

Nippur Tablet Challenges Conventional Chronology— Predating the “Priestly” Account by Hundreds of Years!

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Fox News has published an article with a deceptive title, “Ancient tablet reveals new details about Noah's Ark prototype.”¹ The deceptive word in the title is “prototype.” The article began:

The 4000 year old clay tablet containing the story of the Ark and the flood stands on display at the British Museum in London during the launch of the book 'The Ark Before Noah' by Irving Finkel, curator in charge of cuneiform clay tablets at the British Museum.

I wrote to Dr. Finkel saying that the title for his book was “a curiosity to me” and asked:

Do you place the biblical account of the flood around 500 BC? I place it closer to a thousand years earlier, for I believe, contrary to the documentary hypothesis, there really was a man called Moses who wrote of the biblical account. Additionally, there is a growing corpus of archaeological artifacts that confirms the historicity of the OT.

A standard secular approach is to view Noah as a fictional character and that Jewish priests decided to incorporate a Babylonian myth into the Bible around 500 BC—making the Babylonian account, therefore, a “prototype” of the biblical one. This long-standing position should be rejected for multiple reasons. For one thing, the Lord Jesus, King of Creation, referred to Noah and the global flood, and He knows a lot more about HISstory than Dr. Finkel does. Many professionals do not regard the Lord Jesus in the way Christians do.

I continued in my letter to the author of the new book:

Last fall, I had the privilege of holding in my hands a remarkable cuneiform tablet owned by the UPenn Museum. I have also read *The Earliest Version of the Babylonian Deluge Story and the Temple Library of Nippur*, published by the University of Pennsylvania in 1910 and written by Dr. Hermann V. Hilprecht, who received his Ph.D. from Leipzig. I assume you radically disagree with Hilprecht, but he wrote in the Preface: “The cuneiform fragment submitted in the following pages in connection with a general survey of the character and contents of the Temple Library as based upon more recent investigations, contains the oldest account of the Babylonian Deluge Story extant.”



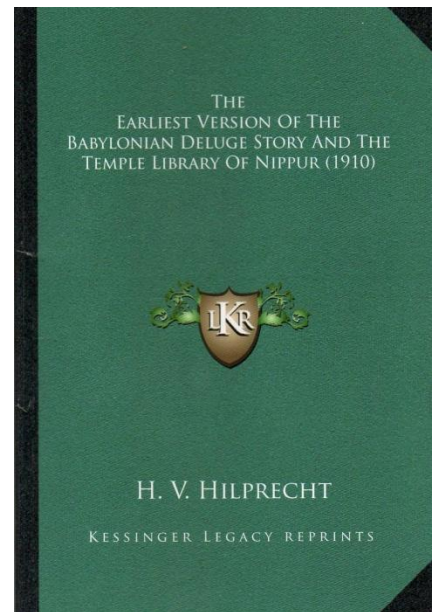
Hilprecht added, “But its significance is further enhanced by the fact that in most important details it agrees with the Biblical Version of the Deluge in a very remarkable manner—much more so than any other cuneiform version previously known ... we must realize that the Nippur

¹ See <http://www.foxnews.com/science/2014/01/24/ancient-tablet-reveals-new-details-about-noah-ark-prototype/>

tablet was written and broken before Abraham had left his Babylonian home in Ur of the Chaldees.”

Further, I asked Dr. Finkel, “Do you believe Abraham as well as the biblical account of the flood both are ‘myths’ in the sense of being untrue?” Hilprecht had written: “There cannot be the slightest doubt that this new Nippur tablet belongs to the most ancient Semitic inscriptions known to us, in other words, to the period generally designated as the period of Sargon of Akkad.”

The former Penn professor also offered a translation of the tablet, and more recent translators agree in large measure with his translation, but there are admittedly some points of disagreement. In *Before the Muses*, Benjamin R. Foster displays actual agreement with Hilprecht. His translation of lines 3 & 4 (“[... a flood] will seize all the peoples at once. [] before the flood comes forth”) agrees with Hilprecht’s translation (“[a deluge I will make, and] it shall sweep away all men together;[but thou seek l]ife before the deluge cometh forth”).



