselves in a luminous cloud. And he (Noah) recognized his authority, and she who belongs to the light was with him, having shone on them because he had brought darkness upon the whole earth.2058

Those who saw the light, Noah and many others, then, survived the flood. The “she who belongs to the light” would seem to be Noah’s wife (or her sponsor Sophia), though she is not identified as such. “The Apocryphon of John” provides only the single detail about the boat—and there only to indicate that Genesis was mistaken. It was not a boat but a place in the darkness hidden by a luminous cloud. As elsewhere in the dualistic world of Gnostic thought the light struggles with the darkness. Here the darkness is the realm of the biblical Creator. The flesh—matter itself—is corrupt. “The Apocryphon of John” even uses the metaphor familiar from Greek philosophy, where the body is the “prison” of the soul.2059 The savior descends into Hades and the chaos of materiality to rescue the children of the light.

The Hypostasis of the Archons
From its references to Pauline epistles in its opening paragraph “The Hypostasis of the Archons” announces that it is a Gnostic Christian text. It tells of the corrupt archons (rulers) of the world in an esoteric interpretation of Genesis 1-6.2060 The chief archon is the blind, ignorant and arrogant ruler who proclaims, “It is I who am God; there is none [apart from me].”2061 He is named Samael, Sakla, and Yaldabaoth. He will eventually be bound and cast into “Tartaros below the abyss.”2062 His offspring Sabaoth—the names reveal how deeply the biblical stories have been recast—repents and repudiates his father. Like the fallen Sophia, Sabaoth is restored to a celestial fate.

The Flood is retold in the context of Creation, Adam and Eve, Seth—and especially the undefiled sister of Seth, Norea. The most striking changes in the biblical account of the flood comes in a work where the heroic figures, divine and human, are female.

Once Eve, through God, conceives the virgin Norea, “mankind began to multiply and improve.”2063 The purpose of the flood then becomes the destruction of this improving race. The archons in council decide to “obliterate all flesh, from man to beast.”2064 But the Ruler of the Forces, quite like Enki in the Mesopotamian stories, speaks to Noah. Only one feature of the ark is specified: that it be of “some wood that does not rot.” Then trouble begins.

The Ruler of the Forces tells Noah to build the ark and hide in it—with his children, beasts and birds of heaven—and set it upon Mount Sir.2065 He seems to have forgotten Noah’s wife, who is none other than Eve’s daughter Norea. When she approaches the ark, Noah
refuses to admit her! “And when he would not let her, she blew upon the ark and caused it to be consumed by fire.” He learns his lesson and builds a second ark.

“The Hypostasis of the Archons” has no other use for the flood story. The rest of the text focuses entirely on Norea. Gnostic thought considered Noah’s wife to be part of the tradition that revealed *gnosis* through the ages, mainly through females from deities Sophia and Barbelo through Eve and Norea to Mary Magdalene.

No sooner has the flood been mentioned when the rulers try to seduce, then intimidate the pure Norea as they had attempted (unsuccessfully, it turned out) with Eve. For help she cries out to heaven. The great angel Eleleth descends and reveals to her the past involving Pistis Sophia, the arrogant Samael, the fall of the chief ruler, and restoration of Sophia and Sabaoth. He reveals to Norea that she and her offspring “are from the primeval father.” The secret of their high status will only become known when “the true man” appears and teaching humankind about life eternal. The “children of the light” will then be entirely reunited with the father.

**Thought of Norea**

One of the shortest of Gnostic pieces in *The Nag Hammadi* is a densely packed celebration of the Gnostic hero. The hymn in very condensed form includes key biblical themes interpreted in Greek philosophical terms.


It is Norea who [cries out] to them. They [heard], (and) they received her into her place forever. They gave it to her in the Father of Nous, Adamas, as well as the voice of the Holy Ones, in order that she might rest in the ineffable Epinoia, in order that <she> had received, and that <she> might inherit the first mind which <she> had received, and that <she> might rest in the divine Autogenes, and that she (too) might generate herself, just as [she] also has inherited the [living] Logos, and that she might be joined to all of the Imperishable Ones, and [speak] with the mind of the Father.

And [she began] to speak with words of [Life], and <she> remained in the [presence] of the Exalted One, [possessing that] which she had received before the world came into being. [She has] the [great mind] of the Invisible One, [and she gives] glory to <her> Father, [and she] dwells within those who [...] within the Pleroma, [and] she beholds the Pleroma.

There will be days when she will [behold] the Pleroma, and she will not be in deficiency, for she has the four holy helpers who intercede on her behalf with the Father of the All, Adamas. He it is who is within all of the Adams, possessing the thought of Norea who speaks concerning the two names which create a single name.
In his introduction to the “Thought of Norea,” Birger A. Pearson points out the hymnic features—*parallelismus membrorum*, repetition, and balanced structure—are characteristic of Semitic poetry. Although written in Coptic, “Thought of Norea” shows none of the traditional characteristics of Greek poetry, though the hymn is thought to have been translated from the Greek.

Pearson sees a “clear fourfold structure” to the hymn.

--an invocation to a divine triad of Father, Mother and Son, such as is found in Sethian Gnosticism. Father is “primal Mind” and also Adamas. Thought (*ennoia*) is a “primal spiritual Mother.” Son is Mind (*nous*), Logos and Autogenes.

--Norea cries out for deliverance, and this leads to her being restored to the divine world, her proper place (that is, the Pleroma).

--In the Pleroma, Norea has “a saving role to play in propagating ‘words of Life.’”

--Four “holy helpers” assist her in Norea’s own salvation. “Her ‘thought’...is the gnosis that brings about for all of her spiritual progeny ultimate reintegration into the godhead. Thus, in saving others, Norea saves herself.”

Pearson also points out the many names under which Norea is identified in Gnostic literature: Norea, Orea, Noraia, Oraia, Horaia, Nora, Noria, Nuraita, and Nhuraita. He too suggests an association with Jewish *aggadah* referring to a Cainite woman called Naamah (cf. Genesis 4:22). He considers, then, her original name in Greek as *Horaia*, semantically equivalent to Hebrew *Na’amah*.

From ignoring Noah’s wife entirely through a debate about the makeup of the ark—or the very existence of an ark—to making Norea the central figure in the flood story, the Gnostic retellings show a freedom of interpretation that frequently challenges some of the basic ideas in the Hebrew Bible.

**Noah’s Wife**

It is no accident that the “Afterword” to a recent edition of *The Nag Hammadi Library* is more devoted to the effect of Gnosticism on modern Western artists than on scholarship—or philosophy and religion. Critic Harold Bloom claims that Gnosis is a mode of “*antithetical* knowledge, which means of knowledge both negative and evasive, or knowledge not acceptable as such to epistemologists of any school.” Modern poetry—for him, poetry of the Renaissance and later—is much like Gnostic literature, Bloom believes; the “strong poet” lies against time in a threefold freedom: negation, evasion, and extravagance. The modern poet, like the Gnostic, takes a tack different from the mainstream Platonic notion of a positive transmission from text to text; rather, it is a “deliberately perverse misreading, whose purpose is to clear away the precursor so as to open a space for oneself.” So it is not, at least for Bloom, the merely the literariness of Gnostic discourse, the encouragement given to individual Gnostic thinkers to work out an
individualized vision, a refusal to accept another’s version of, e.g., creation or the Adam and Eve or the flood. Bloom emphasizes the anxiety of influence, an aesthetic that is neither mimetic, like mainstream Western thought from the Greeks, nor antimimetic, as one finds in the Jewish tradition from the Bible to Jacques Derrida. Rather, “Gnostic writing, when strong, is strong because it is supermimetic, because it confronts and seeks to overthrow the very strongest of all texts, the Jewish Bible. 

Wisdom had become a major theme in Gilgamesh. As the hero moves through his encounters with a variety of human and divine figures, he acquires wisdom. The insults to Ishtar give way to a search that includes male and female figures offering wisdom. Siduri and Utnapishtim’s wife are important parts of Gilgamesh’s growth. When he returns to Uruk, he returns to the city goddess, Ishtar. Read in a certain way, antithetically, the Gilgamesh of this text has taken something from all the avatars of Ishtar. Siduri certainly is one. The deeply rewritten account of the flood includes another surprising change, hinted at above. The goddess whose “fall” was her failure to protect her offspring when Enlil demanded the flood is no longer the mother-goddess, but Ishtar. Or, rather, Ishtar now absorbs the role of the mother, and her repentance is as much a form of wisdom as one sees elsewhere in the poem.

Thus we come full circle. The passage in Gilgamesh Tablet 3 involving the sage Ninsun is, as we have seen, the closest to a direct influence of Mesopotamian literature upon Greek epic. When Ninsun in Gilgamesh Tablet 3 ascends to the roof, sets out an offering of incense to Shamash, and prays for her son, she is most like the later Penelope when she prays to Athena for the safe return of Telemachus. Gilgamesh provides, in the flood story, the closest Mesopotamian parallel to biblical literature. Perhaps it is an accident, but both episodes are filled with wisdom embodied in the female: Ninsun the interpreter of dreams; Siduri, who shows Gilgamesh the way; Ishtar the failed mother who repents of her rash action; and Noah’s wife, who redoubles Utnapishtim’s attempt to bring wisdom to Gilgamesh. Although the great goddesses of the ancient Near East were increasingly marginalized, and the status of women declined from what it was in Sumerian times, the connection between the female and wisdom was never forgotten. Although the goddess and her followers—Eve, Mary Magdalene, for example—could be seen to “fall,” the Gnostics of late antiquity turned the traditions around and subverted them, transforming the female again into a glorious Sophia.

Hans Jonas accounted for the terrible alienation he read in Gnostic texts as a reflection of an existential situation that has its modern counterpart in the nihilism of Martin Heidegger.

Harold Bloom, noting that connection, saw that Heideggerian thinking fostered Deconstruction and, to overcome the critical dilemma posed by Deconstruction, Bloom suggested that we read modern literature in the anithetical way of the Gnostic Valentinus—in a way that Valentinus would want us to read Gnostic literature.

Jonas’s understanding of ancient literature through modern nihilism and Bloom’s antithetical readings of both modern and ancient literature derived from Valentinian
Excursus on Interpretation

Gnosticism are not required in order to rethink of ancient literature. But their strategies remind us that we can no longer read ancient literature innocently—without, that is, situating ourselves in the process. Jonas and Bloom do not appropriate ancient literature in the way Edith Hamilton did, claiming the Greeks speak to us directly because they possessed a “modern” culture in a sea of oriental barbarism. The advantage of ancient Near Eastern scholarship so far has been the very stubbornness by which the texts have resisted such modern “relevance.” Scholars have been comfortable with such resistance because it protects their impartiality. Now that ancient Near Eastern scholarship has deciphered so much Mesopotamian material, though, the new challenge is to integrate the scholarship, and modern literary theory, into a strategy that both preserves the different cultures of the ancient world, sees connections (even if they are oppositional), and makes it clear that when we descend into the depths of any other culture we do so for a purpose.

Following the various descent motifs through ancient texts, some of them quite familiar to the West, but many of them only recently rediscovered and very difficult of access, is but one way to read the ancient texts antithetically, and to do it purposefully.

Medieval Views: The Mandaeans of Iraq and Iran

According to E. S. Drower the Mandaeans, like the Gnostics with whom they share the belief in a special knowledge (manda) that separates them from others, have stories of creation and the flood that reinforce their beliefs.

