**The Sumerian Flood Story**

The Sumerian flood story comes down to us in a single fragmentary tablet, which was not published until 1914.  The poem begins with the mother goddess Nintur ("Lady birth-house" or "Lady womb") recalling that her creatures, mankind, have no place in the world and are apparently wandering around:

    let me bring them back,   
 let me lead my people back from their trails    (Jacobsen, *Harps* 145)

She decides that her people should "come and build cities and cult places, / that I may cool myself in their shade" (*Harps* 145).  She shows them how to purify the land, to perform divine services, and to utter "cries for clemency"  (*Harps* 146).  There is also some indication that this civilizing and city-building will establish peace in the surrounding regions.   
 After a long gap in the tablet, which perhaps told of a failure to build a city because of anarchy among the people, Nintur installs a priest-king to lead the people:  "let me have him oversee their labor, / and let him teach the nation to follow along / unerringly like cattle!" (*Harps* 146).  The first five cities are built and given to their respective deities:  Eridu to Enki, the clever fresh water-god, Badtibira to Dumuzi and Inanna, Sippar to Utu the sun god, and so on.  The people dredged the canals, "which were blocked with purplish / clay," and carried water, which "established abundant growth" (*Harps* 147).

The next section of the story is lost, but it probably contained a list of pre-flood rulers of the first five cities.  These priest-kings were credited with extraordinarily long reigns; other sources say that one king, for example, reigned 36,000 years.  (Compare the genealogies in Genesis and the long childhoods of people in Hesiod's silver age.)  As in the later Story of Artrahasis, the flood probably comes about because mankind makes too much noise, angering the chief god Enlil ("Lord of wind"), who can't sleep because of the noise.  When the gap in the text ends, the goddesses Nintur and Inanna are weeping for their doomed people, but the clever Enki "took counsel in his own heart" (*Harps* 147).  Enki contacts the pious priest-king of Nippur, Ziusudra ("He saw life"), who already has had a vision of the gods meeting and swearing an oath.  Enki speaks to the flood-hero Ziusudra through a wall, perhaps to avoid breaking an oath not to tell the people what the gods planned.  He tells Ziusudra that the gods have commanded that "a flood will sweep over the cult centers; / To destroy the seed of mankind" (Kramer, *History Begins* 153).  No doubt the text continues with Enki's advice on how to build a boat and fill it with living creatures, but here another gap ensues.  After the gap comes a description of the flood itself:

 All the windstorms, exceedingly powerful, attacked as one,   
 At the same time, the flood sweeps over the cult centers.  (*History Begins* 153)

After seven days and nights, the sun god Utu comes out and shines his light on the heaven and earth.   Ziusudra either drills a hole in the boat or opens a window to let the sun's rays in.  Then he kisses the ground before Utu (prostrating himself) and sacrifices sheep and oxen in thanksgiving for his deliverance.  After another gap in the text, we find Enki (?) noting that the gods have sworn "by the life's breath of heaven / the life's breath of earth" that Ziusudra is "allied with all of you" (Harps 149).  Ziusudra kisses the ground again, this time before An and Enlil, who reward him with "life like a god's . . . lasting breath of life, like a god's" (*Harps* 150).  Then the gods transport Ziusudra, now called preserver of "the seed of mankind," to the land of Dilmun, in the east.

Dilmun may refer to the island of Bahrain, but at this early time, it was seen as an Eden-like land of peace and purity.  Another text about Dilmun describes it as "a pure place . . . a clean place" where "the raven uttered no cries . . . the lion killed not, / The wolf snatched not the lamb" (Kramer, Sumerian Mythology 55).  There is also some archeological record of a great flood in this area.  When excavating the site of Ur in 1926-29, Sir Leonard Woolley found an eight-foot band of  "perfectly clean clay" (21) probably laid down by a massive flood around 3500 BC.  Woolley estimated that the flood may have affected an area of the lower Tigris and Euphrates river valleys "perhaps 400 miles long and 100 miles across" (24).  The flood was by no means universal, but such a deluge could have given rise to the tradition of a flood which happened in the dim beginnings of time.

**Generic Flood Questions**   
1.  Why do you suppose flood stories are so popular?  What events or religious tenets might flood stories explain?   
2.  Floods may cleanse but they also destroy.  Why do you think flood stories often occur shortly after the creation?   
3.  Why are humans destroyed in each story?  Why are the flood heroes picked to survive?  What do your answers reveal about each culture's concerns, and its view of the relations between men and gods?   
4.  How does the flood affect the gods?  (Note their reactions to sacrifices.)  How does various gods' behavior before, during, and after the flood affect each culture's and/ or your view(s) of these gods?   
5.  Compare and contrast the rewards that each flood hero gets after his journey.  Why do you think these particular rewards are given in each case?   
6.  Compare and contrast the covenant and / or promise given at the end not send another flood.  No covenant or promise?--why?   
7.  In what ways is the world different after the flood?  What does each story tell us about the relations between gods and men in each culture?   
8.  Some flood stories end with an emphasis on the descendants of the flood hero.  Do you see any significance in the ways mankind reproduces (or in the ways the gods limit life-spans or reproduction) at the beginning or end of each story?   
9.  Do you think the lessons that each story teaches are similar or slightly different?  Do the gods learn any lessons after the flood?