

## Onomastic Aspects about some Greco-Oriental Versions of the Great Flood

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### Abstract

It is a prominent fact that the story of the Flood, well known in the Western world from the biblical version of the episode of Noah, is previously – and also subsequently – found in a number of other mythographic texts, which provide a variable degree of historiographical or literary pretensions. Among others, we will talk about the poems of Atrahasis and Gilgamesh (written in Akkadian), the Sumerian tablet from Nippur, the biblical *Book of Genesis*, and, among the texts written in Greek, the works of Berossos of Babylon, Lucian of Samosata, and Pseudo-Apollodorus.

The most significant onomastic aspect in these works, and the one that can relate all of them, is probably the name of the human protagonist in the episode. From Atrahasis to Deucalion, including Utanapishtim and Noah, it seems that these names can be derived or explained in relation to each other, although their formal resemblance might be considerably remote.

Consequently, once again personal names can be a key element in achieving the most open and complete understanding of some cultural phenomena that are very ancient and that connect the Oriental Mesopotamian world with the Western Greek world through some of its most interesting texts.

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### The texts

Almost all the ancient cultures from which we have preserved texts have narrations dedicated to explaining the origin of the world or human beings. They often coincide in referring to a major flood that took place in the remote past and that flooded the earth completely after days and days of terrible storms.

The purpose of this paper is to indicate that, once again, personal names can be a key element in achieving the most open and complete understanding of some cultural phenomena that are very ancient and that connect the Oriental Mesopotamian world with the Western Greek world through some of its most interesting texts.

The first text we have taken as a reference is the *Epic of Atrahasis*, written in Akkadian and dating from about the seventeenth century BC, which was deciphered in the early twentieth century. This composition, which is divided into three tablets and each one into eight columns -four on the front and four on the back- was found in Sippar. Its 1245 verses narrate how the protagonist, who gives name to the poem, Atrahasis, survived a great flood sent by the gods with the intention of destroying under the water the human race they themselves had created. It is not until the third tablet that we find the episode of the Flood. The previous ones focus on the causes that make it necessary: the gods created the human race to lighten the weight of their tasks, but eventually the earth became overpopulated by an infinite number of noisy men and women who did not allow the gods to rest. Therefore, similarly to what happens in other stories, Enlil, the chief of the immortals, tries to destroy his own creation in different ways and at three different times. The last opportunity is the Flood and it seems an effective solution, but Atrahasis and his lineage survive hidden in a boat they had built by order of Enki, the philanthropist god who had foreseen the dire consequences of living again without humans, and who had contradicted in secret the orders of Enlil.

The best-preserved tablet of this poem is the ME-78941, attributed to the copyist Kasap-Aya or Nur-Aya and dated from the second third of the seventeenth century BC. In regards to the different editions, the 1969 edition prepared by W.G. Lambert and A.R. Millard stands out.

The Sumerian version of the Great Flood, called by some authors “the Ziusudra cycle” because of the name of its protagonist, has come to us mainly through a tablet divided into six columns of 10 or 15 lines each, and written in Sumerian cuneiform. This tablet, which dates from around 1600 BC, was found in Nippur in the late nineteenth century and is one of the oldest versions of the cataclysm. This is the main document we have with which to rebuild the Sumerian narration of the cataclysm, despite its poor condition in some areas.

The narration that the tablet of Nippur offers is weak in terms of details and quite simple, since it only contains the essential information to depict the episode and at no time are there unnecessary or superfluous elements present. There are even moments when the narration seems to be based on details already known by tradition, perhaps present in other stories, and to the point that it fails to develop them. We are especially interested in the last four columns because that is where the narration of the Flood takes place. The previous columns, similarly to the *Epic of Atrahasis*, refer mainly to a series of punishments that happened before the Flood and that the gods had sent to humans with the intention of destroying them. It is hard to say what the reason for the punishments is because the verses that include the reason for the first threat are largely illegible. The narrative is resumed when the god Enki, again the protector of humanity, promotes the repopulation of earth after its number of inhabitants has decreased considerably due to this first plague. But the verses could be related to those presented by the Akkadian poem. In this case the protagonist, Ziusudra, along with his lineage also manages to survive the destruction of the human race hidden in a boat that he himself seems to have built.

