Floods in the Ancient Near East: Crash Course World Mythology #16

Crash Course: World Mythology
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Hi, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Mythology, and we've spent a lot of this series on how various gods created the earth but now, it's time to look at one way they destroy it. Today's topic: is floods.

Oh! Thoth put his swim trunks on! All right, we're all ready, let's get started.

[Opening music]

You're probably familiar with the story of the flood from the Bible, featuring Noah, the ark. But, it turns out a lot of cultures have flood myths. One explanation for this is the belief that myths are rooted in history. Remember Euhemerism? Plus, many of the earliest complex societies grew around rivers, which would flood.

Most of the time that flooding was neither predictable nor helpful, except the Nile River, whose floods were regular, provided water for irrigation, and were thought to be of divine significance. Just ask Sobek, crocodile-headed god of the Nile's floods. Despite his frightening teeth, he also has a reputation for healing, or protection in some stories.

Anyway, flood myths also reflect a common theme of the myths we've examined: the idea that Creation's source is primordial waters. If water can bring life, it stands to reason, it can also bring death. You can see this symbolism in various purification rituals like baptisms, prenuptial cleansings, they serve as tiny reenactments of floods where an old life is destroyed, and a new life begins. A tiny, made to order, single-serving flood. Adorable and destructive.

Let's begin in Ancient Mesopotamia with one of our favorite mythical sources: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Thought Bubble, whatcha got?

At the beginning of this particular story, the hero, Utnapishtim, is talking to Gilgamesh about living in the city of Shuruppak on the banks of the Euphrates. He explains that a group of gods - Anu, Enlil, Ninurta, Ennugi, and Ea - put their divine heads together and decided to flood the place. Luckily for Utnapishtim, Ea has second thoughts and sneaks over to spill the beans.

Ea secretly tells Utnapishtim what's going down and orders him to leave his home, all his possessions and to build a boat which will carry the seed of all living things. Utnapishtim's boat is massive; an acre in circumference with six enormous decks. Utnapishtim and his family loaded up with everything there was: all the silver, gold, and seeds of every living thing. His kith, and his kin, and the wild beasts, and all kind of craftsmen and also shuffle board and a killer buffet, I assume.

When the hour of destruction arrives, the gods sent down a terrifying storm. So terrifying that even the gods were afraid of the flood-weapon. And when they see what they've done to their creation, the gods, humbled, sat there, weeping. Whoops.

The storm rages for seven days before eventually blowing itself out. Utnapishtim looks out of a porthole and sees that all of mankind has been destroyed and he weeps. He's just become the first cruise ship captain under very unfortunate circumstances. His boat comes around on Mount Nimush, and Utnapishtim sends out birds to search for dry land.

First, a dove comes back because there was no place to perch, then the swallow returns. Finally, he sends out a raven, and when it doesn't return, he knows dry land is out there somewhere. He makes a sacrifice to the gods, and am-scrays off that oat-bay lickety split.

Thank you Thought Bubble.

So the flood destroys mankind, but it doesn't end there. Enlil, the brains behind the decision to destroy humanity, sees that Utnapishtim and his family, and also probably the craftsmen, have survived and he can't believe his eyes. What sort of life survived?

No man should have lived through the destruction. Ea, who had told Utnapishtim to build the giant boat, chimes in, "You are the sage of the gods, warrior, so how, O how, could you fail to consult, and impose the flood? Punish the sinner for his sin, punish the criminal for his crime, but ease off, let work not cease, be patient."

Ea tries to instill some moderation in Enlil, and suggests that maybe, in the future, he could just send, like, a lion or a wolf or a plague, you know, something mild. Like a plague. Apparently this satisfies Enlil because he shrugs, pops on down to Utnapishtim's boat, and touches him on the forehead to make him immortal.

I guess it all works out in the end for Utnapishtim. You know what they say: "All's well that end's well... or doesn't end at all ever because it's immortal."

So this all probably sounds familiar to those of you who know the flood story from the Bible. I don't remember Noah having room for every piece of gold and silver, alongside all those animals, but both stories have angry divinities who order a chosen person to order a big boat and fill it with wildlife. Then birds are sent to find land after the boat gets stuck on a mountain. There are a number of important differences though too.