A voice calls to Noh, telling him to “Build an ark.” Carpenters who had the expertise built the boat out of cedars of Harran and “female” cedars of Lebanon. Another version has it that the ark was made of sandalwood. As in other versions of the story, exact dimensions are given for the boat. Male and female of each species are led into the boat. The water rises for 42 days and 42 night—waters from the heavens and from the earth.

Noh had put the animals and his family into the ark through a hole in the top, but Sam was not with them. He was in the fields tending his flocks. When the waters rose, he climbed to the top of the ark and was fed daily by Hiwel Ziwa, the savior from above, who descended into the world of darkness.

The ark floated for eleven months and landed on “Mount Qardun.” Noh cursed the crow but blessed the dove. The crow saw a decaying corpse in the water and forgot Noh’s instructions, and so did not return. Then Noh sent out the dove.

The Mandai are the descendents of Noh’s son, Sam, and his wife, Anhar. The Mandaeans explain the other children of Noh as a trick by Ruha (“spirit” or breath), who seduced Noh in the appearance of his wife, Anhuraita. (Elsewhere the wife’s name is Nhuraitha or Nuraitha.) Ruha gave birth to Ham, father of the blacks, Yam, father of white nations and Jews, and Yafet, father of the gypsies.

The special treatment of Sam is important, since he is considered the father of the Mandaeans, while the other children of Noh are less pure. Having Sam on the ark but not
in the ark precludes the possibility that the prohibition against sexual intercourse inside the ark during the Flood would taint the pure Sam.2088

The “age of the world” then was “guarded” by Sam and his wife, Nhuraita (Norea), “from whom the world was again reawakened.”2089 This is the most explicit reference to the important of Norea who, like Shem, preserved *gnosis* through the destruction of the Flood.2090

Ruha, the Spirit and The Holy Spirit (Ruha d-Qudsha), is a complicated figure rather like Sophia and Ishtar, who like Ruha, is assimilated to the planet Venus. Among other Mesopotamian planetary gods the Mandaeans consider Shamish the Sun as Adunai of the biblical tradition; Nbu (Nebu, or Mercury) as Christ; and Nirig (Nergal, or Mars) as the Islamic prophet Muhammad.2091

**Medieval Views: Noah in the Qur’an**

Noah (Nuh in Arabic) is mentioned frequently in the Qur’an. He is mentioned by name in seven suras (chapters or books), and one, #71 of the 114 suras that make up the Qur’an, is known by his name, “Nuh,” and is devoted entirely to his prophetic message. In addition, thirteen more suras mention the People of Noah, those who refused the truth and were destroyed in the Flood. Many of the Qur’anic references point to Noah and the refusal of the People, especially the Chiefs of the People, to accept his message from God. (Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus were “messengers” as well as “prophets.”)

Several suras do, however, provide details about the Flood not found in other parts of the Qur’an. Sura 29, for example, says that Noah lived 1000 years minus 50 and that he was saved with his Companions (29:14). Sura 54 notes that the Ark was “made of broad planks and caulked with palm-fiber” (54:13).2092

The family of Noah is important in that it provided the progeny to repopulate the world. Two anonymous members of the family are singled out: Noah’s wife and a son. In Sura 11 the son refuses Noah’s numerous requests that he join them, but the son takes refuge on a mountain instead, and is destroyed by the Flood. God’s command to end the Flood follows in the next line. A grieving Noah is told by God that his son is not of Noah’s family, for his conduct was unrighteous (11:46). Noah submits to the truth.

Noah’s wife appears in a single verse (Sura 66:10). She and the wife of the prophet Lut (Lot) are two women who betrayed their “righteous Servants,” their husbands. They enter the Fire. Although the wives are not named in the Qur’an itself, Ibn ‘Abbas, the earliest commentator on the Qur’an, identified Noah’s wife as Wahilah. (According to Ibn ‘Abbas, Lot’s wife was Wa’ilah.) Ibn ‘Abbas provides the context for this verse. Allah warned two of the Prophet Muhammad’s wives, Aisha bint Abi Bakr and Hafsa bint Umar, that they had hurt the Prophet by mentioning the names of the wives of the two ancient prophets. Wahilah and Wa’ilah had betrayed their husbands by “opposing them in religion, displaying belief outwardly while hiding their disbelief inwardly, such that they kept their hypocrisy in their hearts.”2093 A later commentator, al-Jalalayn, adds that the wives of
Noah and Lot were disbelievers; Wahilah “used to say to his people that he [Nuh] was a madman.”

The two disbelieving wives are contrasted in the next verses with two exemplary good women: the wife of Pharaoh, who was a believer (and was, according to tradition, tortured and killed by the unbelieving Pharaoh) and gained entrance to the Garden. Ibn ‘Abbas identifies her as Asiyah Bint Muzahim and provides details of the torture the Pharaoh subjected her to. The other woman, the only one mentioned by name, was Mary, “daughter of ’Imran,” and mother of Jesus, who “testified to the truth of her Lord and of His Revelations” and was one of the devout (66:12).

Ibn ‘Abbas makes the further point that the righteous husbands of Wahilah and Wa’ilah could not save the disbelieving wives from the Fire and that the disbelieving Pharaoh could not keep the believing Asiyah from entering the Garden.

The sura devoted entirely to Noah, Sura 71, provides the fullest account of Noah’s attempts to persuade the unbelievers and their refusals to accept the truth. Their greatest transgression was in holding on to their gods. They refused to abandon Wadd, Suwa’, Yaguth, Ya’uq, and Nasr, Sura 71 is the only place in the Qur’an where these false gods are named.

One passage has a faint echo of the motif found in *Gilgamesh*, but where the passage is deliberately ambiguous in *Gilgamesh*—Utnapishtim’s speech to the people to encourage them to help build the boat, though Utnapishtim knows that they will die in the Flood—the passage in the Qur’an is straightforward and yet equally unsettling. The people are told to ask forgiveness of God, for God is “oft-forgiving.”

> “He will send rain to you in abundance; Give you increase in wealth and sons; and bestow on you gardens and bestow on you rivers (of flowing water). What is the matter with you, that you do not place your hope for kindness and long-suffering in Allah?” (71:11-13)

Unlike some versions of the Flood the Qur’anic references emphasize the destructiveness of the Flood and the further suffering of the unbelievers, who will be tormented by the Fire.

**Medieval English Mystery Plays**

**The Chester Noah Play**

While the medieval English mystery play of Noah written by the Wakefield Master may be better known, the Noah play in the Chester Cycle is older, perhaps the oldest of the cycles that have been preserved, and interesting in the way Noah’s wife is presented.

The play of course closely follows the biblical text, but it adds features that had been added through the long tradition of retellings and interpretations.
Because the plays were staged and performed by the guilds of the city, they include details of construction the craftsmen could appreciate. Master mariners and pilots, shipwrights and, in the case of the Chester Cycle, water-drawers and carriers from the river Dee were, appropriately enough, responsible for the Noah pageants.

As in the biblical text, God provides Noah with specifications of the ark. The play adds certain apparently reasonable features. The ship will be made of “trees dry and light,” with “little chambers” and “eating places” in it. The window will be one cubit of length and breadth, and the door will be in the side.

The sons and their wives have more to do (and say) in this play than in, say, the work of the Wakefield Master. They are identified by name. Shem brings his ax; Ham his hatchet; and Japeth a hammer to the building of the ark. The women—including Noah’s wife—also throw themselves into the task. The wife brings timber, while noting that women can do little more: “Women be weak to undergo/Any great travail.” Shem’s wife offers a “good hack-stock,” or chopping block; Ham’s wife goes to gather pitch; and Japeth’s wife gathers chips for a fire—and sets about making dinner for the family.

Noah is careful to tell us how the boat will be built. He joins boars, makes the mast from a tree, and ties cables. “With topcastle and bowsprit,/With cords and ropes I have all meet/To sail forth at the next flood.”

So far there is nothing but cooperation and harmony. The comic turn comes when Noah gestures to the family to board the boat. The wife refuses. At first Noah is reasonable, but then becomes more agitated as the wife refuses to enter. Even after God speaks (“from the clouds”) and orders Noah to bring both clean and unclean animals into the ark, the wife persists in her refusal to board the boat, though she, like the sons and their wives identify the animals as they are brought aboard.

The comedy for which the medieval Noah plays are famous takes an interesting and rather unexpected turn at this point. Noah descends to find the wife chatting with women in the audience. Unlike other versions, she is not simply rebellious. She refuses to enter the vessel without her friends, the “gossips.”

Unless I have my gossips every one,
One foot farther I will not gone;
They shall not drown, by Saint John,
And I may save their life.
They loved me full well, by Christ;
Unless thou wilt have them in thy boat,
Else row forth, Noah, whither thou list,
And get thee a new wife.

By the 14th century, of course, Noah was well known not only as the savior of humankind but as a precursor of the Savior, Jesus Christ. The Chester play makes only a brief reference to the sins of humanity that occasioned God’s wrath; and in this part we are given an indication of the ones who will die—from an unlikely source. Rarely in the
tradition do we see Noah’s wife (or anyone) indicating their love for anyone outside the family.

Noah is unpersuaded. He sends Shem down to talk his mother in. The other sons try as well, but fail. Things get worse. The gossips have only one recourse as the flood waters come: they drink from a jug they pass around. Noah’s wife is still adamant: she will not enter unless all her friends are taken in.

At this point the three sons simply drag their mother aboard. Noah welcomes her—and receives a “lively blow” for his troubles.

Noah is patient in all of this, and the lengthy account of the Flood and its aftermath is almost completely given in his words. God speaks to Noah from the clouds and enters into a dialogue with Noah. The play ends with God’s long speech on the changes that will take place in the new order. The wife has nothing to say in all of this. Her last line was given as she was dragged aboard and whacked Noah. “And have thou that for thy speech!” There is no hint of repentance here, and no concern for her friends, the women who have been lost.

The Wakefield Noah Play

The title of the Wakefield mystery play about Noah, *Processus Noe cum Filiis*, gives a somewhat distorted view of its contents. The three sons of Noah do appear in the pageant. Each one has three lines total. That is three times what their wives get to deliver. Yet, as with all Bible-based versions of the story, the Wakefield “Noah” is about family and the promise of the future, so the title is in some ways justified.

It is even more, though, a play about Noah and his wife. Of the various English mystery plays the Wakefield Cycle has received perhaps the most acclaim among literary critics. Several of the plays were written by the anonymous author known to us as the Wakefield Master. “Noah” is the best known of the Master’s works. Its spirited portrayal of the conflict between Noe and his Uxor is no doubt what has gained the Master his following. The distinctive nine-line stanzas probably helped. Scholars of the genre note the success of his punning. And of his careful design. The play lacks much of the richness of detail in, say, the Chester Cycle, but there is no mistaking its artistry.