The main documents available so far to reconstruct the narration are the CBS 10673 and CBS 10867. Other fragments that may be considered copies of the same tablets have been found, but their value is secondary. The edition used as a reference is the one produced in 1969 by M. Civil.

Around 1870, the archaeologist George Schmidt discovered on one of the tablets of the Library of Assurbanipal at Nineveh a story that would change the interpretation of the Great Flood. It was a cuneiform text, written in a neo-Assyrian dialect, which spoke of a great flood that had ravaged the whole race of mankind, except for the lineage of Utanapishtim, who had survived in a sort of vessel by divine will. This became the first known version of the Mesopotamian Flood, which surprisingly coincided with the biblical *Genesis*. From then on, people began to question how the biblical story of the Flood fit into an even older literary tradition.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* has been almost totally reconstructed from a set of seventy-three tablets, thirty-five of which were found in Nineveh, eight more in cities of Assyria, and the remaining thirty in cities in the region of Babylon. The oldest preserved fragments date approximately from about the middle of the seventh century BC, and therefore it seems clear that this version of the Flood was set in writing during the first millennium BC. However, we can consider the existence of a previous oral version, the result of tradition, since the character Gilgamesh already appears in some stories not connected to the second millennium.

The poem, which consists of about three thousand six hundred verses divided into twelve tablets, each of which has six columns, mainly narrates the search for immortality by its main protagonist, Gilgamesh, and how during his travels he finds and starts to understand different feelings, like an initiation to the adult world. Once the trip is completed, that is to say the initiation, he accepts his mortal condition, and having matured he is now ready to return to his homeland and take his place on the throne of Uruk. The story of the Flood appears in tablet XI, although throughout the other tablets we find references to the name of Gilgamesh's grandfather, Utanapishtim, the man who was able to survive the Great Flood and became the father of the lineage that repopulated the earth after everything returned to normality.

There are several editions of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, among which we can point out the 1930 edition by R.C. Thompson and, some years later, the one by W.G. Lambert in 1980.

Out of all these versions of the Great Flood, perhaps the best-known is the one in the *Book of Genesis*. This story seems to date from towards the first half of the first millennium BC and has come to us mainly from two quite different versions, which are called Yahvist and priestly. The Yahvist code provides a more vivid, detailed and colourful narration, while the priestly code presents a more serious tone. Despite the formal differences and some other content differences in terms of details, both versions are quite similar. It seems clear that the Yahvist code is older and would date from the ninth-eighth centuries BC, written therefore at the beginning of the Hebrew monarchy, while the priestly code would be from the sixth century BC and would have been written under the rule of King Nebuchadnezzar. Both documents are written in Hebrew and are from the region of Judea.

The story of the Flood in the *Book of Genesis* can be divided into three episodes: the preparation of the Flood, the Flood itself, and the end of the Flood. The narration itself appears in Chapters VI-VIII, but even before, in the fifth, we have some references to it. Here we find the genealogy of the antediluvian patriarchs, who lived a total of 8225 years. There are ten men and the last one is Noah. It was precisely during the year 600 of the life of this man that the Great Flood took place. This genealogy is interesting because it starts talking about Adam and, especially, because it allows us to locate the cataclysm in a timeline starting from the creation of humanity, something that is not found in other stories.

The essential difference between this story and the ones we have seen so far is the cause of the Flood: it is not an overpopulated land that upsets the creators of the human race, but there is one god who wants to punish a human race that has been degenerating since its creation. Therefore, now we will find no trace of the confrontation between the punishing god and the philanthropist god, although there are details that are difficult to understand without taking into account the rest of the stories about the Flood from the Near East.

The last reference text presented here is the story of Babylon by Berossos. This text represents a turning point between the Eastern texts that include the story of the Flood and the texts of the Greek world. His work dates from the fourth century BC and, despite being written in Greek and for the Greeks, it has many Oriental elements.

The story of the Flood by Berossos has only been reconstructed from fragments of indirect transmission. We can summarize the transmission of this author's work into three main branches: the one from Juba of Mauritania from the first century BC, in which we find Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century; the one from Alexander Polyhistor also from the

first century BC, which ends up after passing through the hands of various authors, mainly in the hands of Abydenos in the third century and later on in the hands of Syncellus in the sixth century; and finally the one from Posidonius from the second century BC, which is noted by numerous Latin and medieval authors.