First of all, the reason the Babylonian gods decided to destroy humanity is, well, it's unclear. In one version it's because humans are making too much noise, which, okay, fair. Keep it down you kids! Don't make me send a deluge down there and literally destroy you.

In the Old Testament, the flood is punishment for mankind's sinfulness. As the book tells it, "God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the Earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually. And it repented the Lord that he had made man on the Earth, and it grieved him at his heart. And the Lord said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the Earth; both man and beast, and creeping things and the fowls of the air, for it repenteth me that I have made them."

Which I mean, man, I don't love the creeping things but I don't want them destroyed, what about Anansi?

Yahweh commands Noah to build a boat, like Ea did with Utnapishtim, but Yahweh gives Noah even more detailed instructions. He's also less efficient when it comes to the rainstorm. It takes Yahweh 40 days to do what the Babylonian God did in 7. Then again those Babylonians were working as a team.

Like the Sumerian myth, Noah celebrates his survival with a sacrifice. This seems to make Yahweh feel both relieved and sorry for destroying the world. He says, "I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every living thing as I have done."

Whoops again. Yahweh doesn't make Noah immortal like Utnapishtim but he does promise Noah that he and his sons will replenish the earth and he gives them all the living things of the earth for food, along with some rules for how they should be eaten, which, I mean, that's got to be pretty disappointing for those animals, right? Like, "yay, we survived the flo - you're going to do what?!"

Most important, at least for this episode, is that Yahweh establishes a covenant with Noah and promises that he will never have another flood destroy the earth again.

Somewhere in between the inscrutable Babylonian flood and the sin-cleansing biblical flood, is the Zoroastrian flood. This is a myth that comes to us from ancient Iran, it also features a lone survivor named Yima who gathers two of each species to repopulate the earth, but rather than building a boat Yima gathers the animals in his mountain castle, which is high enough to survive the rising flood waters.

The creator god, Ahura Mazda, decides that the earth needs a new beginning not because of sin, but because it's overwhelmed by the constant multiplication of its immortal beings. This suggests that prior to the flood Earth's inhabitants were immortal and it's only after this cleansing that we have a world in which stuff dies.

In yet another flood myth, this one from Ovid's metamorphoses, Jupiter decides to destroy mortals for their sinfulness. Jupiter seems to be worried that humans might contaminate other earthly beings, which, I mean, yeah, same. The gods don't all agree with Jupiter but they assent to his decision because he's the boss. They're sad because they'll miss all the delicious sacrifices that humans gave them, but they agree that a flood is better than a fire, because fires can get out of control and then reach up to Olympus.

Remember gods, only you can prevent heaven fires. So Jupiter gets together with Neptune, who pumps up the river and whips up some high winds and, flood. There's no chosen survivors for Jupiter, he's trying to just wipe the slate clean.

But luckily for humanity, two people: Deucalion and Pyrrha are fortunate enough to survive and so life carries on. Jupiter obviously notices that these two dodged his wrath, but he's so impressed with Deucalion and Pyrrha's piety that he spares them. Like Utnapishtim and Noah, they give thanks in prayer and, like Noah, they're tasked with repopulating the world. They do that by throwing stones over their shoulders which become more humans. And that kids, is how babies are made, no follow-up questions.

Today we learned that gods in the ancient Mediterranean world seemed highly ambivalent about their creations, especially humans, but especially creeping things. But also there's enough similarity in these myths to suggest that they may have influenced one another, and that seems likely given the amount of cultural transmission in the region.

And we also learned that a good way to survive a flood is to be reasonably righteous, that helps Deucalion and Pyrrha, Noah, and Yima. But maybe the best way to survive the destruction of humanity is to listen to the gods. Especially when they give you detailed instructions on how to build a boat.

Sometimes life, like a flood, is unpredictable and frightening so it makes sense for us to look for meaning in tragedy wherever we can find it and one way that we can find meaning is to tell a story, and then to change into some dry clothes.

Thanks for watching we'll see you next week.

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Thanks for watching. And just so you know, that thing with the rocks, is totally how babies are made.