Patterns of three abound. The chord is sounded in the opening lines of the play, as Noah provides a lengthy survey of history from Creation through the Fall of the Angels and the Fall of Adam and Eve to his own time. God is addressed as “maker of all that is,/Thre persons withouten nay, oone God in endles blis.” The Trinity is, of course, one of the most common themes in medieval Christian art and literature. But the emphasis on the Trinity is unusual in the Wakefield Cycle as a whole and in the plays of the Wakefield Master in particular. In addition to the Trinity, the three sons and their three wives, one can see the story unfold in three movements. At the center is the conflict between Noah and his wife. They even strike each other three times. At least two levels of meaning are normal in medieval literature, with its penchant for allegory. “Noah” adds a Christological level of meaning that is sustained throughout the play.
Excursus on Interpretation

Like its counterpart in Chester the Wakefield Noah sees the Old Testament from the perspective of the New. Noah is at once a very old and sad fellow, one who looks back to the flawed Adam but also forward, in a way he cannot know, to the New Adam, or Christ. Just as God’s creatures have fallen into deep discord—a major motif in the play—as humans have ceased to recognize the overlordship of God, so the patriarch Noah has to deal with an insubordinate wife. The slapstick fighting between husband and wife no doubt carries the play; but it gives way in the third movement to a harmonious and even loving relationship between husband and wife, one that properly—for medieval thought, at least—respects the patriarchal hierarchy of the family. The restoration of a proper balance in the marriage mirrors the cosmic restoration of love through the mediation of Christ.

Within that framework the Wakefield Master highlights certain parts of the biblical story and downplays or ignores others. The play opens with old but pious Noah, who seems to have a good grasp of the human situation. Six hundred years “liffyd with grete grevance/Allway” (lines 58-59), he sees himself in simple, quite earthy terms.

And now I wax old,
Seke, sory, and cold;
As muk apon mold
I widder away. (lines 60-63)

“Shit upon soil” pretty much describes his life, and his wife will echo Noah’s self-image. God speaks to Noah in equally sad terms. As in Genesis, God says, “I repente full sore that ever maide I man” (line 91) and will therefore destroy “both beest, man, and woman.” This after he laments the loss of respect for his sovereignty. “Man must luf me paramoure/By reson, and repent.” (line 80). “Paramoure” in this instance means passionately. Loving passionately—yet with “reason”—is the lesson the wife must learn.

The design of the ark is given in some detail, as it is in scriptures. Built of “naile and bord,” which of course reflects medieval boat building, it has the dimensions and features derived from Genesis. The ark will have “parloures oone or two/And house of office mo/For beestys that ther must be” (lines 132-35). There will be a window and on the side a door. Packed in with these details is the order that there shall be no fighting in the ark. God’s orders follow the biblical account with only a few differences in emphasis. Much is made of the responsibility Noah will have to maintain the animals with corn, hay and “oder mete.” God ends the first movement by once again identifying himself as “most mighty,” “Oone God in Trinity,” to be loved by humans.

The center presents the physical comedy as the wife comes on the scene. Noah hails his “dere wife,” and she answers with a complaint about him. They have little to eat or drink; he is always fearful of any rumor he hears; and he speaks always of sorrow. She addresses the women in the audience, and he becomes agitated at her grumbling. He is the first to strike. She insults him and strikes him back. After the battle she sits down to spin.

Noah then turns to the onerous task of building the boat. In the Wakefield “Noah” the old man must do it all. Though he complains of his sore back, he carefully builds the ark.
As in the Chester Cycle the ark is fitted with a top and sail, “helm and the castell,” window and door. When he seals it with pitch and tar, he is sure it will endure forever. Then the battle begins anew. The sons agree to enter the ark, but the mother refuses.

She sits and spins. When even the sons’ wives cannot persuade her to enter, she is adamant until the floodwaters rise so that she can no longer sit on dry earth. Quickly she rushes aboard the boat. That does not end the conflict, however. Husband and wife go at each other. She appeals to the women in the audience. He appeals to the men in the audience. Then he attacks her again.

I shall make the[e] still as stone, beginnar of blunder!
I shall bete the[e] bak and bone, and breke all in sonder. (lines 406-407)
The wife groans—and Noah points out that she does it while he is lying under her!

This is the highpoint—or low point—of the slapstick comedy. And no one would miss the moral: at this moment the family is in chaos. The proper hierarchy in the family has been flipped.

At this point the three sons blame both father and mother for their spiteful acts.

The third movement then begins when Noah agrees. He takes the helm. His wife, too, has calmed down. At first she is largely an observer of the scene. As the storm rages, though, he asks her to take the helm while he determines the water’s depth. Symbolically, of course, this illustrates family harmony—within the proper authority.

In a significant addition to the traditions of Flood stories, it is Noah who asks his wife for advice. He wants to know what bird is best to release to see if the flood has indeed drained away. It is the wife who suggests the raven. Noah himself releases the raven and then sends out doves.

The point of this unusual shift becomes clear when Noah points out the difference between raven and dove. We are expected to see the connection between the wife’s counsel and the “irrational” raven. Noah considers the dove both “more gentill” and “trew.”

The ravyn is a-hungrye
Allway.
He is without any reson:
And he find any carion,
As peraventure may be fon,
He will not away.

The dowfe is more gentill. Her trust I untew,
Like unto the turtill, for she is ay trew. (lines 499-506)

Just as he makes the point, the dove returns with the olive branch. The play ends quickly at this point. There is a brief description of the devastation outside the ark. The Wakefield
“Noah” does not detail the sacrifice, covenant, or promises to humanity. Even the rainbow is ignored.

But the Wakefield Master does at the end bring up and resolve the thorny issue of the sinners who have been killed in the flood. Will they never escape their fate? Strikingly, Noah is able to answer the question. Escape? Maybe not, but it may be that grace will admit them to a higher place. The play ends with Noah’s prayer that he and she will be granted a place with the saints and angels. The final line of the play is, “Amen, for charité” (line 558), reinforcing the medieval Christian hope that ultimately love—mercy and caritas—will reign above fear.

An Early Modern View: John Milton on the Flood

Arguably the most learned English poet, John Milton published his famous epic, *Paradise Lost*, in 1674. As the title suggests, Milton’s epic is based on biblical materials, especially the events from Creation through the Fall of Man. Adam and Eve are, not surprisingly, developed at considerable length in the twelve-book epic. Milton was able to read the Bible in Hebrew, Greek and Latin as well as in English. His knowledge of Greek, Latin and modern languages prepared him for what was considered the highest “kind” of poetry, the epic, and the proper structure of the epic had come to be fixed at twelve books. The Flood takes up the better part of Book 11.

While Eve sleeps and receives instruction through dreams, the angel Michael takes Adam to the top of a mountain, where he receives a vision of the future. The narrative device works in a most interesting way when Adam learns of Noah and the Flood.

The historical survey ends what is in essence a commentary on a selection of Old Testament stories with a glancing reference to the return from the Babylonian Exile—and the promise of the coming of Jesus Christ. Comparison of Milton’s treatment of figures in the Hebrew Bible reveals vast differences in emphasis. The Flood covers no fewer than 115 lines of poetry—more if we add Adam’s comments on Michael’s narrative. (And some attention is given to Noah after the Flood.) Abraham, in contrast, receives merely forty lines. Even Moses, who is seen as a “figure” (type) of Christ (11:240-41), rates under a hundred lines. This is a complete reversal of the biblical references. After a brief account of Joshua and David, even Michael seems to tire of the revelations.

The rest
Were long to tell, how many Battels fought,
How many Kings destroyd, and Kingdoms won,
Or how the Sun shall in mid Heaven stand still
A day entire, and Nights due course adjourne,
Mans voice commanding, Sun in Gibeon stand…(12:262-67)

Milton’s version of the Flood shows the influence of his reading the New Testament as well as the Old, Philo, Josephus and Ovid. He spends a good deal of time on the sins of the people that brought about the Flood.
He look’d, and saw the face of things quite chang’d,
The brazen Throat of War had ceast to roar,
All now was turn’d to jollitie and game,
To luxuire and riot, feast and dance,
Marrying or prostituting, as befell,
Rape or Adulterie, where passing faire
Allurd them; thence from Cups to civil Broiles. (11:712-18)

Noah, of course, tries to have them change their ways.

At length a Reverend Sire among them came,
And of thir doings great dislike declar’d,
And testifi’d against thir wayes; hee oft
Frequented thir Assemblies, whereso met,
Triumphs or Festivals, and to them preach’d
Conversion and Repentance, as to Souls
In Prison under Judgements imminant:
But all in vain: which when he saw, he ceas’d
Contending, and remov’d his Tents farr off; (718-27)

The detail draws not only on Genesis, but the Gospel of Luke (17:27) and Josephus. For Milton the Flood echoes the Fall in many respects.

Then from the Mountain hewing Timber tall,
Began to build a Vessel of huge bulk,
Measur’d by Cubit, length, and breadth, and highth,
Smeard round with Pitch, and in the side a dore
Contiv’d, and of provisions laid in large
For Man and Beast: when loe a wonder strange!
Of every Beast, and Bird, and Insect small
Came seavens, and pairs, and entered in, as taught
Thir order: last the Sire, and his three Sons
With thir four Wives; and God made fast the dore. (728-37)

The boat and its occupants derive from the Bible and earlier materials, of course. Milton is more a literalist here than Philo or Augustine, who allegorized many of the details.

The Flood itself owes more to Ovid. Ovid is probably the source of the dark terror that Milton sees in the Flood. Ovid’s Deucalion and Pyrrha, who lament the destruction, may have prompted what is Milton’s most innovative narrative leap in the poem—one that was already anticipated by the Gilgamesh poet, though of course Milton had no direct knowledge of the Mesopotamian material, except perhaps Berossus’s Babyloniaca.

Just as Gilgamesh frames the Flood story with a storyteller and an audience of one, Utnapishtim and Gilgamesh, Milton’s decision to have Michael tell the story to Adam not only strengthens the bond between the teller of divine secrets and the Everyman who can learn from the story, immediately Adam but then Milton’s reader.

Where Milton’s innovation becomes most powerful is in his having Adam respond to the story twice, in much the same way as the Mother Goddess and Ishtar respond in
Mesopotamian stories. As the Flood intensifies, Milton in his own voice—taking seriously his idea that the poet is a prophet--notes Adam’s grieving. Then he lets Adam speak, and Michael respond.

How didst thou grieve, then, Adam, to behold the end of all thy offspring, end so sad, depopulation; thee another Flood, of tears and sorrow a Flood thee also drown’d, and sunk thee as thy sons; till gently reared by th’Angel, on thy feet thou stoodst at last, though comfortless, as when a Father mourns his Children, all in view destroy’d at once. (11:755-62)

Adam’s lament opens with his repentance.

O Visions ill foreseen! Better had I Liv’d ignorant of future, so had borne My part of evil onely, each dayes lot Anough to beare; those now, that were dispent The burd’n of many Ages, on me light At once, by my foreknowledge gaining Birth Abortive, to torment me ere thir being, With thought that they must be. (11.764-71)

Adam continues in this vein, and Michael responds in a longer speech to Adam, in which he explains, among other things, that all humans will turn degenerate and depraved, with one exception, the “Son of light/ in a dark Age.”

Milton thus ignores the central biblical line that God remembered Noah. Instead, he ties Noah’s parental grief with Michael’s stern but hopeful foreknowledge of Christ’s descent into the dark world.

The narrative of the Flood then begins again, almost as if it had not been narrated before. The one just man, Noah, saves himself and his household. Adam is then able to see the ebbing of the waters. Flannagan notes that Milton is careful not to mention the place where the ark came to rest. “If he had done so, the place would have become improperly sacred; humankind would have worshiped the place rather than celebrated the covenant between God and humankind that Milton considered more important.”