This fragmentary and indirect transmission makes the study of Berossos's work difficult. Most fragments, however, do give the name of Xisouthros to the protagonist of the story of the Flood, and make clear the many and significant similarities between the text of this author and the ones from the Near East we have seen so far. Indeed, there are other stories about the Flood in the Greco-Roman world, but what makes Berossos's special is this combination of elements: despite being a Greek author, his work has Eastern roots and, as far as the content goes, is closer to stories from the Near East than to Greco-Roman stories. The differences with other Greco-Roman stories about the Flood that are posterior, such as the one from Pseudo-Apollodorus and the one from Ovid, are already evident in the name itself of the protagonist: Berossos called him Xisouthros, a name as we shall see closer to the traditions of the Near East, while in general the Greco-Roman authors called him Deucalion.

We find other differentiating elements related to the personal names of the protagonists, such as for example the name of the woman: Pindar of Thebes (*Ol.* IX, 41-46), Pseudo-Apollodorus (*Bib.* I, 7.2.) and Lucian of Samosata (*Dea Syr.* 12) in the Greek world, and Virgil (*Bucol.* VI, 41), Ovid (*Met.* I, 350; 385) and Higinus (*Fab.* 153) among the Romans all speak of Pyrrha, the wife of Deucalion. For these authors, the only ones who survive the cataclysm are this couple, while the versions of the Near East and that of Berossos only give the name of a man and say that he was accompanied by his family and a series of animals, in addition to having food and all the things necessary to repopulate the earth.

### The names

These, then, are the names of the protagonists of the Flood according to the texts: Atrahasis, Ziusudra, Utanapishtim, Noah and Xisouthros. All these names are very different in appearance, but if we study them carefully we see that they are not as different as they might seem at first glance and that, on the contrary, all of them may be related based on their meaning or their form.

Most authors, like J. Bottéro and S.N. Kramer (1989:604) or S. Dalley (1991:2), agree to give the meaning of "very wise" to the name of Atrahasis, transcribed At-ra-am-ḥa-si-is. Indeed this is the role of the protagonist in the *Epic of Atrahasis*, either because he is the only one who survives the Great Flood, along with his family, or because he is chosen by Enki to reveal the so-called secret of the gods, that is to say, the intention to deny humans the earth and completely destroy them.

The relationship between this name and the name of the man who survived the Flood narrated in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is clear: Utanapishtim is called Atrahasis in verse 197 of tablet XI. It is unclear whether At-ra-am-ḥa-si-is, which could mean "very wise", is in this case simply an epithet that the author attributes to Utanapishtim or, if this author is betrayed by his subconscious and while he is writing the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, he has in his mind the *Epic of Atrahasis*. If Atrahasis is only an epithet of Utanapishtim, it seems strange that it would not appear in any other instances in the twelve tablets that make up the poem. Furthermore, it should be noted that there are elements throughout the Akkadian poem about the Flood that cannot be understood without the previous narrations, or that at least are more clear if we keep in mind the *Epic of Atrahasis* and even the Sumerian narration in the Nippur tablet.

The meaning given to the name of Ziusudra, the protagonist of the Sumerian Flood, is also related to the role he plays in the story. Once the earth has returned to normality, the gods reward this man with immortality. So Ziusudra is taken to the Dilmun, the Sumerian paradise, where he will spend eternity. The meaning of the name, “life of long days”, would be indeed related to this aspect, as affirmed by J. Bottéro and S.N. Kramer (1989:578). In regards to meaning, it would be linked to Utanapishtim, a name that could mean “he who searches for life” or “very far away”, referring to the immortality he obtains after the Flood, like Ziusudra.

As far as etymology is concerned, the name Ziusudra, often transcribed as Zi.u4.sud.ra (although we can find other transcriptions such as Zin-Suddu or Ziudsura), would also be close to Utanapishtim. The Sumerian -sud.ra element could be translated into Akkadian as the epithet *rūqu*, which means “very far away”, as noted by A.R. George (2003:152). This is an epithet that sometimes can be found accompanying the name Utanapishtim, as in verse 215 of tablet XI.

