The Gilgamesh Epic Emerges: Deciphering Cuneiform Brings Antiquity to Light

Emily Nuss
Social Studies Education

No doubt our world hardly resembles the one that existed a century and a half ago. Technological innovations, global commerce, and the two world wars, among other developments, have each served to reshape our perceptions of humanity and history. Less-recognized by many, however, were the efforts made by pioneers in the field of archeology, especially in Mesopotamia. Through exploration that turned to excavation, at first by curious diplomats and then by experts, numerous antiquities were taken from the arid plains of Iraq to fill museums in London, Paris, Constantinople, Philadelphia, and Chicago. Biblical familiarity gave impulse to their work, along with the human drive to discover. Of all the wonders they uncovered, the most important became the cuneiform
tablets which have communicated more than thought possible about the ancient civilizations that inhabited the region. Assyria flourished in the north, preceded by the kingdom of the Akkadians, and Babylon prospered in the south upon the achievements of their Sumerian forerunners. While the majority of the surviving tablets contain business transactions, extensive libraries found have supplied scholars with samples of Mesopotamian literature. Of the stories deciphered and translated, none have received the amount of attention that the Gilgamesh Epic has attracted. It stands as a connection point, whereby scholars, students, and general audiences alike identify with a heroic individual who is distant, but shares our human struggles. This paper will trace the early development of archeology in Mesopotamia, as it pertains to the decipherment of cuneiform, after which I will delineate how news of the Gilgamesh flood story was received and how it has come to be recognized as a world masterpiece.

Early travelers to the Near East noted remarkable ruins in the wasteland of the Mesopotamian desert. One visitor from Greece, a physician named Ctesias described the remains he encountered in the fourth century BC. It possible that the Greeks had additional knowledge of the ancient civilizations, for the philosopher Aelian notes a character by the name of Ciligamos in his writings during the second century. Another Greek historian by the name of Berossus recorded a legend that mimics a portion of the Gilgamesh Epic. In addition, the Qur’an makes reference to the physical remains left behind. But knowledge of the great kingdoms of the Babylonians and the Assyrians was faint. The other peoples of the ancient Near East who predicted or lived contemporaneously with the Assyrians and the Babylonians, such as the Hitittes, Hurarians, Akkadians, and Sumerians, had been entirely forgotten. Sumerologist Samuel Kramer from the University of Pennsylvania explains that, “there was no clearly recognizable trace of Sumer or its people and language in the entire Biblical, classical, and post-classical literature.”

As a result, early travelers to Mesopotamia formed only basic links between the antiquities they observed and the history of the region according to that framework with which they were familiar, opening vast potential for later archeological inquiry. Late in the eighteenth century, preliminary work to extract meaning from antiquities was pioneered by a Danish geographer, Carsten Niebuhr. He copied certain Persian inscriptions and correctly concluded that the unusual symbols formed an ancient script. His transcriptions were published in Copenhagen between 1774 and 1778 along with an account written in German of his journey. Scholarship being done simultaneously on Old Persian in India aided the decipherment of Niebuhr’s documents. Notable among those working was a German high school teacher named Georg Grotefend, who recognized that the inscriptions Niebuhr had copied likely began with an imperial address and was able to identify the names of Darius Hystaspes and Xenodes, both names from the Old Testament, within the curious cuneiform script. His groundbreaking achievements were announced in 1802, but they gained little notice. For, as Edward Chiera explains, “The work was necessarily slow because in those times communication was difficult...and many months were wasted by individual scholars on problems which had already been solved by their colleagues working independently.” In this way, Grotefend’s discovery was overlooked, as no word of his achievements was passed from Germany to Britain. Despite early interest shown by both European travelers and certain academics on the home front, the potential abroad for verifying Old Testament episodes through archeology had yet to be widely recognized.

British diplomat and scholar Henry Rawlinson drew attention to the matter several decades later. He had gone to the Near East under the auspices of the English Intelligence Service in 1835. During this period, Mesopotamia was under the jurisdiction of the Ottoman Empire, but formal relations had been established between the Empire and Great Britain. Conrert describes how “consular agents were appointed at Mosul and Baghdad, usually young men of education who occupied their leisure in exploration and occasionally a little amateur excavation.” Rawlinson was just such an agent who had learned some Persian during a former placement in India. Upon arrival in Baghdad, he became interested in a certain curiosity—the Behistun rock—on which a proclamation was inscribed in three languages. It was erected high on a cliff face along the ancient road east out of Babylon by King Darius Hystaspes in the sixth century BC. Rawlinson recounts in a personal narrative his feat of copying the symbols of the most inaccessible Persian portion of the inscription by the assistance of a “wild Kurdish boy.” He describes the ordeal as an adventure, including each danger and miracle. After making further notations, the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society published a translation of the Persian portion in 1846 along with copies of the cuneiform originals in Elamite and Akkadian.