The birds are sent out, and Milton largely overlooks the details of Noah’s departure from the ark. “The ancient Sire descends with all his Train” (11:862). Noah sees the rainbow and apparently perceives the covenant in the color symbolism. That is the last of Noah in the story. The rest of Book 11 turns to Adam and the angel.

From deepest woe, Adam’s emotions turn to its opposite. “Whereat the heart of Adam erst so sad/ Greatly rejoic’d, and thus his joy broke forth” (11:868-69). There is nothing, of course, of a repentant god or his triumphant contender. And Noah is not taken away to enjoy a special place in the universe.
Book 11 ends with a joyful Adam, who explains the symbolism of the rainbow, and a final speech by Michael, who adds nuance to Adam’s interpretation.

It need hardly be said that Milton’s Flood story has even less regard for Noah’s wife than does Genesis. Except for the reference to the four wives and three sons, the other humans with Noah are assimilated to the animals on the ark, “all his Train.” Milton is clearly more interested in the theological association between the Old Testament righteous man and the Christ of the New Testament. Just as Adam’s wife sleeps in the valley below Adam, Noah’s wife has no special role to play in the new order.

In having Adam play the role of the participant-observer who recognizes his role in bringing on the Flood and repenting of his actions, then as the one who is able to understand the optimism that finally triumphs over destruction and despair, Milton’s innovative narrative comes full circle to Utnapishtim’s story told to Gilgamesh.

**The Flood as Apocalypse**

Bill Moyers sets up his “Living Conversation,” mentioned earlier, on the biblical Flood with this unsettling series of questions.

We have all heard the cry. “Why did I survive the war and my buddy didn’t?” “Why was I the only one to walk away from the crash?” “Why did cancer take her and not me?” Surviving a catastrophe is a complex and painful destiny. Just look at Noah. His response to the Great Flood in the Book of Genesis is to build an altar and get drunk. In a way we are all the survivors of that ordeal, and it doesn’t make me feel any better knowing that the Author of the Apocalypse was none other than God.2106

Partners to the Living Conversation called, simply, “Apocalypse” (Chapter IV—not the expected traditional final chapter) were Karen Armstrong, Byron E. Calame, Alexander A. Di Lella, Carol Gilligan, Blu Greenberg, Samuel D. Proctor, and Burton L. Visotsky.2107 The conversation partners, all adults, first note the distance between a modern child’s vision of the Flood. One remembered it as story “about rainbows and fun and getting on the Ark and going for a sail with all those animals.” As he rethought the story in Genesis, he was “struck by the awfulness of God destroying the whole earth.” Another takes a traditional Judeo-Christian view that humans are accountable for their actions, and that the aftermath of the Flood was actually quite positive: the Flood fertilized the earth and made it immensely productive. Others join in, bringing in the problem of the origin of evil. A distinctly modern note is sounded by Blu Greenberg, a writer and poet, who finds that God is at first a perfectionist but he learns from the experience. “So the story of Noah is about God growing into the relationship, maturing in it, moving from expectations of perfection in human beings to accepting them as flawed beings.”2108

Soon the conversation comes to include a litany of humankind’s destructive acts: the Crusades, the Inquisition, the Holocaust, the wiping out of Native Americans, enslavement of Africans. Noah himself comes in for his share of criticism. Karen Armstrong worries that, unlike Abraham—who argued with God to save the people of Sodom and Gomorrah—Noah is told to build and ark and save his family. He does not try
to same anybody else. She reminds us that *Schindler’s List* originally carried the title, *Schindler’s Ark*, and she prefers the flawed humanity of an Oskar Schindler to the righteous Noah.\(^{2109}\) Noah’s indifference to others even leads one member of the group to think Noah’s later drunkenness is evidence of his Survivor’s Syndrome: he could not avoid the guilt.

What constitutes Noah’s “righteousness” is a question that occupies much of the conversation. Even the sacrifice he offers after the Flood raises questions for the participants. If one thinks about the Flood the way ones does about the Holocaust, the sacrifice can be seen, as Karen Armstrong does, as “a sort of knee-jerk way in the midst of this carnage, this slaughter, this absolute catastrophe of a total holocaust which had been caused by God—this was not the moment to offer a sacrifice of praise. I don’t like the image of God sniffing the sweet smell of meat. It reminds me too much of those pagan deities in Lucretius, snuffing up the smell of people’s sacrifices and utterly indifferent to human suffering and pain.”\(^{2110}\) Others in the group sense the terror in Noah’s response. While it would be saying too much to claim that the group had reached consensus on any of the weighty questions raised about Noah, the discussion increasingly pointed to Noah as a deeply flawed individual. “Progress” came with the generations after the Flood when Abraham was able to discuss matters with God—to argue with God. And far from demonizing the Other, as the group finds in Noah’s indifference to the rest of humanity, Abraham is quite willing to accept the god of the Canaanites who have been cursed by Noah.\(^{2111}\)

**Mrs. Noah**

One of the last problems discussed is the role of women. Bill Moyers himself opens with a question, “Does it concern you that the women in the story of Noah have no names? We never hear their voices. We don’t know anything about Ms. Noah. They are simply there as passengers on the ship.”\(^{2112}\) One member opines that, “Somebody has to clean up the ark.” The women in the group are, of course, bothered by the patriarchal order, not just for women today but for everyone who reads the Bible. Karen Armstrong reminds the group that Mrs. Noah was comic figure in the medieval play of the Flood. “She is a truly ill-minded woman who refuses to get into the Ark. She’s busy gossiping. They have to drag her on by force. So one of the first appearances of a woman in history is as a figure of fun. The serious people are men.”\(^{2113}\) They even try to assign a name to the anonymous Mrs. Noah.\(^{2114}\)

Nameless in the biblical text, “Mrs. Noah” would, Carol Gilligan thinks, take care to ask about her daughters. (Did they have daughters?) The group reminds us of the medieval mystery play of the Flood, where Mrs. Noah is a gossiping comic figure. The women in the group, however, are not satisfied with a mere negative view of the problem. They see in those few women in Genesis (and Ruth) who do have a voice the ability to change the course of history.\(^{2115}\) As they suggest names for Mrs. Noah, they suggest Miriam, Rachel, Sarah, Rebekah and Noami.
Alexander A. Di Lella, a Franciscan priest and biblical scholar, is the only one who turns from the question that might have lead to Mesopotamian and Gnostic representations of Mrs. Noah in the flood stories to a comparison with Mesopotamian stories, but not with an interest in the women of those stories. Di Lella, who throughout the conversation, championed traditional Judeo-Christian views, uses a Babylonian flood story to contrast an account that has no moral dimension to what he thinks is the key to the biblical flood story: its moral perspective. Of all the discussants Di Lella is the one who asks that we may close attention to what the text says, to the literary genre in which the story is constructed, and the faith one needs to wrestle with the problematics of the text. Although he does not find a problem with Mrs. Noah, he does set the stage for another conversation, one that takes seriously the many problems in the Flood story and may make use of the diverse voices in the ancient world who raised the questions.

**Holy Spirits**

What we call the planet Venus was the astral character of Inanna/Ishtar. From the earliest texts Inanna as the Morning Star and the Evening Star received offerings. Like the Moon, that other bright light in the night sky—Venus is the brightest of the “stars”—Venus has phases. When Venus seemed to disappear from the sky, Urukeans knew it was time for periodic lamentations.

**Spirit/Wisdom/Word**

The Spirit of God “hovering” over the abyss in the second verse of the Torah has to be one of the best-known and most interpreted figures in the Bible. Understanding a universe that is not an ordered cosmos, a kind of pre-universe with darkness covering the tehom, with a middle earth just a formless void, and with a ruach Elohim hovering over the waters, is not easy. The vision nonetheless appears to preserve Mesopotamian notion that the Above (an) split off from the Below (ki), with the earth at the center. The Spirit of God (descending from the Above?) is already active, like a wind or breath or a great bird moving and moving (?) the waters below. That Spirit comes to be conflated with Wisdom (chokmah, Sophia) and even with the Word (logos).

Spirits could be good or evil. Mesopotamia even knew of gods that were good and gods that were evil, suggesting that “good” and “evil” were often distinguished by the effects they had on humans, rather like modern images of viruses. The Spirit of God in Genesis 1:2 as an extension of God is in the main interpreted as a good or “holy” spirit, though it is not so qualified in Genesis. (Contrast an “evil” spirit sent by God in Judges 9:23). Similarly, things and persons could be “holy” in these ancient societies without necessarily having the connotations of “good” and wholly positive.

**“Holy” Spirits**

Readers of *Gilgamesh* are often puzzled that the same root used to identify Ishtar’s dwelling, the Eanna, as “sacred” (qudushi, 1.12) is used of the women who serve Ishtar the way Shamhat the harimtu serves her. They, too, are holy or sacred, qadishtu (3.126), as is the river Ulay in Elam (8.17). The qadishtu is mentioned along with the ēntu (the
feminine form of the priestly en) and kulmashatu. The Semitic root /q-d-sh/ in the Bible generates “prostitutes” as well as “saints.” The verb qadash, for example, can range in meaning from “be defiled” to “be sanctified.” The Qaddish addresses the Holy One. In Akkadian, the questions about the qadishtu are so complicated that Richard A. Henshaw points out that his study of the term in his Male and Female: The Cultic Personnel is the longest section in the very long chapter on “Officiants Who Interpret Sexuality and Fertility.”

The term is one equivalent of the Sumerian nu-gig, and nu-gig is frequently an epithet for Inanna. Ishtar is just as frequently a qadishtu. While the word usually has something to do with sexuality, Henshaw notes that the rituals the qadishtu women perform (along with the male shangû) have nothing obviously to do with sexual activity. They are rituals of purification that involve exalting the deity, taking part in processions, and singing inhu-songs.

The Great Goddess and the women in her service are, then, at the very heart of an understanding of sexuality very different from the Western tradition.


The one image of the Spirit in the Bible that has, however, attracted so much commentary that it was turned in Gnostic thought (at times) into a terrible demoness. At the very opening of Genesis, as “the earth was waste and void, and darkness was upon the face of the Deep,” the ruach of Elohim “moved upon” or “hovered above” the surface of the waters (Genesis 1:2). E. A. Speiser, who notes similarities and differences between Genesis and Mesopotamian thought, especially in Enuma Elish, prefers “an awesome wind sweeping over the waters.” Speiser takes the Hebrew ruach to mean primarily “wind” or “breeze,” and only secondarily “breath” (and then “spirit”). The term is “more concrete than abstract.” As for “sweeping,” Speiser points that the same stem occurs in Deuteronomy 32:11, of eagles in relation to their young. The Ugaritic cognate, Speiser continues, “describes a form of motion as opposed to a state of suspension or rest.”

The imagery of the Spirit as “moving upon,” “hovering above” or “sweeping over” the surface of the Deep rather than resting over the waters has held extraordinary importance for many commentators over the centuries. Recently Jim Myers has explained the relationship between the ruach of Elohim and the verb that describes its motion. It was Martin Luther especially who noted the connection between the ruach here who merachefet over the waters and the only other place in the Hebrew Bible where the word occurs—in Deuteronomy 32:11.

