



The Epic of Gilgamesh

Timeline of Jewish Captivity

Moses
leads Israelites
out of Egypt

Reign of
King David

Assyrian
Captivity

Prophet
Jeremiah

Exile in
Babylon

Birth of
Jesus Christ

1300 BCE

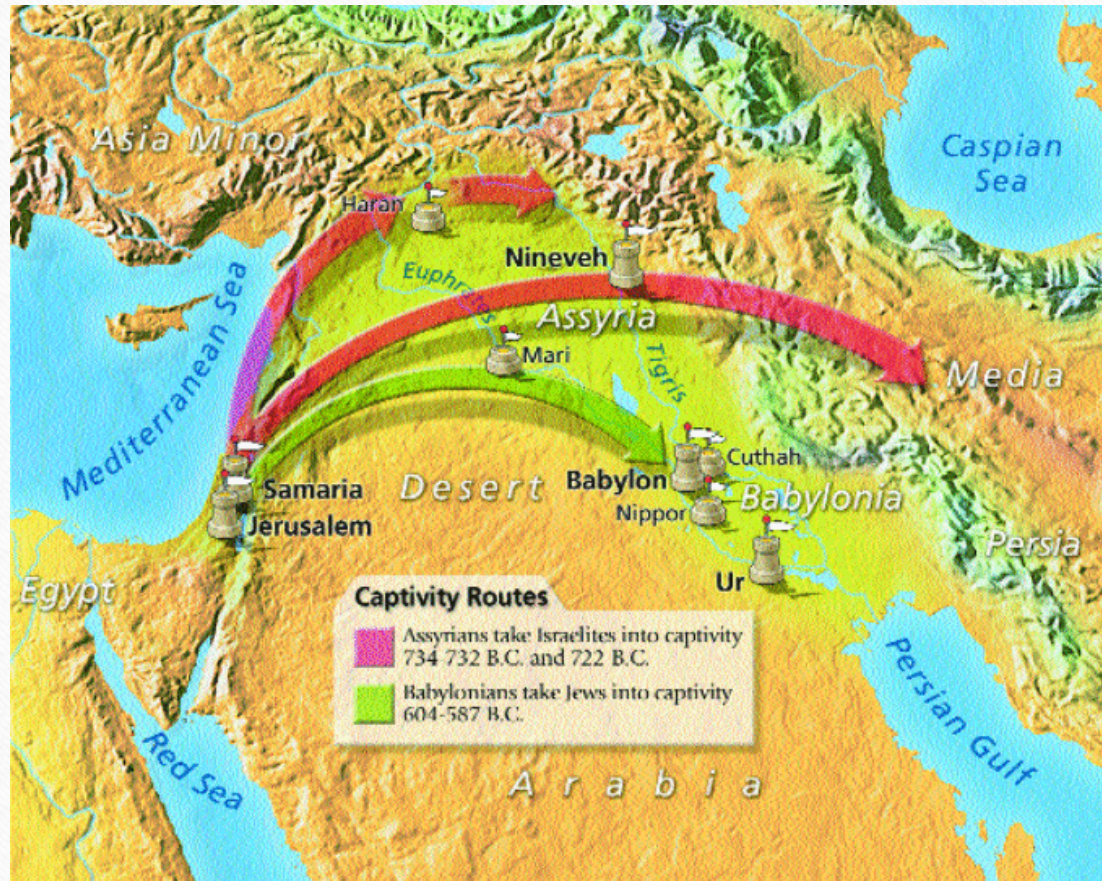
1000 BCE

c. 730 BCE

c. 600 BCE

c. 550 BCE

1 CE



While in exile – first under the Assyrians, then under the Babylonians – the Israelites were exposed to creation narratives that had emerged hundreds of years earlier and were passed down orally and in writing in this “cradle of civilization:” the Enuma Elis and the Epic of Gilgamesh.

Epic of Gilgamesh:

Mythologized story of the real king
Bilgamesh or Gilgamesh, who
ruled c. 2100 BCE.

Early Sumerian poems about him
were combined and used as source
material for an “epic” tale c. 1800
BCE in Babylon....edited again c.
1200 BCE

Right: “Deluge” tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh,
found by archeologists in 1849 during excavations of
King Ashurbanipal’s 7th century BCE library in
Nineveh.



The Epic of Gilgamesh starts with the premise that Gilgamesh was a great and powerful King, whom the gods sought to humble. Yet he was able to defeat then befriend the “wildman” Enkidu that was sent to put G in his place.

The Epic then goes on to describe all the adventures they have together, and G’s unsuccessful quest for immortality.



Uruk = ancient city
(c. 4000 BCE)
located in modern
day Iraq

Areas of similarity between the Bible and the Epic of Gilgamesh:



Thomas Cole, *Expulsion from the Garden of Eden* (1828)

Genesis: Garden of Eden

Adam and Eve are like Enkidu and Shamhat, who were made by the gods from “a pinch of clay,” and live harmoniously in a natural setting surrounded by animals, until Shamhat tempts Enkidu (sexually). He then realizes his nakedness, and has to leave the “garden of the gods” forever.

Later, there’s a snake that steals the plant of eternal life from Gilgamesh.

Areas of similarity between the Bible and the Epic of Gilgamesh:

Ecclesiastes

Gilgamesh, in his pursuit of eternal life, first comes to know pleasure: “Let your belly be full, keep enjoying yourself, day and night! Every day, make merry...” [Eccl. 8:15 – “So I commended pleasure, for there is nothing good for a person under the sun except to eat, drink, and be joyful.”]

...then wisdom: “A three-stranded cord is hardest to break.” [word for word in Eccl. 4:12]

Ultimately, he comes to learn all is vanity: “Only the gods (live) forever under the sun. As for mankind, their days are numbered; whatever they achieve is but wind!” [remember “chasing after wind” – Eccl. 1:14, 2:11, 5:10, 6:9]



Relief carving of Gilgamesh, c. 713 BCE

Areas of similarity between the Bible and the Epic of Gilgamesh:

Genesis: The Great Flood

- Gilgamesh hears the story of a great flood from a survivor, Utanapishtem.
- Flood caused by the gods to diminish the people.
- Ea, god of wisdom, warns Utanapishtem in advance, telling him to build a boat (specifying dimensions) and to “take the seed of all living creatures:”

Demolish the house, build a boat!

Abandon riches and seek survival!

Spurn property and save life!

- Storm lasts 7 nights (vs. 40 days).
- Gods promise never to flood the Earth like that again.



Jacopo Bassano, *Animals Entering Noah's Ark* (1570)

Important differences between the flood narrative in Gilgamesh and Genesis

Though most mainstream Jewish and Christian scholars accept a “Mesopotamian source” for the Biblical flood narrative, the differences between its telling in Genesis vs. Gilgamesh reveal the uniqueness of Israelite thought and belief.

- One God vs. many
- Flood caused by human sin vs. a whim lends moralizing element
- Noah saved due to piety, not wisdom

Post-Script: Was there actually a great flood?



Nanabogho in the Flood. (Illustration by R.C. Armour, from his book *North American Indian Fairy Tales, Folklore and Legends*, 1905)

Flood stories across dozens of cultures (from the ancient Aztecs to Buddhists in China, to the Norse) and with striking similarities.

Geologists have proposed the possibility of a great flood in the Middle East at the end of the last Ice Age, c. 5000 BCE. There is physical evidence that supports this theory, including stone age structures under the Black Sea.

Other theories include tsunamis or meteorites as a cause of localized flooding instead.