THE MESOPOTAMIAN FLOODSTORIES:
A COMPARISON AND INTERPRETATION

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Introduction

Up until now three Mesopotamian floodstories have been discovered. The first one was published in 1873 and is part of the Gilgameš-epic, written on its eleventh tablet, the lines 8-196. In terms of time of composition however, this version of the flood is the latest, being composed in the twelfth century B.C. The second Akkadian floodstory, or better parts of it, have been known for a long time. However, the different pieces of the epic containing the floodstory have only recently been put together in an understandable way. The complete epic was published not long ago, in 1969, under the name: The Atrahasis-epic, with the subtitle the Babylonian Story of the Flood. The epic is named after the only human being who plays an active part in the story: King Atrahasis. All the other actors are gods. The epic, which takes up three tablets, on the third of which the floodstory is related, could as well have been called “The Story of the Revolt of the Gods and the Subsequent Creation of Man” (tablet I) or “The Story of the Plagues” (tablet II). The reason to single out for subtitle “The Flood” might have been that already two Mesopotamian floodstories were known, one in the Akkadian and one in the Sumerian language. This Sumerian floodstory is our third flood-text. It was written probably not long before 1600 B.C. and first published in 1914. In this article we use its translation by Civil.

Generally the floodstory is interpreted as a story about destruction. Kristensen is the only one we know of who had a different view 4). Now that there are not only new data about the story of the flood, but also about the Mesopotamian religion in general a re-examination of the floodstory is appropriate. In particular the publication of the Atraḥasis-epic has provided the historian of religion with new material, unknown before. It is our intention to look in this article at the context of each of the floodstories, the contents of the stories themselves, and the differences between them. After that we will try to find out their meaning, using new material concerning the cosmological creation-stories.

Our interpretation of the floodstory as a story about destruction and re-creation is cautiously offered to the reader. We realise its provisional character. Time and again new data are found, which destroy existing explanations. Also, there is a shortage of data which makes it difficult for the student of the Mesopotamian religion to get a clear picture of which he can be sure. Lastly and most importantly, the distance in time and way of thinking between us and the world of Antiquity makes us run two kinds of risks. The first risk is inserting our ideas in the antique text, too eager to clarify what is difficult to understand because of its strangeness. The other risk is as bad: too impressed by the distance and otherness, one is not able to explain things at all. Sympathy with the Antiquity and a notion of relativity are our resources in evading these risks.

Before we proceed to the research proper, it is useful to look at what the Mesopotamians understood by a flood, because the English word flood does not give quite the correct picture of the phenomenon concerned.

The technical term for flood in Sumerian is a.ma.ru., in Akkadian abubu. The Sumerian word is translated by Civil as “storm”. The Akkadian word is translated both by the Akkadisches Handwörterbuch and the Chicago Assyrian Dictionary as “flood, deluge”. According to Jensen, the abubu indicates the moving water caused by a rainstorm or a storm which drives the seawater into land (or both). The abubu is not the inundation itself. In Gilg. XI 131 it is said: “The

4) W. B. Kristensen, De Plaats van het Zondvloedverhaal in het Gilgameš-epos (1915) in Verzamelde Bijdragen (Amsterdam, 1947), 7-14.