On the evening of 3 December 1872 ‘a large and distinguished’ company assembled in the Rooms of the Society of Biblical Archaeology. The keynote speaker for the evening, which was chaired by the famous orientalist Sir Henry Rawlinson (1810–1895), was George Smith, “of the British Museum”, who “was received with cheers”.1 Helped by “Chaldean traditions as narrated by the Greek Berosus”,2 Smith had succeeded in identifying Tablet XI of the Epic of Gilgamesh among the cuneiform fragments from Assurbanipal’s palace library at Nineveh and that evening he lectured on “the Chaldean account of the deluge”.3 The importance of the evening must have been widely known, since the “resolution of thanks” was proposed by Prime Minister William Gladstone (1809–1898), despite the fact that this December was one of the busiest of his political career with no less than ten Cabinet meetings. Gladstone’s speech, which was repeatedly interrupted by applause, drew attention to the importance of the songs of Homer but did not discuss Greek parallels to the Flood.4 Understandably, “the meeting was concluded at a late hour”. The next morning, The Times and The Daily
Telegraph carried extensive reports of Smith’s paper, the latter even the complete text of his preliminary translation.5

Smith’s discovery stimulated research into the Greek traditions of the Flood, and in 1899 Hermann Usener (1834–1905), the most erudite classicist of his time, produced his Sintfluthsagen, in which he analysed the Near Eastern, Indian and Greek versions of the Flood.6 Although the book is still valuable for its many interesting observations, Usener was too strongly influenced by the Romantic Movement to contemplate historical dependencies: according to him, every country had invented its own version. This belief is no longer tenable. More recent inquiries, as this book also tries to show, have demonstrated the influence of the Ancient Near East on Greek life, religion and literature. The Greek myths of the Flood are just one example of this influence, and it is hardly fortuitous that a pupil of Walter Burkert, Gian Caduff, has written the authoritative account of the Greek traditions of the Flood, in which the role of the Ancient Near East is properly acknowledged.7

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5 See The Times and The Daily Telegraph of 4 December 1872. I derive the quotations from these reports.