The Holy Spirit of the Mandaeans
One might assume that, because the Holy Spirit for Modern Christianity is always a positive force for good (even for those who find the Holy Spirit in a Blessed Trinity a difficult concept), Holy Spirits are always positive. Among the Mandaeans, though, the
Holy Spirit is anything but positive. The Ruha d’Qudsha, literally “Holy Spirit,” is their chief female demon.\textsuperscript{2124} Because the Mandaeans of modern Iraq and Iran preserve many traces of ancient Mesopotamian thought, their Gnostic take on the Holy Spirit is an interesting combination of Eastern and Western traditions. Ruha d’Qudsha, for example, is, like Inanna/Ishtar, identified with the planet Venus. For the Mandaeans she is the mother of the Seven Planets. While in some traditions this may be positive, for the Gnostics the Seven Planets are the evil archons who rule the lower world. In the Flood story she seduces Noah, tricking him to believe she is his wife, and becomes the mother of all survivors of the Flood except for the Mandaeans themselves.

Along with the Planets, Ruha d’Qudsha plot against both Adam and the Stranger (the alien Savior identified by Christians as Jesus). They propose killing the Stranger and making Adam their follower.

Ruha and the Planets began to forge plans and said, “We will entrap Adam and catch him and detain him with us in the Tibil. When he eats and drinks, we will entrap the world. We will practice embracing in the world and found a community in the world. We will entrap him with horns and flutes, so that he may not break away from us...We will seduce the tribe of life and cut it off with us in the world....Arise, let us make a celebration: arise, let us make a drinking-feast. Let us practice the mysteries of love and seduce the whole world.”\textsuperscript{2125}

The ziggurats of Babylon and Uruk in particular were used as observation towers in antiquity, and these temple towers allowed Mesopotamia to take the lead in astronomical and astrological reckoning. The position of some eighteen zodiacal constellations was recognized by the 1\textsuperscript{st} millennium BCE, and then became associated with the twelve months. Five planets were recognized: Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn.\textsuperscript{2126} The Mandaeans retained versions of the Mesopotamian names (Nbu, Nirig, Kuan, and Libat for Mercury, Mars, Saturn, and especially Venus, which as we have seen was one of the earliest attested manifestations of Inanna as the Morning Star and Evening Star). Shamish is of course a version of the Semitic Sun God, Akkadian Shamash. The Mandaeans went a step farther, however, in identifying these planets/deities with the religions they demonized. Shamish becomes Adunai (the LORD of the Bible); Saturn becomes Moses; Mercury becomes the Anointed One, the Messiah, Mshiha; and Venus is assimilated to Ruha as the Holy Spirit of the Christians. The War God Nergal, or Mars, becomes Muhammad. Thus the Mandaeans dissociated themselves with the archons who ruled the lower world—and the religions they represented. Judaism, Christianity and Islam are equally demonized. Ruha/Venus then is not only a seducer and deceiver. She herself is the daughter of the Lords of Darkness; she generates by herself the serpent-monster ‘Ur, and incestuously with ‘Ur produces the planets. The staff of Moses, so prominent in the many stories about Moses, was given to him by Ruha.\textsuperscript{2127}

We are not surprised, then, that the Mandaeans connect the “Spirit of Holiness” with the Flood, when Ruha in the form of Noah’s wife seduces Noah and gives birth to the three
sons mentioned in the Bible—even as the true son, father of the Mandaeans, had to ride out the Flood on the roof of the ark.

**Other Gnostic Holy Spirits**

Between the Bible, which treats the Spirit, especially the Holy Spirit, in a positive light, and the Mandaeans, which link the Mesopotamian spirits/demons to the religions that oppressed them, the Gnostics of The Nag Hammadi Library offer a middle ground. The Spirit (*pneuma*) enlightens the one who is suddenly able to see the truth; it functions more deeply than *psychic* instruction open to many more humans because they contain “soul” and are capable of understanding ethical norms. (The lowest humans are those so immersed in materiality, in the body, that they cannot even rise to the level of the psychics.)\(^{2128}\) The “Holy Spirit” is frequently encountered in The Nag Hammadi Library, often identical to the Spirit. Complicating matters is the tendency to conflate the Holy Spirit with Sophia and with the Logos. The Spirit is, then, sometimes seen as masculine, sometimes as feminine, and sometimes as an androgynous figure.


Truth came into the midst; all its emanations knew it. They greeted the Father in truth with a perfect power that joins them with the Father. For everyone loves the truth because the truth is the mouth of the Father; his tongue is the Holy Spirit. He who is joined to the truth is joined to the Father’s moth by his tongue, whenever he is to receive the Holy Spirit. This is the manifestation of the Father and his revelation to his aeons.\(^{2129}\)

The Holy Spirit is the “bosom” of the Father as he/she is the “tongue,” and Father, Holy Spirit, and the Word (Jesus) exist in essential unity. True to Gnostic thought, however, the Spirit coexists with the Mother in the Gnostic trinity of Father-Mother-Son.

The Gnostic Savior was, according to the “Apocalypse of Peter,” filled with a Holy Spirit as he laughed while he was being crucified. He laughed because the unenlightened ones who crucified him were mistaken, while the Gnostic understood the situation truly.

And he said to me [Peter], “Be strong, for you are the one to whom these mysteries have been given, to know them through revelation, that he whom they crucified is the first-born, and the home of demons, and the stony vessel (?) in which they dwell, of Elohim, of the cross which is under the Law. But he who stands near him is the living Savior, the first in him, whom they seized and released, who stands joyfully looking at those who did him violence, while they are divided among themselves. Therefore he laughs at their lack of perception, knowing that they are born blind. So then the one susceptible to suffering shall come, since the body is the substitute. But what they released was my incorporeal body. But I am the intellectual Spirit filled with radiant light. He whom you saw coming to me is our intellectual Pleroma, which unites the perfect light with my Holy Spirit.\(^{2130}\)
“The Apocryphon of John” is less acceptable to orthodoxy. The Father’s initial creative act is seen as the Father gazing upon his image, “which he sees in the spring of the [Spirit].”\(^{2131}\) (The spring is “the spring of the water of life.”) He puts his “desire” in his “light-water” and produces a female, Barbelo, which is the image of the “virginal Spirit.” The “virginal Spirit” is considered male in this context. Barbelo is the “womb of everything,” prior to “the Mother-Father, the first Man, the Holy Spirit.”

The Father looks “within Barbelo” and she conceives one “not equal to his greatness,” but the “only-begotten one of the Mother-Father.”

“The Apocryphon of John” then introduces Sophia, “the Sophia of the Epinoia.” With “the reflection of the invisible Spirit” Sophia “conceived a thought” from herself. The Fall of Sophia occurs when she desires to “bring forth a likeness out of herself without the consent of the Spirit—he had not approved—and without her consort and without his consideration.”\(^{2132}\) Without the (male) Spirit, Sophia is able to conceive, but the “thing” that came out of her was “imperfect.” Indeed, it was the terrible First Archon, and “The Apocryphon of John” calls him “Yaltabaoth.” He is also called “Saklas” and “Sanael.” Impious and mad, the First Archon believes, “I am God and there is no other God beside me.” There is no question at this point that the Gnostic text has completely subverted the Hebrew Bible. And the ridicule of the Hebrew tradition is extended to the “seven powers” created by this unholy trinity. The seven powers include Eloaiou, Yao, Sabaoth, Adonin, and Sabbede, all twisted forms of the sacred of the Bible.

The mother hears the blasphemy of her son. “Then the mother began to move to and fro. She became aware of the deficiency when the brightness of her light diminished. And she became dark because her consort had not agreed with her.”\(^{2133}\) She repents. While the mother’s mistake in conceiving a son without her consort may suggest the Mesopotamian tradition of Tiamat’s conceiving monsters after her consort has been killed, the treatment of Barbelo here is unquestionably prompted by Genesis. “The Apocryphon of John” makes it clear that this is a version—the correct version—of the biblical Spirit hovering over the waters. It is the correct version because “Moses” got it wrong. “Do not think it is, as Moses said, ‘above the waters.’ No, but when she had seen the wickedness which had happened, and the theft which her son had committed, she repented.”\(^{2134}\)

When she repents the “virginal Spirit,” also called the Holy Spirit, comes to her. In his consent “the Holy Spirit poured over her” from the “fullness” of the Pleroma. The First Man appears. There is a great deal more in “The Apocryphon of John,” but there is enough in the Fall and Repentance of Sophia to show that the Gnostic text conflates the (female) Spirit of Genesis 1:2 and the (male) Logos of The Gospel of John 1:1. And the story of the Fall of Man is reversed because Sophia, after repenting, rectifies “her deficiency.” As in other Gnostic texts, “Moses” is said to have gotten that story wrong as well. The true transmission of gnostis to humanity is from the repentant Sophia through Eve.\(^{2135}\) Therefore Sophia is called “Life, which is the mother of the living.”

“The Gospel of Philip,” which has gained considerable attention because it exalts both Mary, the mother of Jesus, and Mary Magdalene, also associates the Holy Spirit with
Sophia. And along with baptism, the “mystery of marriage” is celebrated in the most sacred of Gnostic rituals, “the mirrored bridal chamber.” This in the context of the special relationship between Jesus and Mary Magdalene, who appears to be conflated with Wisdom.

In “The Gospel of Philip,” the creation of Adam is seen in terms of both “soul” and “spirit.”

In this way Adam was raised from being a (mere) psychic to one filled with pneuma. He receives the spirit from his “mother,” that is, the Spirit who is identified as Sophia.

“The Apocryphon of John” contains a version of the Flood story, as we have seen. “The Hypostasis of the Archons” also has a Flood story, one that involves Noah’s wife Norea and Sophia. As in “The Gospel of Philip,” Adam is “soul-endowed” but becomes a “living soul” when the Spirit descends and comes to dwell within him. Eve is the “spirit-endowed Woman,” and the serpent in the Garden is “the Female Spiritual Principal.” After the Archons attempt to defile Eve, Eve becomes pregnant from Adam and gives birth to Seth and Norea. Norea is “the virgin whom the Forces did not defile.” Humanity begins to “multiply and improve.”

It is at this point that the Archons take counsel with one another and decide to “obliterate all flesh.” The “Ruler of the Forces,” rather like Enki in the Mesopotamian stories, decides to save Noah, his children and the animals. Norea is excluded in this plan. When she is not allowed to enter the ark, she destroys it by fire. Noah then must build a second ark.

The rest of the Flood story is ignored, as “The Hypostasis of the Archons” turns to the Archons who attempt to lead Norea astray. In their arrogance they threaten Norea. She is saved by the “Holy One, the God of the Entirety,” and the Holy Spirit. The Archons withdraw and a Great Angel, Eleleth, reveals to Norea the story of the Fall of Sophia and her repentance. That story brings “The Hypostasis of the Archons” to an end.