Hilprecht also wrote “it is inconceivable to an objective historian that the Biblical Deluge Story of the so-called ‘Priestly Code,’ agreeing with the oldest Babylonian Version, which is characteristic of Nippur, in so many important details, should have been received into the Old Testament at a time when Nippur's glory was long passed and its Temple Library practically in ruins....”

Near the end of my letter to Dr. Finkel, which did receive a response, I asked:

...do you believe there was an account of a global flood written on a tablet that preceded an actual (significant) flood (in line with the title of your book)? Or, do you believe the biblical account was written around 500 BC and that your examination of the tablet only needs to precede 500 BC. IOW, the tablet precedes Noah’s (perhaps in your mind mythical) “Ark”.

In his somewhat friendly response of Jan 13, 2013², he avoided answering my question completely. Nevertheless, on Thursday, Oct 17, 2013, I had the privilege of holding the remarkably ancient cuneiform tablet (image above), credited to the Babylonian Section of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.³

² I do not reveal content partly because there was little of substance and also because I do not want to violate his privacy.

³ On October 17, 2013, I had the privilege of having lunch with Dr. Philip Jones, Associate Curator and Keeper of Collections for the Babylonian Section of the UPenn Museum. These were the instructions he gave me over lunch regarding giving credit for the images.

On p. 49, Dr. Hilprecht offered his translation of the 14 lines on the Nippur Tablet. The words in brackets, [], are not to be found in the cuniform text, but Dr. Hilprecht offered them “according to context.” Approximately 86 years after Dr. Hilprecht’s publication, there is a more recent translation appearing in *Before the Muses, An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* by Benjamin R. Foster.⁶ I am taking the liberty of displaying both translations in couplet form. Dr. Hilprecht’s couplet appears first—then the newer translation is **emboldened** for contrast:

- The words, *loosen* and *explain*, are similar. When a person *explains*, he “loosens” understanding.

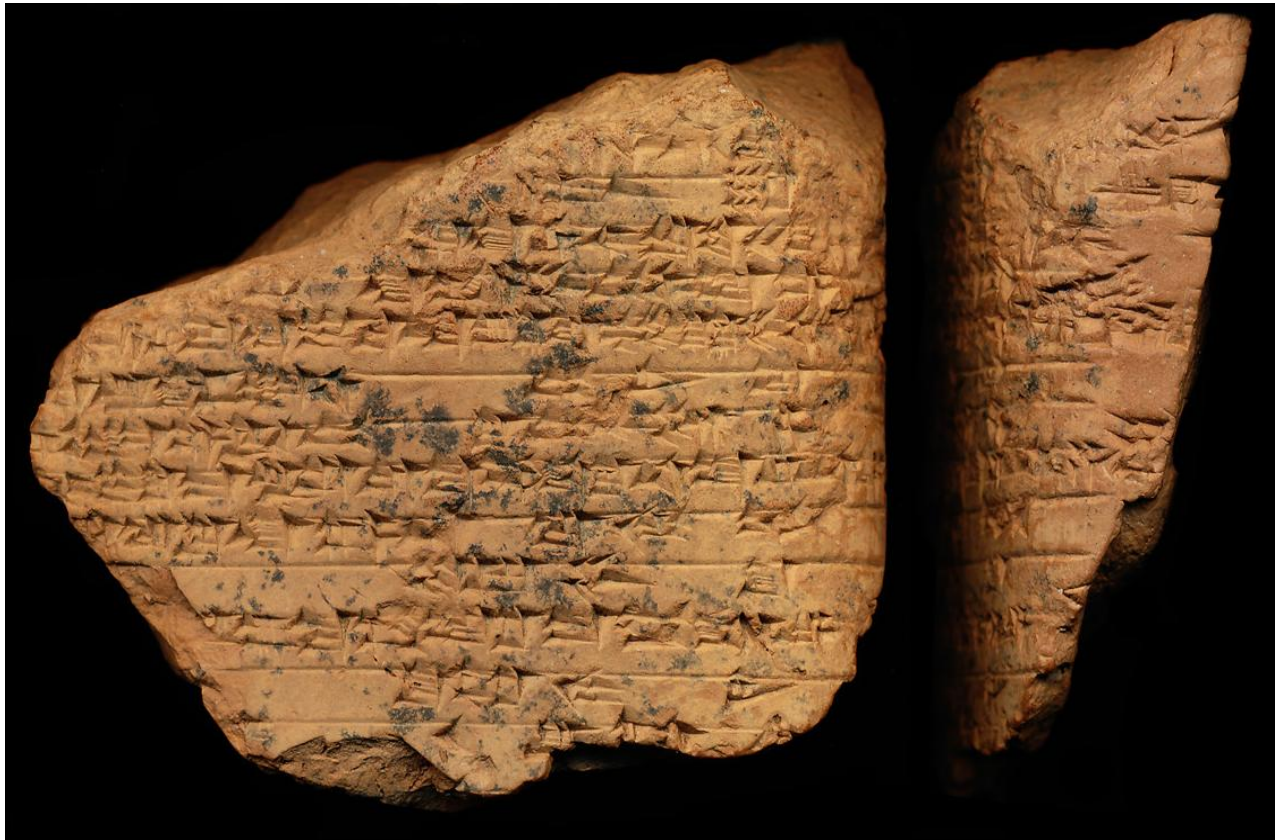
- Both translations are more or less equivalent.