The next name, Utanapishtim, would then be related, as we have just seen, both to Atrahasis, a name for which it is substituted once, and to Ziusudra, with whom it would share a similar meaning and a close etymology, as indicated by A.R. George (2003:152) and E.G. Kraeling (1929:140). But the similarities with this latter name do not end here, as the first element of the name Ziusudra, *Ziu-*, which can also be pronounced *Uzi-*, can evolve phonetically until it reaches *Ut-*, the first element of the name Utanapishtim: *Ziu-/ Uzi- > \*Uti- > Ut-*.

The central element of Utanapishtim (transcribed in various ways, such as *Utnapishtim*, *Uta-na'ish-tim* or *UD-napišti*) can still be linked to another name, the Hebrew Noah. We could, therefore, have a possible relationship between *-na'ish-* and the Hebrew name Noah, in which this latter name would be an adaptation of that element, a hypothesis put forward by S. Dalley (1991:2).

As for the meaning of the name of the Hebrew protagonist, Noah (נֹחַ, נֹחַ), it could also be related to its function, which would then be linked to the vineyard, as chapter CVI of the Book of Enoch could suggest, or with the fact of becoming the father of a new post-Flood lineage, as was stated first by I. Goldziher (1870:208) and some years later by E.G. Kraeling (1929:138). While this point is uncertain, although there are studies about it, the relationship with the other names that concern us is far more clear as we have seen.

We could also find a possible link between Noah and Ziusudra based on the role they play in the story of the Flood, since both have a life of long days. However, it is difficult to relate these two names etymologically or formally.

The case of the last protagonist, Xisouthros (Ξίσουθρος), is even more interesting. As mentioned, the story of the Flood by Berossos represents a turning point in the narrations of this episode. Although written in Greek and for a Greek audience, its roots are clearly Oriental and this can be affirmed on the basis not only of the content but also the form. The name itself of Xisouthros is much closer to Utanapishtim or Ziusudra than to the Greek Deucalion, the name that most of the Greco-Roman texts give.

As some authors such as J. Bottero and S.N. Kramer (1989:613) or S. Dalley (1991:2) point out, this name could mean “life of long days”, referring to the immortal destiny that is granted to Xisouthros. This character is warned by Cronos, father of Aramazd (the Armenian equivalent of the Greek Zeus), about the advent of a great flood and advised about the



need to build a boat on which to hide with his family, his closest friends, and some animals from different species.

After a quite graphic description of the storm and the rising of the waters, Berossos tells us that the boat of Xisouthros gets stuck in the mountains of Kurdistan. This is the moment when the hero and his three companions (we do not know their names, only their degree of kinship in relationship to Xisouthros: his wife, a daughter, and the captain of the ship) disembark and disappear. The rest of the companions look for them everywhere but do not find them; they only hear a voice that gives instructions on what to do from there on. The voice, which comes from heaven, tells them that the destiny of Xisouthros was to be taken and placed among the gods and that the three people who were with him enjoyed the same fortune upon leaving the boat.

The element of immortality, present in almost all the Eastern tales that we have seen, also appears in the story of Berossos. Not so in the Greco-Roman narrations, which are more focused on the repopulation of the earth after the Flood. This is an important factor that indicates that the story of Berossos looks into the Oriental world rather than into the Greco-Roman world. But there are other factors too; for example, the fact that Xisouthros hides in a boat with his family, his closest friends, and some animals (in the Greco-Roman texts, Deucalion and Pyrrha travel alone) and the episode where the protagonist releases birds on three occasions to check if the earth has again emerged from among the waters (this element appears in both the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Book of Genesis*).

Based on its meaning, we can then relate Xisouthros to Ziusudra (“life of long days”) or Utanapishtim (“he who searches for life” or “very far away”). But perhaps the most significant relationship is indeed with Ziusudra based on phonetics: Xisouthros could be a phonetic loan from the Sumerian Ziusudra, as suggested by E.G. Kraeling (1947:178). Here we should also mention the hypothesis of M. Camps (1996:166), who argues that the name Xisouthros may be related with Σισυθρία, phonetically even closer to Ziusudra. This name, which would have become Σκύθρα (Scythian) because of poor reading, shows the origin of Deucalion.

The possibility of a phonetic loan, added to the similarities between the Sumerian text and Berossos, would lead us to conclude that, in fact, the Greek text is a link between the Eastern and the Western narrations about the Flood.

Onomastic sciences, in this case as in many others, help us to try to establish or confirm possible relationships between texts or even between cultures that may seem different and far away but that in fact are not so different or distant.

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