There are many other references to the (Holy) Spirits in The Nag Hammadi Library. The pervasive influence of Platonic emanationism gives all the mythemes of Creation, Fall, Flood, the Descent of the Logos, and the Crucifixion a philosophical complexity that turns every figure into symbols. The Gnostic texts do not hesitate to challenge versions of such stories found in the Hebrew Bible. A persistent theme is the pneuma, the Spirit that dwells in the Gnostics who have become enlightened, pneumatics. Through gnosis they are able to grasp what the merely soul-endowed psychics are usually unable to grasp (and the foul somatics are completely deficient). The Spirit is sometimes seen as male, sometimes as female, and at times androgynous, as the Spirit of Genesis is conflated with Wisdom and with the Logos. Males are paired with females from the beginning. The Gnostic texts tend to emphasize the role of females in the transmission of gnosis, from the Mother, Barbelo, Sophia, Eve, Norea, and the Marys, including Mary Magdalene. On
the other hand, the descent of Sophia into the darkness leads to the Fall as Sophia thinks of conceiving without the consent or assistance of her consort. Her repentance (and in some versions the repentance of her ill-conceived son, the First Archon, identified with the God of the Hebrew Bible) leads to the cycle of Fall and Repentance in human history. Humans are saved through the Spirit, and the female principles are at least as important as the Logos (in the Christian Gnostic texts).

**Questioning Back**

No one is more concerned about the impact of ancient Greek philosophical on Christian theology than those moderns who worry about metaphysics. The call for an “overcoming” metaphysics is still frequently heard. According to theologian Joseph S. O’Leary, thinkers influenced by Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida, whom O’Leary sees as an “acolyte of Heidegger,” see the problem as “onto-theology.”2141 The first part is the systematic pattern of “locating being” in a “logical way,” that is, the way of ontology. The second part is a grounding of the unity of being in a source of being, i.e., theology.2142 Each has its own dangers; together the two strands of traditional Western thought make it difficult to recover (or “uncover”) the kind of thought behind ancient, non-Western texts.

O’Leary’s method of overcoming metaphysics in the recovering of early Christian texts is captured in the title of his book, *Questioning Back: The Overcoming of Metaphysics in Christian Tradition*. “Questioning Back” involves a deconstruction of texts beginning with the most recent and working one’s way back to the earliest texts. After dealing with the inventors of “destruction” and “deconstruction,” O’Leary takes up theologians like Jürgen Moltmann, Wolfhart Pannenberg, David Tracy, and especially Karl Rahner and Karl Barth. They are considered in a chapter titled “Faith in Crisis, Theology in Bonds.”

To many modern students of literature, linking Heidegger’s “deconstruction” with Derrida’s “deconstruction” will seem peculiar, since the latter is usually celebrated for proclaiming that the meaning of texts can never be recovered. This would be an interpretive counterpart to Radical Orthodoxy’s charge of nihilism. O’Leary sees it a little differently.

Deconstruction is not the reduction of meaning to a mere nothingness, or to the empty space lit up by the play of signifiers. It is a wrestling with the metaphysical tradition of meaning which, to use Heidegger’s terms, it appropriates in a more originary way, by bringing to light the play of dissemination which the stable hierarchies of metaphysics occlude.2143

Questioning back is O’Leary’s method of “reading backwards.” After the modern theologians O’Leary reads Martin Luther, Church Fathers, especially Augustine, the Nicene Creed, and finally the Gospel of John. Even Negative Theology he finds captured by metaphysics. By the end he proposes a new reading of the orthodox Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—as “emptiness,” “phenomenality,” and “immediacy.”2144 He ends where I begin here, with Spirit.
He is especially good at reading Augustine. In *Confessions* Augustine describes his illumination at Milan. A key passage associates his experience with, on the one hand, the Gospel of John and, on the other, the discovery of the name of God in Exodus 3:14.

And when I knew you for the first time, you lifted me up that I might see that that which I wished to see indeed had being but that I who wished to see had not being as yet. You struck the weakness of my gaze, shining powerfully on me so that I trembled in love and dread, and I found myself to be far from you in a region of dissimilitude, as if I were hearing your voice from on high: “I am the food of the full-grown: grow and you shall feed on me, nor shall you change me into you as the food of your flesh, but you shall be changed into me.” And I realized that you punished man for wickedness and that you had caused my soul to dry up like a spider’s web. And I said: “Is truth then nothing, since it is not diffused through either finite or infinite space?” And you called from afar: “I am who I am” (Exodus 3:14) and I heard as one hears in the heart, nor was there further room for doubt: I had more easily doubted myself to live than the existence of truth, which is perceived through the consideration of the things that are made. (*Confessions* VII.10)

O’Leary considers the quotation of Exodus 3:14, God’s revelation as “I am who I am,” as the “king-pin” of Augustine’s “ontological interpretation of the contrast between the reality of God and his own weak state.” Augustine’s ontological reading “underlies the food-image.”

After Augustine, O’Leary moves to the Nicene Creed and the Gospel of John. While the Nicene Creed only includes the Holy Spirit in a single line at the end of a series of claims that constitute a perfect blending of “onto” and “theology”—*Et in Spiritum Sanctum*—the Spirit is important to O’Leary’s recovery of a more authentic Trinity. (Recall that the Nicene Creed, like others after it, can be read as a narrative, with a clear beginning, middle and end.)

**The Spirit in John**

The “spirit” in the Gospel of John is not always explicitly the Holy Spirit. O’Leary’s discussion of a Trinity of emptiness, phenomenality, and immediacy concludes with the Spirit. The discussion ends O’Leary’s book, his “questioning back,” and in a sense brings our discussion full circle. Yet O’Leary has relatively little to say about the Spirit. “John’s Gospel teaches us again and again to discard the forms we have grasped as inadequate and instead to let the Spirit guide us into all truth (clearly a never-ending process). The Spirit might be defined as the immediacy of God, that aspect of God which vitally touches our existence.”

O’Leary does cite a few passages from John: 4:23, where “believers are to worship ‘in spirit and truth,’” and “only such worship places no idolatrous blocks against the divine emptiness.” The Spirit has names such as “comforter” and “helper” (14:16). And the form of Jesus is “transcended” as the Spirit is sent to the believers, “yet there is no gnostic disregard for the historical origins of revelation.”
For our purposes several Johannine references to the Spirit point in the direction of a rewriting of the Torah. At the very beginning of the Gospel of John (1:33), John the Baptist testifies to having seen a “spirit coming down like a dove out of the sky, and it hovered over” Jesus. He would not have recognized the one, but he had been told to recognize the one he will call the Lamb of God when the spirit came down and hovered over him. Thus the spirit, like the ruach Elohim of Genesis 1:2 (with none of the Gnostic complications of the figure), points the coming of Christ and his baptism as a new Creation. The spirit that hovers over Christ is identified in the same passage as a “holy spirit” (1:34).

At the very end of the Gospel of John, Jesus is said to have “breathed over” his disciples and identifies it as a “holy spirit” (20:22), through whom they will be able to forgive sins. The episode in which this occurs concludes with Thomas’s recognition that Jesus is his “Lord” and his “God,” a formulation that reminds many interpreters of the formulation, Yahweh (i.e., the LORD) Elohim.2150

One passage where O’Leary finds the “immediacy” of God is in the very episode Heracleon had considered in such an unorthodox way, when Jesus speaks with the Samaritan Woman at the Well. Jesus tells the woman that the time is coming when she—the true believer—will not worship God on the mountain where Samaritans worshiped or in Jerusalem. Rather, she will worship God “in spirit and truth,” without regard to place (4:23).2151 The episode emphasizes, rather than a place of worship, the “living water” that the Samaritan Woman immediately recognizes (4:10).2152 Jesus explains to her that whoever drinks of the water will never be thirsty again.

The woman at the well is the first person in the Gospel of John to recognize Jesus as (possibly) the Messiah. He reveals himself to her after she had connected his declarations about the time coming when the Father would no longer be worshiped in sacred places (4:21-24). She picks up the reference to the Messiah, and he responds with one of many variations in the Gospel of John of the “I Am” formula. “I who am speaking to you…I am he” (4:26). She then proclaims the truth to the community, and many Samaritans become believers because of her testimony.

Similar “I AM” formulas appear in Hellenistic times, including in Gnostic texts. The formulation can be seen in earlier Mesopotamian texts as well. The Sumerian poem, “Enki and Inanna: The Organization of the Earth and Its Cultural Processes,” for example, has in a long litany of divine attributes of Enki, proclamations like, “I am the great storm that breaks over the Great Below: I am the great en of the land.”2153 In “Enki and His Word: A Chant to the Rider of the Waves,” mentioned earlier, the final section, which emphasizes the “word” of Enki—the “word” as “the venom of a lion” and “a floodwave that breeds fear”—several lines contain what appears to be a bilingual pun on the god’s name:

“Eh! Ah! The king’s house! Eh! Ah! The king’s house!”

Possibly it is a blessing on the Sumerian king and his palace. What is interesting is the pun on Enki’s Akkadian name, Ea. A transliteration of the Sumerian text reads:
Excursus on Interpretation

924

e-a é-lugal e-a é-lugal.
The line includes a play on two cuneiform signs that can be used to represent the homophone [ay], e and é. (The acute accent is an Assyriological convention to distinguish different signs for the same sound.) The usual sign for “house” is é, here “house” of the king. What is curious is that the line seems to open with a sigh, e-a, that sounds like the Akkadian name of Enki, Ea (é-a).2154

The name of Ea can contain not only all his powers—the divine me—but also the watery source of his dark wisdom. The Babylonian Enuma Elish, which was so important in Babylonian religion that it was recited during the New Year Festival and urged upon older and younger, the wise and the learned, the father and the son, even the shepherd and herdsman to repeat the story,2155 concludes with a release of the spirit of Father Ea into the Son Marduk. The poem ends with the Igigi gods proclaiming the Fifty Names of Marduk, who had been raised to Kingship of the Gods and who had defeated Tiamat. At the end of the litany, Marduk receives the name of his Father. (Recall that the many Divine Dialogues have Enki/Ea transferring his wisdom to the Son.) Along with the name Ea comes the cosmic “decrees” and “oracles,” all of them. Three terms are used to describe the totality of the powers. One of them is the nagbu that opens Tablet 1 of Gilgamesh.

Ea’s speech is the grand climax of Enuma Elish.

When the Igigi exhausted their store of names
and Ea heard the names, his spirit sang out joyously
thus: “The one whose names his fathers have glorified—
he is the same as I am! Ea is his name!
he is the only one to manage my decrees,
the whole collection,
every one of them!
He alone carries out the total of my oracles!”2156

In these few lines we see three times punning on the name Ea. The name is related to the Akkadian root for “to live” (as is the case with Yahweh and Yah of the Bible) and also the first-person pronoun and its pronominal ending. Thus “Ea,” “Life,” and the “I” of “I am,” all reinforce the totality of spiritual power in the Father.

Ishtar as the Holy Spirit
Assyriologist Simo Parpola has explored the possibilities that Assyrian concept of god shared many features with Eastern and Western philosophies and religions. The concept that the god Assur was not a “council member” in the Assyrian pantheon but was rather “the totality of gods” is reflected by the 6th century BCE and later traditions such as Platonism, Orphism, Neoplatonism, Hinduism and Tantrism.2157 Assyrian prophecy, in which Ishtar is the most important provider of prophecies, shares much with the “Mystery Religions” of antiquity and related religious and philosophical systems, especially Gnosticism, Jewish mysticism and Neoplatonism.2158 There were many aspects of the Neo-Assyrian Ishtar (including Urkittu, “the Urukite,” but especially Mullissu, a Mother Goddess), but the most significant point is that she was the aspect of Assur/Ishtar who is
the “spirit” or “breath” of God. The Ishtar of the Assyrian prophecy texts is “the spirit of God, who, residing in the heart of the prophet, spirits him and speaks through his or her lips.” Parpola finds in Ishtar the “functional equivalent of the biblical Spirit of God (also called the spirit of YHWH, the Holy Spirit, or simply the Spirit).” She shares many features with Shekhinah and Sophia.

