

OF BABIES, BOATS, AND ARKS*

Anne Draffkorn Kilmer, University of California, Berkeley

I. INTRODUCTION

I would like to start this contribution with an apology: neither of the two types of texts that I discuss in this paper, the Hebrew Book of Genesis, on the one hand, and the Sumerian and Akkadian birth incantations, on the other, are texts in which I have done any original work, nor do I claim to be a biblical scholar. Nevertheless, I hope that my observations will be of interest.

This article presents another means of understanding the time frame of the biblical flood story as it is described in Genesis 7–8. The impetus for this approach originated during the course of the oral portion of Father Emmerich Vogt's doctoral qualifying examinations in 1985, in which I participated. Father Vogt was at that time a student in the Joint Doctoral Degree Program sponsored by the Graduate Theological Union of Berkeley and the Department of Near Eastern Studies. He, in connection with examination questions on the Book of Genesis, had calculated the time span for the Noachic flood as follows:

150 days (Gen. 7:24) = 5 months (including the 40 days), calculated as 1 January to 1 June of Noah's 600th year.

121 days = 4 months (Gen. 8:5) when the flood waters receded, calculated as 1 June to 1 October.

Total number of days = 271. If we add the 7 days (Gen. 8:12) after which the dove landed for good, the total is 278 days.

At the time of the oral examination, I asked those biblical scholars present whether anyone had noticed that the number of days, 270–80, is *exactly* the length of time for human gestation and that, as a result, one might suggest that the biblical ark be considered a uterine symbol. My query was met with surprise and received no answer. In the intervening years I have had very useful discussions with Francis I. Andersen, David Noel Freedman, Isaac Kikawada, and, more recently, with Sheldon Greaves and Mary

* This article was originally presented as a paper at the American Oriental Society's annual meeting in Toronto in March 2001.

Frances Wogec. I thank all of them for their advice and their cautionary comments.¹ Though warned that the Flood “calendar” was a “sticky wicket,” I decided to rethink my question and to try to discover whether the topic, viz., the comparison between the length of Noah’s Flood and the length of human gestation, had been discussed in the scholarly literature. Thus far I have not been able to find this specific suggestion anywhere, even though comparisons between the first creation of Genesis 1 and the Flood narrative have been made. I hope that what follows here will add a new perspective to the biblical narrative and to the Mesopotamian materials I adduce as comparanda as well.

II. NOAH AND THE ARK

Duration of Stay in the Ark

Noah and the animals were enclosed (perhaps “enwombed” or even “entombed” might be said) from 17 February (Gen. 7:11) to 1 October (Gen. 8:5), plus 40 days (Gen. 8:6), plus 14 days (Gen. 8:10–12). (The initial 7-day grace period of Gen. 7:4 and 10 are not counted because the rains had not yet started.) For the classical/antique traditional folkloric rationale behind not counting the first 7 days of pregnancy and the reasons that the significant subsequent 40 days are counted separately from the remainder of the gestation period (it concerns the physical substance of the fetal material), see the materials collected by M. Stol.² All together, the stay in the ark was 278 days, or 9 months and 1 week, which is the normal length of human gestation. Gen. 7:16 tells us that YHWH “shut Noah in” (the ark), using the verb *sgr*, which is also used in 1 Sam. 1:5 and 6 of the womb of Hannah.³ We might also note that the verb *yš*’ “to come out,” used by YHWH in Gen. 8:16 in his command to Noah to leave the ark, is also used elsewhere in the Old Testament of babies emerging at birth, as *wašû* is used in the cuneiform materials.

It appears, then, that Genesis offers us a rebirth or a re-creation of earth’s living creatures by means of their new gestation in the ark.

¹ Our former University of California, Berkeley, doctoral student, Sheldon Greaves, has been kind enough to supply me with a table (see table 1 below) of the biblical flood chronology taken from his article “Interpretation of the Biblical Ark and Chronology of the Flood,” in which he presents the many discussions in the secondary literature of the symbolism of the ark and the patterns of the flood chronology. The flood “calendar,” as it is often referred to, has been calculated in many

different and confusing ways. Greaves’ article is an informative summary of the arguments among biblical scholars. I have relied on it very much. It has been published at Berkeley in the *Journal of Associated Graduates in Near Eastern Studies* 11 (2005): 43–50.

² M. Stol, *Birth in Babylonia and the Bible*, Cuneiform Monographs 14 (Groningen, 2000), p. 18.

³ I thank F. I. Andersen for this reference.