About the discovery Rawlinson claims, “[It] is almost of equal value as the interpretation of the Assyrian inscriptions as was the Greek translation of the Rosetta Stone for the intelligence of the hieroglyphic texts of Egypt.” He realized the immense importance of his discovery, estimating that it would certainly impact the early study of cuneiform. Unlike Grotefend, his efforts were recognized and others came to build on his achievement.

At the same time, Frenchman Paul-Emile Botta had begun excavations as Khorsabad, in 1842, and his friend and competitor, Austin Henry Layard, was beginning to dig at Nimrud and Nineveh, in 1845. The work of these men resulted in quantities of bricks, tablets, and cylinders engraved with the curious markings being shipped to Europe along with more impressive sculptures. Both the British Museum and the Louvre became storehouses for the ancient treasures. Since monuments and relics drew more attention, neither Botta nor Layard had serious regard for the inscriptions and their workmen were prone to toss tablets aside. In fact, Layard was even remembered for passing the writing off as decoration. But a few foresaw the tablets’ value. Rawlinson and his assistant Hornmand Reuss, working also at Nineveh, sent 26,000 tablets back to England between 1849 and 1854. Even so, as Leo Dueul notes in Treasures of Time, “Most of these were gathered negligently, since their discoverers were more intrigued by winged bulls and other potential exhibits.”

Meanwhile additional work to decipher the code had begun in certain corners of Europe. Grotefend and Rawlinson were two pioneering scholars among several, including Frenchman Jules Oppert and Irishman Edward Hincks. But other academics distrusted the credibility of their work. In 1857, the Royal Asiatic Society invited four leading Assyriologists, as they had come to be called, to each independently decipher a certain text from the Tigris Pleiser cylinder at the British Museum. To the society’s astonishment, each one produced comparable renditions, proving their scholarship.

Despite the success gained through this formal recognition, the task of steadily cataloging and translating the scores of tablets had which had made their way to European museums remained daunting. A young, self-educated scholar who admitted he was fated for the work appeared on the scene when the time was ripe. George Smith was employed by the curator of the British museum to aid in the process of repairing and deciphering tablets. He said about himself, “For some years I did little or nothing, but in 1866, seeing the unsatisfactory state of our knowledge of those parts of Assyrian history which bore upon the history of the Bible, I felt anxious to do something toward settling a few of the questions involved.”

From 1866 to 1872, Smith searched for clues in the Babylonian texts that had been taken from Ashurbanipal’s library in Nineveh, hoping to construct a framework for the history of the region based upon textual evidence rather than the biblical narrative. More often than not, however, his notable finds related to Old Testament episodes. But these
points of connection were minor compared to what he calls “a far more interesting discovery” made in 1872.23 That year, he happened upon a fragment that contained a Babylonian parallel to the biblical flood, and on December 3, he read a paper to the Society of Biblical Archæology entitled “The Chaldaean Account of the Deluge.” From his title it is obvious that the Bible was the accepted historical standard. Against it, this foreign account—the first fragment of the Gilgamesh Epic discovered—gained instant recognition.

Both Alexander Heidel and N. K. Sandars, each experts on the Babylonian account, remark on the impact made by Smith’s report. Heidel says the announcement “created tremendous enthusiasm throughout Europe and gave a great impetus to the study of cuneiform inscriptions in general.”24 Sandars likewise notes that “interest was immediate and widespread.”25 The Daily Telegraph in London responded by sponsoring Smith to go to Nineveh to search for additional fragments. In turn, Smith agreed to supply the Telegraph with news detailing what he found. Thus, at the demand of the public, Smith set out for the field himself.

Smith joined those at Nineveh where Layard had been digging and quickly found precisely what he was seeking.26 He made his initial announcement, and then summarizes the fifteen new lines had uncovered. Curiously, he happens upon a fragment that contained a Babylonian parallel term, the word interest is used to describe the discoveries.27 Evidently, the value of Smith’s discovery for humanity at large was already recognized. These papers immediately followed the Telegraph’s release on May 21.28

In October, more news from Smith came from London. The Little Rock Daily Republican29 and the San Francisco Bulletin30 published it under the headline “Assyrian Discover.” This extended article reported that Smith brought more than four hundred tablets back from the Near East, in which the “history, politics, astronomy, mythology, geography, and language of ancient Assyria” were disclosed. But to avoid boring its readers, Smith chooses to focus on “a text that has attracted most attention—that, namely, which belongs to the deluge series.” He notes how this same text had impressed both students and scholars during the previous year when he had made his initial announcement, and then summarizes the content of the fifteen new lines had uncovered. Curiously enough, after providing the summary, Smith closes by saying, “I need not dwell upon the interest of placing this account side by side with that contained in the Book of Genesis.” In this phrase, he intimates that he is privy to more knowledge about the legend, while admitting that it is easier to report that which will be popularly understood.