Parpola further thinks that the prophecy texts identify prophecy with the “words of Ishtar,” rather than the “words of Assur.” He attributes this function largely to the “mother aspect” of Ishtar. She is the “heart” of her human manifestation and her place in the divine assembly. “She is the emotion (libbu) moving the prophet, the breath (shāru) issuing from his or her ‘heart,’ and the voice (rigmu) and words (dibbī) emerging from his or her mouth.”

Not surprisingly, then, Parpola is one of the Assyriologists who identify Ishtar with the Mother Goddess in Utnapishtim’s narrative of the Flood in Tablet 11.

Parpola goes further in reading the narrative of “Ishtar’s Descent into the Underworld” in light of the special relationship between the goddess and the king in Assyrian religion. “Ishtar’s Descent” should be related, not to myths of fertility or “seasonal growth and decay,” but to the Ascent of the Soul. “Descending, she is the holy spirit entering the prison of the body; ascending, she is the penitent soul returning to her celestial home.” He sees parallels with the Gnostic texts from Nag Hammadi, especially The Exegesis on the Soul, which tells the story of the Fall of Sophia and the ascent of the soul. He notes that the ascent of the soul is described in that Gnostic text in terms of a bride adorning herself for the arrival of the bridegroom, like the “Sacred Marriage.”

The ascent of Ishtar requires a “ransom” in the figure of Tammuz. “The sacrifice of Tammuz—an etiology for the death of the king as Son of God” Parpola likens to the Redemption and, paradoxically, the Christian promise of eternal life for humans. He sees in this the elements of an ecstatic mystery cult, and finds a further parallel in the Gnostic Thunder, Perfect Mind. The followers find absolution from sins, spiritual rebirth and resurrection from the dead.

“Ishtar’s Descent into the Underworld” leads Parpola to a most important relationship between Ishtar and the Assyrian king, whom he considers “God’s son and Chosen One.” Although Tammuz is the key figure in “Ishtar’s Descent,” Parpola calls attention to Gilgamesh as “the prototype of the perfect king.” I would prefer to see Tammuz (and his Sumerian equivalent Dumuzi), as a “Chosen One” in the role of the en rather than as king. The analysis of the myth as one of death and rebirth, with a special place for the one who is sacrificed, traditionally Dumuzi/Tammuz, works well with the tradition of the en and the “Sacred Marriage.” It is true that The Sumerian King List includes Dumuzi in the First Dynasty of Uruk, but his place on that list is problematic (as are most of the figures until Gilgamesh and his successors). The Old Babylonian period saw, as we have noted, the separation of the Babylonian king and the old role as deified en. Assyrian kingship was a different matter. Babylonian kings, at least from Hammurabi on, where not “high priests” of Marduk. The New Years Festival in Babylon included the beating of the king...
during the one time he entered the presence of the gods. The Assyrian kings, however, functioned as priests and had greater access to the temple rituals than did the Babylonian king. Parpola is right, then, in seeing the “Chosen One” in Assyria as king and, without necessarily using the old Sumerian term, en, connecting the Assyrian king with both Tammuz and Gilgamesh.

Parpola’s claim, then, that the myth of Ishtar’s descent and ascent has as a “central component,” the concept of a “perfect man sent for the redemption of mankind, materialized in the institution of kingship,” would appear to renew the connection between king and en. In “The Descent of Ishtar,” Parpola proposes, “the king’s redemptory role is expressed by the image of the shepherd king, Tammuz, given as Ishtar’s substitute to the ‘netherworld,’ that is, the material world.”\textsuperscript{2167} In my view, this could also be applied to the complex case of Gilgamesh, where both Gilgamesh and Enkidu must be related to the central divine figure, Ishtar.

**The Long Return**

The earliest views of the en of Uruk, on cylinder seals, steles, and especially the Uruk Vase, predate writings about him—unless we find him present on the earliest Standard Professions List. We see him in remote locations, in the mountains, killing lions, protecting a cow giving birth, occasionally fighting humans. We see him returning to the temple, with gifts for the Great Goddess: wild and domesticated animals and vessels fashioned into the shapes of animals. He is the Master of Animals, as art historians like to call him. And a “priest-king,” as others call him, although both aspects need to be clarified, since except for anointing someone he is not shown making the kinds of animal sacrifices we see in ancient Jerusalem or in Greco-Roman religions; and he is not yet the Sumerian lugal. (The historical event Gilgamesh was most noted for, as king protecting the city against the invasion of the House of Kish, is nowhere mentioned in *Gilgamesh*.)

Within the civilized space he is depicted as an overseer, literally keeping an eye on the activities of the city. Uruk cylinder seals and the Uruk Vase show him standing tall, on firm ground, in an ordered *mis en scene*. Frequently we see him in his see-through skirt. On the Uruk Vase he is being invested in his office with an elaborate sash. Inside the sacred precinct where he is headed, the various implements and activities are no longer in an orderly spatial scene. Perhaps that reflects a more complicated religious scene, where things move up and down as well as along a firm ground.

Holly Pittman examined the more than 150 cylinder seal impressions from early Uruk and found certain themes prevailing in the seal imagery.\textsuperscript{2168} There were workers and occasional scenes suggesting warfare; marshes; animal objects; animals in file; heraldic animals; and symbols. Many of the seals included feeding flocks, presentations to Inanna, processions to the temple, boats approaching the temple, rituals at the temple, and even the herd directed to the temple. Prominent in these seals is a tall human, in many cases clearly the en with his rolled cap and see-through skirt. The orientation in these themes is toward Inanna and the temple. A classic case is a scene in the mountains where the en feeds rams by pulling vegetation to the animals.\textsuperscript{2169} The en is in the center holding the
tree branches. He is flanked on both sides by rams and, beyond the animals, the signs of Inanna. (Two vessels very much like the Uruk Vase stand next to one of the Inanna signs.) Another seal shows the en and his companion approaching a collection of objects much like those shown in the sacred precinct of the Uruk Vase. 2170 Almost every motif is doubled, though the pairs are not entirely identical. The en carries vessel in the form of a horned animal. Two Inanna signs mark the goddess’s presence. And again, two large vessels like the Uruk Vase stand next to Inanna.

Gilgamesh recapitulates the journeys outside the city and entrances to the city that are depicted on those very early visualizations and later in the literature of the great ens Enmerkar, Lugalbanda, and Dumuzi. Enmerkar is so settled in Uruk that he does not leave the city but sends a messenger out (and in the process invents writing). Lugalbanda seems to have a primary duty in traveling far distances in order to bring the goods back to Uruk. (Bringing back a wife and son comes as a surprise to Enmerkar, as we have seen.) Dumuzi, the most famous of the lovers of Inanna, as a shepherd is a liminal figure, neither here nor there, sometimes in the wilderness, sometimes in the city with Inanna. He carries the epithet Amaushumgalanna more than other ens, but the activities of Amaushumgalanna in “The Early Dynastic Hymn” point to Gilgamesh.

In other words, Gilgamesh of the stories that mention him by name carries with him a long and complicated tradition that stretches back at least to the 4th millennium BCE. The Standard Akkadian Gilgamesh shows the marks of archaism throughout its collection of tales. 2171 Each retelling of the en and lugal stories retains traces of other accounts and adds new twists.

Seeing Gilgamesh leaving and returning to the city as a recapitulation of the Great Goddess’s periodic withdrawals, descents and “falls,” followed by journeys back to the “house” she stole from heaven and established in Uruk, is not as obvious as the journeys of the ens Inanna/Ishtar has selected. We hear how Gilgamesh makes his way across the dangerous waters, including the Waters of Death, to the source of rivers; hears the story of the Flood with its ironic ascents and descents (and an invitation to learn from experience and empathy); sleeps and awakens; descends into the waters and ascends purified; travels to the depth of the apsû and learns wisdom of the nagbu; loses the Plant of Rejuvenation but gains an insight into the limits of mortals, including heroes; and finally finds his way back to the city and its goddess.

Fortunately, the rush of mythemes in the 11th tablet of Gilgamesh are already prepared in the opening lines of Tablet 1.

Bernd Jager provides an elegant conclusion to his essay on Gilgamesh and on Gilgamesh’s return to his city (and in my view, to Ishtar and everything the goddess still meant to her city).

The young king Gilgamesh leaves the “oppressive” boundaries of his town to find a scope for his seemingly endless energy and vitality. He meets the limits of his own power when the gods strike down his friend. At this point he also has to come to terms with the limits
of his own life, his own mortality. He rages against the limits of death as he has raged against the limitations of his subjects and the confinement of the city. He is unsuccessful in his search for immortality, and at the very point that the limits of his own life are accepted, the walls of Uruk emerge from the distance. Gilgamesh now enters Uruk, presumably to truly inhabit rather than exploit the city.2172

Notes to the Excursus: Interpreting Gilgamesh

The word *tehom*, which may be a borrowing from the Akkadian, is one of several terms for “deep” and “depth” in the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis it appears here (1:2) and additionally in the context of the Primal History (7:11 and 8:2, where it is in hendiadys with the heavens); finally in the long blessing of Joseph, where the “deep” is also in hendiadys with the heavens. The word occurs some 15 times elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (Deuteronomy 33:13, Job 38:30 and 41:32, Psalms 36:6, 42:7, 104:6, 148:7, Proverbs 8:28, Isaiah 51:10, 63:13), Ezekiel 26:19, 31:4, 31:15, Amos 7:4, and Habakkuk 3:10. Contrast the use of *amoq* in about the same number of instances, where “the deep” is largely contrasted with a surface.


For “depth” as a motif in modern Arabic fiction, see Maier, “Leila Abouzeid, Muhamed Barrada and the Myth of Depth,” *Moroccan Cultural Studies Journal (Fez)* 1 (1999), 75-100, from which some of this material has been taken.


Derrida, “...That Dangerous Supplement...,” 108.


See Hillis Miller, 116.


Kramer and Maier, 78.

Kramer and Maier, 79.


Vogelzang, 71.

Gertrud Farber-Flügge, *Der Mythos “Inanna und Enki,”* 144-45; see Kramer and Maier, 57-68.


Cited in Rayment-Pickard, 172.

Rayment-Pichard, 172.


Fasold, 151-56.

See David Allen Deal, *Noah’s Ark: The Evidence* (Vista, CA: Kherem La Yah Press, 2005), esp. 45-53. Both Fasold and Deal provide many maps, photographs, and charts of the area and their reconstruction of the ark. Deal, e.g., has a sketch of the landing site and the boat as the survivors were beginning to secure building materials from the ark and establish agriculture, 52.

Robert M. Best, *Noah’s Ark and the Ziusudra Epic* (Fort Myers, FL: Enlil Press, 1999), 83.
Excursus on Interpretation

1960  Best, 90-100.

1961  Best, 236-45.

1962  Best, 262-63.

1963  Best, 269-71.


1965  Noah’s Ark, Retold and Illustrated by Lucy Cousins (Cambridge, MA: Candlewick Press, 1993).


1970  “The Flood Story,” The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature c.t.1.7.4 and t.1.7.4.