The same period of 278 days is that in which YHWH's *mayim* overpowered *'ereš* to which we may compare Adad's *abūbu*, which conquered earth's creatures in the Atrahasis Epic. Essentially, earth is being re-created or reborn at the same time that the ark's creatures are being saved or reborn. Note that just as the *ruah Elohim* in Gen. 1:2 played a role in the first creation of earth, YHWH's *ruah* once again causes the waters to begin to disappear so that earth can reemerge (Gen. 8:5). This parallel and others (such as key vocabulary, the loading of animals) between the first Creation of Genesis 1 and the second Creation of Genesis 7–8 have been discussed by biblical scholars.⁴ Note also that Otto Rank,⁵ already in 1909, considered Moses' ark/basket as a uterine symbol; furthermore, G. S. Kirk⁶ discusses, in passing, Freudian interpretations of "enclosure motifs" as uterine symbols. He alludes to Noah's ark but makes no specific point.

The Significance of the 150 Days

The meaning of Gen. 7:24 and 8:3 must be that the flood waters reached their height and stayed at that level, covering even the highest mountains before they began to recede.

In human pregnancy, 150 days, or 20–22 weeks, is a highly significant time, for it is then that the fundus of the uterus reaches the umbilicus; this is measured by palpation and permits the midwife or obstetrician to determine whether the size of the fetus and progression of the uterus are adequate and "healthy." The umbilicus is the fixed reference point by which one can measure the height of the fundus and is used as a benchmark by which to estimate the day of birth.⁷

Thus when Gen. 7:18 tells us that "the water swelled and increased greatly," it seems to be reporting that all was well "with mother and baby" at close to the halfway point in a normal pregnancy. I might also point out⁸ that the period of 150 days here is mentioned twice, once in Gen. 7:24 and again in 8:4, near the midpoint of the 278 days and at the halfway point of the 46 verses that comprise the Flood narrative of Genesis 7 and 8. Moreover, the fifth month is the middle month of nine. I consider this placement in the center as a sign of its significance in the story-telling pattern.⁹

⁴ See especially G. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, Indiana, 1986), pp. 9–13.

⁵ O. Rank, *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero: A Psychological Interpretation of Mythology*, trans. F. Robbins and S. E. Jelliffe (New York, 1964), p. 73.

⁶ G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Function* (Berkeley, 1970), pp. 200f.

⁷ See, for example, P. Ladewig, M. London, and S. Olds, *Essentials of Maternal Newborn Nursing* (Redwood City, California, 1990), pp. 193f.

⁸ See A. D. Kilmer, "Visualizing Texts: Schematic Patterns in Akkadian Poetry," in A. Guinan et al., eds., *If a Man Builds a Joyful House: Essays in Honor of Erle Verdun Leichty* (Leiden and Boston, 2006), pp. 209–19, in which I discuss the importance of repetitions at "half-time" in the tablet design of Akkadian poetic texts.

⁹ Cf. the analysis of G. Wenham, "The Coherence of the Flood Narrative," *VT* 28 (1987): 336–48.

The Significance of the Seventh Month, Seventeenth Day

Likewise, the text of Gen. 8:4 seems to assure us that the ark and the creatures within had reached the time of certain viability; the ark had come to a secure rest on the mountain and was therefore safe.

Human fetuses (before incubators, etc.) are generally considered viable outside the womb after 7 months. Delivery may occur relatively safely for a 7-month or older fetus. As for the mountain tops that were seen in Gen. 8:5, perhaps they may be seen to symbolize the top of a baby's head that appears at the start of birth; in this case, one thinks of the earth's reemergence/rebirth.

The Safe Delivery of God's Creatures from the Ark

On 1 January, Noah's 601st year, Noah (who functions in some sense both as midwife and baby) is careful not to "deliver" his cargo too soon lest it come to harm. The 40-day wait (8:6) and the 14 days of trial flights of birds delay the "birth" until exactly the right time, 278 days.

In Gen. 8:13 we are told that, after an additional 36 days, "the earth was dry." I would suggest that this could well refer to the normal period of postpartum menstruation, which, maximally, is considered to end at six weeks, or 42 days, after which the new mother may resume all normal activities.

As to the final count in Gen. 8:14, is it 10 days more than a lunar-solar year, or should it be corrected to one year exactly? If one should emend the reading *b^ešib 'āh w^e 'esrīm* to *b^ešib 'āh- 'āsār yôm*, then the biblical flood lasted from 17 February of Noah's 600th year to 17 February of his 601st year. I find Hendel's arguments about a textual error convincing.¹⁰

Selected Parallels with the Story of Adam and Eve

Reflections of the events in the garden may be seen in the following passages in Genesis:

- (1) 6:19: the loading of the ark "two by two, male and female"; cf. 1:27: "male and female created he them."
- (2) 8:17: God gives instructions to Noah and family regarding their responsibilities to nature; cf. 1:28 f.
- (3) 9:3–4: instructions as to what they can and cannot eat; cf. 2:16–17.
- (4) 9:20–21: the wine of the vine that leads to Noah's shame; cf. 3:10–13: the fruit of the tree that leads to Adam's shame.

