



2-1-2016

# Samuel Chen, *The Primeval Flood Catastrophe: Origins and Early Development in Mesopotamian Traditions*

Alan Lenzi

*University of the Pacific*, [alenzi@pacific.edu](mailto:alenzi@pacific.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/cop-facarticles>

 Part of the [History of Religion Commons](#)

## Recommended Citation

Lenzi, A. (2016). Samuel Chen, *The Primeval Flood Catastrophe: Origins and Early Development in Mesopotamian Traditions*. *History of Religions*, 55(3), 367–370. DOI: 10.1086/684280  
<https://scholarlycommons.pacific.edu/cop-facarticles/167>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the All Faculty Scholarship at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in College of the Pacific Faculty Articles by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [mgibney@pacific.edu](mailto:mgibney@pacific.edu).

*The Primeval Flood Catastrophe: Origins and Early Development in Mesopotamian Traditions.* By Y. S. CHEN. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013. Pp. 304. \$175.00 (cloth).

*The Primeval Flood Catastrophe* is a revised version of the author's dissertation, completed at the Oriental Institute, University of Oxford. Although Y. S. Chen has collected and treated all flood-related sources up to the first century BCE in volume 2 of his dissertation (see p. 2 n. 4), this monograph only focuses on the material from the Early Dynastic III (ED III) to the Old Babylonian (OB) periods. The author's main argument is that the Primeval Flood Catastrophe (henceforth, Flood) developed in the OB period in response to political conditions and under the influence of earlier Sumerian literary traditions. To support his thesis, the author utilizes a historical, developmental approach to the material, despite the significant obstacles in applying such an approach (12–16) to the imperfectly recovered Sumerian and Akkadian materials.

Chapter 1 lists all attestations of the relevant flood terminology and analyzes this data first by orthographic variation and then by contextual usage (figurative, mythical, and literal). Two important observations arise from the orthographic data. First, because of semantic and orthographic ambiguity in the use of the terms *mar-uru<sub>5</sub>*, “tempest, stormwind,” and *a-ma-ru/mar-uru<sub>5</sub>*, “flood,” prior to the OB period, it is difficult to determine the relevancy of many texts containing these terms for the study. Second,

only Sumerian a-ma-ru and Akkadian *abūbu* take on the meaning “Flood,” and this occurs only in the OB period. With regard to contextual usage, the figurative uses of “flood/tempest” are much more common than the mythical or literal ones. Thus, the bulk of the chapter is given to analyzing the figurative uses in various ways (e.g., similes vs. metaphors). One significant finding is that Chen identifies three different kinds of floods/tempests: a normal flood/tempest, a cosmic flood/tempest at the beginning of the primeval era, and the Flood that brought the primeval era to a close. The author reasonably concludes that “flood/tempest” is overwhelmingly concerned with depictions of power and/or destruction. In terms of literary development, the Flood first appears in the *Instructions of Ur-Ninurta* and is uniquely developed in the *Atram-ḥasis Epic*.

Chapter 2 demonstrates that “the Flood motif and the temporal clause regarding the Flood were innovations that took place starting from the time of Ur-Ninurta (c. 1923–1896 BC), as a result of the literary and ideological responses to the catastrophic demise of the Ur III period” (127). To demonstrate this development, Chen examines thirty-one texts that deal with primeval times in serial fashion, paying close attention to temporal indications throughout each text. In the first half of the chapter, Chen examines twenty-one texts that include a reference to primeval time without the Flood. Special attention is given to how the primeval times relate to other conceptual and temporal frameworks (e.g., cosmological, cultic, historical, legendary, chronographical, etc.) to discern the literary motif’s development and contribution to the literary works in which it occurs. For example, *Shulgi Hymn O* depicts the historical king Shulgi and the legendary king Gilgamesh as brothers in primeval time. This projection “back to the primeval time was an attempt to gain a sense of precedence and permanence for their kingship” (76). In the second half of the chapter, Chen considers ten texts that mention the Flood in primeval times. The author offers several interesting observations here. For example, in the *Sumerian Flood Story* Ziusudra’s kingship is permanent and stable, even transcendent, since Ziusudra gains immortality, whereas in the antediluvian period represented in the tablet designated W-B 444, kingship is impermanent, mobile, and ultimately abolished, which is why kingship had to descend from heaven a second time in the postdiluvian world. But when Chen makes assertions that one tradition innovates or builds on a previous tradition and yet has not established the extent to which or even the possibility that the texts/traditions knew one another, he has not sufficiently heeded his own methodological cautions in the introduction (see 13–15).