- The second half of the translation-couplets are equivalent, but was the original author talking about reed weaving or destruction? The word, *reeds*, apparently does not appear in line 5 of the tablet.

⁶ CDL Press, Bethesda Maryland 1996, page 184.

7."total height shall be its structure.
8." it shall be a house-boat carrying what has been saved of life.
"Let its structure be [interwoven?] of good(?) reed.
"[] let it be a vessel with the name "Guardian of Life."

The second translator used the word, "reed." A goal here is to open things up for discussion. Other Akkadian experts may examine the text more closely—comparing the excellent images with Hilprecht's transcription.



9."with a strong deck cover (it).
10."[The ship] which thou shalt make,
"[] roof it over with a strong covering.
"[Into the boat which] you will make,

Both couplets are roughly equivalent.

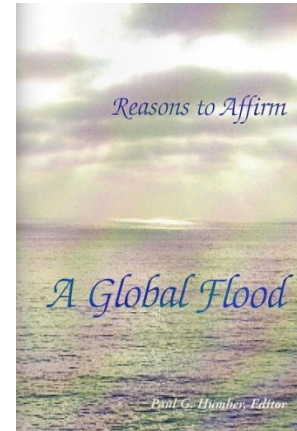
11."[into it br]ing the beasts of the field, the birds of heaven,
12."[and the creeping things, two of everything] instead of a number,
"[Bring aboard] wild creatures of the steppe, birds of heaven.
"Heap up []

Both translations are more or less in harmony, and the Bible certainly does talk about beasts/creatures of the field/strepe and also of birds. Here is evidence that an account of a flood was written that harmonizes with Moses' account. Many biblical scholars today believe Moses wrote his account ca. 1400 BC—900 years before the so-called "Priestly" account but approximately 1,000 years after the actual flood.⁷

The former Penn professor wrote on page 61:

Unless we assume that in the earliest period of Babylonian history there existed already different versions of the Deluge Story in the plains of Shinar—a theory which for various reasons I must decline—it is evident that the Nippur fragment, by 1500 years earlier than the two Nineveh versions, represents the oldest version of the Babylonian Deluge Story in a Semitic translation ... it is inconceivable to an objective historian that the Biblical Deluge Story of the so-called 'Priestly Code,' agreeing with the oldest Babylonian Version, which is characteristic of Nippur, in so many important details, should have been received into the Old Testament at a time when Nippur's glory was long passed and its Temple Library practically in ruins....

Again, credit for the close-up image goes to the Babylonian Section of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. Evidence for a flood of biblical proportions is much fuller than this small report would seem to suggest (see sidebar); nevertheless, this little tablet adds to the discussion, and Professor Hermann Hilprecht's expertise should not be ignored.



This booklet, edited by the author, is available on the Associates for Biblical Research's website.

⁷ Person who would like to receive a copy of *Reasons To Affirm A Global Flood* (36 contributors, most being members of Creation Research Society) may go the Associates for Biblical Research website (<http://www.biblearchaeology.org/bookstore/product.aspx?id=213>) and order it there.