¹⁰ See R. Hendel, "4Q252 and The Flood Solution," *Dead Sea Discoveries* 2 (1995): 72–79. Chronology of Genesis 7–8: A Text-Critical

- (5) 9:21–23: covering Noah’s nakedness; cf. 2:25 and 3:7 and 21: clothing for Adam and Eve.
- (6) 9:25: the curse against Canaan as agent of the shame; cf. 3:14: the curse against the serpent as agent of Adam’s shame.

III. THE CUNEIFORM TEXTS

If it is indeed convincing to think of Noah’s ark as the dark womb (and perhaps also as a tomb) as well as the baby, which must survive the watery journey, then certain Sumerian and Akkadian parallels may be brought to bear on the question.¹¹

Boats and Neonates

Cuneiform birth rituals and incantations regularly refer to the fetus as a boat that must find its way through dark waters and/or that must be untied from its mooring. J. Scurlock puts it this way: “The Mesopotamian woman was understood as the steerswoman of a boat formed inside her by the man’s semen. It was her [dangerous] duty to float this boat on her amniotic fluid.”¹²

I have counted eight, possibly nine, passages in the birth incantations that give us our information about the fetus being visualized or conceptualized as a boat loaded with the cargo that will determine its sex and that, I think, ensures that the baby has all its parts. The following examples should suffice for our purposes here.¹³

KAR 196 = Köcher *BAM 248* ii 49–56: one text describes a difficult birth where the baby is “stuck”; it says “May her massive mooring rope be loosened, and may her locked gate be opened ... may (the baby) come out promptly and see the light of the sun.”¹⁴ In another passage of the same text (Köcher *BAM 248* ii 47 f.) we find “May the boat [here meaning the baby] come in safely from [the waters?], may the vessel proceed directly” (*lišlima eleppu lištēšera makurru*).

¹¹ In the cuneiform flood accounts the duration was 7 days and 7 nights. Note the contribution by V. Emelianov on the calendar of the flood, its relation to the cultic calendar and royal ideology, and the probable timing as being the end of the year, thus January through February (“The Calendar Date of the Flood in Cuneiform Texts,” *NABU* 1999/41–45).

¹² J. Scurlock, “The Status of Women in Ancient Mesopotamia,” in P. Cannistraro and J. Reich, eds., *The Western Perspective: A History of Civilization in the West* (Belmont, California, 1999), pp. 62–64.

¹³ I thank our Berkeley student Mary Frances Wogec, who is currently finishing her doctoral dissertation on cuneiform childbirth incantations (under the supervision of Wolfgang Heimpel), for supplying me with pertinent references.

¹⁴ See J. Scurlock, “Baby-snatching Demons, Restless Souls and the Dangers of Childbirth: Medico-Magical Means of Dealing with Some of the Perils of Motherhood in Ancient Mesopotamia,” *Incognita* 2 (1991): 137–85.

Note that the words used for the boats are *makurru* “cargo boat” and *eleppu* “boat”; both these Akkadian words are used of the arks in the cuneiform flood stories (in a late version of the Atrahasis Epic it is named the *nāšir napištim*, the “lifesaver”). Comparable to the loading of Noah’s ark, these baby-arks in the cuneiform birth incantations are loaded with a variety of things, notably with carnelian (for girls?) and lapis (for boys?); the texts also say that the mother does not know what is loaded with respect to these two items, which probably means that she does not know whether the baby yet to be born will be a girl or a boy.

In a Middle Assyrian medical text¹⁵ “the boat (i.e., the baby) is held at the quay of death; the vessel is held at the quay of distress” (*ina kār mūti kalât eleppu, ina kār dannati kalât makurru*).¹⁶ W. G. Lambert’s remark (p. 37) that this metaphor of a boat as a baby is “curious” (because “quays on the Tigris and Euphrates can rarely have been dangerous ... to boats”) may be explained by the basic knowledge that in rising or sinking waters (whether slow or fast) a boat will come to harm unless the lines are loosened (i.e., lengthened) adequately before they break or unless the boat is cut loose to allow it to float safely and not be damaged against the docks. It may be germane to compare this to Old Babylonian Atrahasis III ii 55, where, as the storm becomes savage, the mooring rope is cut, thus releasing the boat.¹⁷ For a similar imagery of the baby as a shipwrecked sailor (as opposed to a boat), note the passage in Lucretius, *On the Nature of the Universe*: “Then again, an infant, like a shipwrecked sailor, cast up by the cruel sea, lies naked on the ground, speechless and helpless, when Nature first has thrown him forth with painful birth from his mother’s womb to the sunlit world....”¹⁸

Loading and Unloading the Ark

It may also be mentioned that the cuneiform flood hero, Utnapishtim (Gilg. XI 83), loaded into the ark “all the seed of living creatures,” thus the loading might be understood as being the equivalent of implanting seed in a uterine chamber.