1971  Segment E, line 6, clearly indicates An, Enlil, and Ziusudra, followed by $mi_2$ and signs that are difficult to read or missing at the end of the line.


1973  Unless otherwise noted, the translations are by Dalley; here, 18.

1974  See CAD 17.iii.371-73. The pestilential winds of shuruppû are mentioned in both Tablets 3 and 5 of Gilgamesh.

1975  Dalley, 9.


1977  The rest of Enki’s characterization of the human/god mixture is difficult to interpret. See Dalley, 15.


1979  Dalley, 30.

1980  Dalley, 33.


1982  Dalley, 34.

1983  Dalley, 35.


1986 Kramer and Maier, 134.

1987 For convenient translations of Apollodorus, Ovid, and Hyginus, see “The Great Flood,” at www.livius.org. The story attributed to Apollodorus is from *The Library* Section 1.7.2; Hyginus’s is from *Fabula* 153.


1989 Innes, 35.


1991 Innes, 40.

1992 Reprinted in “The Great Flood: The Story by Ovid,” www.livius.org. Published by Samuel Garth, the translation was completed by many writers, including John Dryden, Joseph Addison, Alexander Pope, John Gay and others. See Innes, 24.

1993 Graves, 140. Graves points out the differences in the Greek and Latin versions of the story and recognizes the influence of eastern accounts of the flood, including the Sumerian Flood Story, as recorded by Berossus (142), and suggests that “all these arks were built of acacia-wood, a timber also used by Isis for building Osiris’s death barge” (142). He also recognizes the version in *Gilgamesh*, where Graves thinks the flood was sent by Ishtar. He adds (from *Gilgamesh?*) that “the ark was a moon-ship (see 123.5) and the feast was celebrated on the new moon nearest to the autumnal equinox, as a means of inducing the winter rains. Ishtar, in the Greek myth, is called Pyrrha” (141). He includes as well the interesting point that in the earliest Greek version of the story, Themis renews humanity without first obtaining the consent of Zeus. Graves thinks that it is likely Themis, not Zeus, “was credited with the Flood, as in Babylonia.” The Mesopotamian material seems confused here, since even if Themis is a version of Ishtar, Ishtar repents her complicity in the flood but is not the author of the event. Elsewhere Graves gives only scattered references to Themis.


Excursus on Interpretation

2003 Dimant, 126.

2004 Dimant, 126-34. For Enoch, see the survey by Philip S. Alexander, “From Son of Adam to Second God: Transformations of the Biblical Enoch,” Biblical Figures Outside the Bible, 87-122.

2005 Dimant, 137.


2013 The Works of Philo, 821.

2014 The Works of Philo, 830. Ironically, the standard text of the Hebrew Bible reads LORD rather than God in this verse (Genesis 8:20). Philo’s knowledge of Hebrew has been questioned, and he read the Bible mainly in Greek. The Hebrew text was, however, not completely standardized in this period. See “Philo,” at en.wikipedia.org.

2015 The Works of Philo, 834.


2017 The Works of Philo, 829.

2018 The Works of Philo, 830.

2019 The Works of Philo, 831.

2020 The Works of Philo, 831.


2022 The Works of Philo, 816.

2023 The Works of Philo, 817.

2024 The Works of Philo, 815.


2026 The Works of Josephus, 34.

2027 The Works of Josephus, 34.


Lewis, 108.

Lewis, 109.

Lewis, 109.

Lewis, 124.

Lewis, 124.

Lewis, 135-39.

Lewis, 146.

Lewis, 173.

Lewis, 175-76.


Justin Martyr, 527.


Augustine, 655.

Augustine, 656.

Augustine, 656.

Augustine, 656.

Augustine, 656.


MacRae and Parrott are unpersuaded that Christian themes are found in the text and suggest that it is an early, transitional piece. Parrott, 278, deals with the suggestion that the “third illuminator” is Christ.

Frederick Wisse, trans. “The Concept of Our Great Power,” The Nag Hammadi Library, 311-17. The text was edited by Douglas M. Parrott and introduced by Frances E. Williams. Wisse’s translation differs in a few particulars from his translation in earlier editions.


One other Nag Hammadi text apparently refers to Noah, though in a very broken context. In “Melchizedek” Noah appears in a line of male heroes from Adam, Abel, Enoch, Noah, and finally Melchizedek, who sees himself in the suffering of the Savior, Christ. “Melchizedek,” trans. Soren Giversen and Birger A. Pearson, The Nag Hammadi Library, 438-444. It may be simply an accident that “Melchizedek” is followed immediately by “The Thought of Norea,” trans. and ed. by the same scholars as with “Melchizedek,” 445-47. Norea (or Orea, once) is thought to be derived from a Cainite woman named Naamah (cp. Genesis 4:22) or Na’amah.


Bloom, 67.

Susan A. Handelman treats Bloom’s hermeneutic in the only section (chapter 8) devoted to a modern literary critic, along with Freud, Jacques Lacan, and Derrida as “slayers of Moses,” in *The Slayers of Moses: The Emergence of Rabbinic Interpretation in Modern Literary Theory*, 179-224.

Bloom, 72.

Walter Burkert, “‘Or Also a Godly Singer,’ Akkadian and Early Greek Literature,” 190-203.

These are only a few of the wise females in *Gilgamesh*. Rivkah Harris noticed that women in *Gilgamesh* usually play supportive, nurturing roles and the two married women—Utnapishtim’s wife a prime example—are unnamed, anonymous creatures. Nevertheless, Harris also noticed, the women are usually dispensers of wisdom, “Images of Women in the Gilgamesh Epic,” 219-30.

Bloom, 60.


The name is variously transliterated as Noh, Nu, Nuk. See, e.g., Lupieri, *The Mandaean: The Last Gnostics*, 50. Shem is translated sometimes as Sam or Shum.

Or Hibel Ziua; see Lupieri, 46-48.

Drower, 258-59. For the text (GR 18), see Lupieri, 200-202.

Drower, 216. The name suggests a Zoroastrian influence. The Mandaens consider Ruha, “Spirit” and “The Holy Spirit” (Ruha d-Qudsha), equivalent to Libat (Venus) among the planetary gods of Mesopotamia, Lupieri, 204-205. For a visual representation, see Lupieri, after 172.

Drower, 93, 219, 307. The names suggest variants of ancient Norea in *The Nag Hammadi Library*.

Drower identifies Dana Nuk, who makes a celestial journey in the company of Hiwel Ziwa, as Noh, 307; but the story seems very close to Enoch. Would Noah and Enoch, both of whom come to be of great interest in the Second Temple period, sometimes be confused with each other?

Elsewhere Nuhraita (Norea) is considered the wife of Sam, not of Noh, Lupieri, 216.

Lupieri, 202.

While *manda* is usually considered the equivalent of *gnosis*, Lupieri is unsure: he points to the Mandaean sanctuary that is called *manda*, with its “living water” directed through the space by a canal, its rectangular building of wood and reeds, and its reed enclosure. Important immersions in water are carried out in front of the *manda* building, Lupieri, 14-15.

Lupieri, 205-206.


2095 The chronological list of suras according to the Cairo Edition has Suras 11 and 71 from the Meccan Period of the Prophet Muhammad’s life (b. 570-d. 632 CE) and Sura 66 from the later Medinan Period. See Hanna E. Kassis, A Concordance of the Qur’an, xxxvi-vii.


2097 Medieval Mysteries, 96.

2098 Medieval Mysteries, 97.

2099 Medieval Mysteries, 101.

2100 Medieval Mysteries, 103.


2103 Of many excellent editions of Paradise Lost, the recent The Riverside Milton, ed. Roy Flannagan, incorporates earlier scholarship. The Flood is narrated in Book 11. For Paradise Lost, see Flannagan, 297-710; the Flood is narrated in Book 11.

2104 See notes in Flannagan, 682-87.

2105 Flannagan, 685.

2106 Bills Moyers, Genesis, A Living Conversation, 111.

2107 The conversation partners are introduced pp. xix-xxxvii.

2108 Moyers, 115.

2109 Moyers, 129.

2110 Moyers, 142.

2111 Moyers, 145.

2112 Moyers, 145.

2113 Moyers, 146.

2114 Moyers, 148-49.

2115 Moyers, 149.

2116 Moyers, 150.
For a translation and commentary by an Assyriologist who sees parallels with *Enuma Elish*, see E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, 3-13.

Henshaw, 206; Chapter 4 runs to nearly eighty pages, 191-270, and three of the five appendices deal in one way or another with the complicated term.

Henshaw, 208-209.

Henshaw, 209.

Speiser, 3.

Speiser, 5.

Jim Myers, “Ruach: Spirit or Wind or ???” *Biblical Heritage Center* at [www.biblicalheritage.org/Bible](http://www.biblicalheritage.org/Bible).


Jonas, 72.

*Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, 36.


O’Leary, 44.

O’Leary, 203-23.

Cited by O’Leary, 185.

O’Leary, 185.

For a discussion, see Maier, “Johannine Myth and the New Trinity,” 333-37.

O’Leary, 223.

O’Leary, 223.


The Jesus Seminar prefers “true worshipers to worship the Father as he truly is,” without specifying the “spirit,” in *The Five Gospels*, 410.

The Jesus Seminar translates Jesus’s reply to the woman’s question about the source of “lively, life-giving water” as a “source of water within them, a fountain of real life” (John 4:11-14), that is, within those who seek the source. The phrasing has an uncanny resemblance to the place where Utnapishtim and his wife dwell after the Flood, far away at the “mouth” of rivers (Tablet 11.204).

For a translation of the poem, see Chapter 3 of Kramer and Maier. Material in this section has been presented in Maier, “Johannine Myth and the New Trinity,” 338-40.

For the etymology of Ea’s name, see J. J. M. Roberts, *The Earliest Semitic Pantheon*, 19-21.


Parpola, xvii.

Parpola, xxvi.

Parpola, xxvi.

Parpola, xxvi.

Parpola sees the parallels between Ishtar of the Flood and Tiamat of *Enuma Eliš*, xxiv, xxxiv, lxxv and xci. Tiamat was considered differently in Assyria than she was in Babylon, where she was the arch enemy of Marduk.
Parpola, xxxi.

Parpola, xxxiii.

Parpola, xxxiii-iv. He might also have noted the similarities to *De Dea Syria (The Syrian Goddess)*, which describes the rites of an ecstatic cult in Membij. (While scholars refer to the “Syrian Goddess” the text refers to her as the “Assyrian” Goddess.)

Parpola, xl.

Parpola, xv.

Holly Pittman, “Towards an Understanding of the Role of Glyptic Imagery,” 197n27. Pittman had counted 161 images from Uruk VI through III at the Eanna. In the Discussion following her paper Pittman found significant differences between northern Mesopotamia and southern Mesopotamia in the themes they presented (the north using geometrical images, while the south used mainly figural images). She also found significant differences between the Uruk images and the 220 seal impressions found at Susa. Stylistically the Susa seals are very much like those of Uruk, and many include the *en*, but the themes tend to differ, Susa preferring rituals with the ruler; master of animals; combat and prisoners; hunting; herding; transportation of goods; weaving; human and animal birthing; working in the field and the like. Thus even at a very early date when the products of two cities can be compared, there are many similarities but also major contrasts.

Amiet, *La Glyptique Mésopotamienne Archaïque*, #636 A-B.

Amiet, #643.