Chapter 3 focuses on the literary representations and development of (a) the Flood hero in relation to the last antediluvian dynasty, (b) the names and functions of Ziusudra and Uta-Napishtim, and (c) the antediluvian era as a whole in chronographical sources. Chen intends to identify “the major sources involved” and to unravel “the conceptual and literary processes through which the traditions emerged and evolved” (129). In the first section of the chapter Chen argues that the diversity of traditions surrounding the names of the Flood hero and of the names and number of the last antediluvian royal dynasty is a result of ancient interpretations of the first few lines of the ED III *Instructions of Shuruppak*. As for the origin and meaning of the names Ziusudra and Uta-Napishtim (and variants), Chen believes the two names/figures probably derive from separate traditions or “at least . . . they once developed separately and

were associated with different conceptual frameworks and plots” (170). Uta-Napishtim (and variants), which he believes means “I/he found life,” was shaped thematically in the different versions of the *Gilgamesh Epic* due to Gilgamesh’s search for life. Ziusudra, which means “life of prolonged or distant days,” derives from the “the context of royal hymnic compositions from the Ur III period onward as a topos of the royal figures being rewarded with a prolonged life or reign due to their alleged contributions to the (re-)establishment of cultic and public services” (171). The two figures’ close association was a secondary development, most fully exhibited in the Standard Babylonian version of the *Gilgamesh Epic*. The final section treats the representation of the antediluvian era as a whole in chronographical sources, where Chen proposes the stages through which the antediluvian section “could have” (189) developed and reconstructs the “original or canonical” order of the antediluvian king list (192). Chen is at his best in this chapter when offering his many interesting suggestions about the role and function of the Flood hero and antediluvian kings in individual texts and how one text’s use of these contrasts with another. His developmental approach, however, is problematic for the same reasons given for chapter two above. Is it reasonable to believe the OB version of the *Instructions of Shuruppak* was created by a scribe interpreting an ED III version of that composition? Chen also utilizes at times an outmoded sort of form criticism, once popular in Biblical Studies, to ask about the priority of and cross-fertilization between *kinds* of tradition (e.g., the didactic tradition “must have” borrowed from the chronographical tradition).

In the highly structured final chapter, Chen examines the Flood story (in its various manifestations) and its intertextual relationships with the Sumerian city laments, *The Curse of Agade* and *Ur-Namma A* under four subheadings: general conceptual patterns and literary motifs, means of destruction, cause of destruction, and petition and restoration. Under each subheading Chen first describes the topic in the Sumerian texts and then describes how it is represented in the Flood materials. In each case he finds a genetic relationship between the two corpora. This entire literary process was shaped, he argues, by the destruction of the Ur III kingdom and the attempts of subsequent kings in the Isin-Larsa period to present themselves in royal hymns as legitimate successors to the fallen regime.

Chen’s comparative case studies offer several interesting interpretive insights. For example, Chen finds that many motifs used to depict the destructive power of the storm/flood in city laments (e.g., famine, ritual discontinuation, divine anger) are also used in the Flood stories. Moreover, these destructive motifs reverse royal prerogatives used in royal hymns to legitimize kingship (e.g., abundance, ritual patronage, and divine favor). He argues that the author of the OB *Atram-ḫasis Epic* has deliberately taken the results/effects of destruction described in the city laments and turned them into the causes for bringing the flood. He contends that the city laments have adopted the destruction-restoration rhetoric of the royal hymns (e.g., *Ishme-Dagan A* and *Ur-Ninurta A* from Isin), which in turn sheds light on the Flood hero’s royal status and long life (a constant theme in the royal hymns [zi or nam-ti / bala u<sub>4</sub> su<sub>3</sub>, “to prolong life / reign”]) in the various versions of the Flood story. Finally, the people’s deliberate manipulations of the gods through making or withholding offerings in the *Atram-ḫasis Epic* was “an ingenious and satirical spin” on “the common motif of the interruption of divine offerings during the catastrophe in the city laments” (248).

One has to admire the industry, enthusiasm, and creativity with which Chen tackles the antediluvian puzzle. The author exhaustively compiles the sources, which are treated with philological acumen; he puts forward many interesting literary interpretations; and his main point about the rise of the Flood in the OB period is well established. As for some of the other developmental conclusions, the numerous methodological difficulties that Chen lists in his introduction and the fact that many pieces of the traditions are likely missing place question marks over several of his suggestions. Still, those looking to work with Mesopotamian Flood traditions would be wise to consult this monograph and the author's dissertation.

ALAN LENZI

*University of the Pacific*