Other small points of comparison exist between Mesopotamian language about human birth and Flood narratives that contrast the darkness of the womb with the light at its opening. For example, in Old Babylonian Atrahasis I 282 f., at the birth of the baby, “the destined time opened the womb; light (*namru*) and joy were on her (the midwife’s) face.”¹⁹ In the birth incantation Köcher *BAM* 248 ii 56: “Let it (the baby) come out and see the light.” Cf. Gilg. XI: the flood hero recounts that at the end of the flood

¹⁵ W. G. Lambert, “A Middle Assyrian Medical Text,” *Iraq* 31 (1969): 28–39. This text is in a private collection in Venice.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

¹⁷ Lambert-Millard *Atra-hasīs*, pp. 92 f., line 55.

¹⁸ I thank Denise Greaves for this reference.

¹⁹ A. D. Kilmer, “Fugal Features of Atrahasis: The Birth Theme,” in M. E. Vogelzang and H. L. J. Vanstiphout, eds., *Mesopotamian Poetic Language: Sumerian and Akkadian*, Cuneiform Monographs 6 (Groningen, 1996), pp. 128, 132.

when the ark was on the mountain, “I opened the *nappašu* ‘airhole’ and daylight (*urru*) fell upon my face (literally ‘on the side of my nose’).” I note the cognate relationship of *nappašu* with *npš*, the “baby’s first breath,” and with *napištu*, “life,” all of which surely includes wordplay. There is, in fact, quite a bit of wordplay in the birth incantations.²⁰ Note, moreover, from an incantation to soothe a baby: “Oh little one who lived in the house of darkness, you have indeed come out (and) seen the light of day.”²¹

Thus the flood hero may, as mentioned above, be seen as both midwife and as one of the “newborns” or “reborns.”

IV. CONCLUSION

The associative evidence would seem to favor an interpretation of Noah’s ark as a uterine symbol, the vessel that contained—for rebirth—representatives of all of earth’s creatures. The time frame can thus be explained in terms of human gestation. Putting it differently, the accounting of the passage of time in Genesis 7 and 8 should perhaps be seen as a “biological” and not solely “calendrical” reckoning, whether lunar or solar.

I conclude by quoting from an article by N. Lemche on the chronology of the Flood: “I have no intention of reviewing the various theses on the chronological system in the flood story. Nobody has achieved a coherent review and for very good reason, since most of the debate has been highly speculative and, strictly speaking, not very useful”²²—I hope that the “biological” approach suggested here, however, will, at the very least, be considered a “useful” one.

²⁰ Scurlock, “Baby-snatching Demons,” passim.

²¹ G. Cunningham, “*Deliver Me from Evil*”: *Mesopotamian Incantations 2500–1500 B.C.*, Studia Pohl, Series Maior 17 (Rome, 1997), p. 109.

²² N. Lemche, “The Chronology in the Story of the Flood,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 18 (1980): 52–62.

TABLE 1. SCHEMA OF THE FLOOD CHRONOLOGY

DATES	EVENT	INTERVAL	FLOOD: TOTAL NO. OF DAYS	YEAR: TOTAL NO. OF DAYS	COMMENTS	REFERENCE IN GENESIS
1 January 600	600th year of Noah's life	na	0	47	—	—
17 February	Flood begins	40	40	87	—	7:11–12
n.d.	“Waters 150 days”	150	150	197	Stated twice	7:24
17 July	Ark “rests” on Ararat, waters abate	—	150	197	Waters begin to decline. This is the end of the “high- water mark”	8:4
1 October	Tops of mountains visible	74	224	271	—	8:5
n.d.	Noah waits 40 days; sends out raven and dove	40	264	311	Estimated date is 11 November	8:6
n.d.	Noah sends dove again; it brings back an olive leaf	7	271	318	Estimated date is 17 November Noah knows flood is over	8:10–11
n.d.	Noah sends dove again; it does not return	7	278	325	Estimated date is 24 November	8:12
1 January 601	Earth was dry	36	314	361	—	8:13
27 February 601	Earth was dry	57	371	418	Added to bring the length of the Flood to one solar year?	8:14