European and American sentiments regarding George Smith’s discovery—and in fact the entire emerging field of Assyriology—would have been characteristically different, perhaps even non-existent, had Europe not expressed cultural familiarity with the biblical narrative. Contrell explains, “It is difficult for our modern, secularized civilization [sic] to appreciate the excitement that was aroused in Europe by the news... that the fabulous cities of the Old Testament, Nineveh and Babylon, could still be identified and excavated. Our Victorian forefathers lived far closer to the Bible than most of us do today.”31 When news came from Mesopotamia, the obvious popular connection was biblical. For until the mid-nineteenth century, it had been the source of ancient history. Mogens Trolle Larsen, author of Compend of Assyrian Excavations in an Antiqua Land, points out that, “What gave Mesopotamian discoveries their particular interest was the feeling that the archaeologists were hunting for the very beginning of human history, as perceived in light of the sacred writings.”32

Moreover, beyond uncovering of the ancient historical past, discoveries made in Mesopotamia were simply interesting. The news articles published in America during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century use the adjective interesting repeatedly. An article published by the Trenton State Gazette33 in September of 1873 which describes the h wakes of transporting the antiquities Smith had gathered while abroad back to England provides several examples.34 At least three times the article uses the descriptor. First there is the phrase: “To light upon so precious a page of antique record, so absorbingly interesting at once to the naturalist and the Biblical student, was indubitably lucky.” Then also: “A brick inscription...will be of interest to chronologists,” and, “objects of high interest were actually unearthed and packed away on the morning of his departure.” More often than any other adjective, and often without a parallel term, the word interest is used to describe the discoveries. It suggests fascination and curiosity. Excavators in Mesopotamia were surely uncovering items of great intrigue, made so because they were foreign, ancient, other-worldly, and yet somehow close through biblical familiarity. Even so, the word interest also directly reflects that emotional response to curios collected while touring abroad that is immediately intense, but short-lived. The antiquities gathered were meant for display, and as such, were interesting. Descriptions from this September article say as much. The article tells how the antiquities sent by Smith were boxed, then transported on the backs of mules across the desert, at one point nearly being lost down a stream, before being delivered to Alexandria. There, the boxes passed by customs officials and were sent on to London. These details are interesting because they are sensational. Just as Rawlinson described his own adventure with the Behistun rock, so this article provides details for popular enjoyment.

Disquiet from the technical and obscure progress being made by the Assyriologists who became intimately acquainted, the story of discovering the Babylonian deluge was a piece that could be popularly understood.35 For this reason it received the most attention, as an article published in San Francisco in 1875 explains, “This latter part of the story is to us the most interesting portion of the narrative, because the author has here woven into his text the account of the deluge.”36

The discovery of a parallel story of the biblical flood was so well propagated that, by 1898, it could be claimed that “every Biblical scholar knows that the Hebrew account of the deluge found in Genesis has been paralleled by two Babylonian accounts, one that of Berosus, a Babylonian historian... and the other...found on Assyrian tablets by George Smith.”37 During the thirty years since the original announcement, former understandings of creation and human origin were weakened by the new knowledge gained from cuneiform documents. Robert Biggs, translator of one recent version of the Gilgamesh Epic, explains that Victorian England was “rocked” by the publication of parallel accounts.38 Not only did the Mesopotamian discoveries make the news for sake of intrigue, but they attracted attention because they raise questions about cultural fundamentals. For if the Babylonian account had preceded the Old Testament version, then biblical authority is diminished.

Also in 1898, a corresponding article from Grand Rapids noted that Bible scholars had taken two positions regarding the parallel accounts. Some maintained that the biblical flood story was written by Moses, but others now believed that Moses had obtained the story from older sources.39 Elwood Worcester, whose lectures on this topic were associated with an Episcopal Church in Philadelphia, published a text titled The Book of Genesis in the light of Modern Knowledge. He would have sympathized with the second group. His argument is not meant for “pious readers ‘who believe every word of the Bible from cover to cover,’” but for those who are “eager only to ascertain its truth.”40 In response to changing scholarly understandings, Worcester expanded his interpretations of the Old Testament.

The debate continues, however, despite the accommodations made by thinkers like Worcester and the fact that it would seem that both accounts must share a common
source, whether historical or mythical. Another article titled “Creation and the Deluge” from ten years earlier, this one published in Baltimore, explains that between the two accounts “resemblances...are so numerous and striking that one cannot but feel that both have at least a common origin.”

Here, the author bases his conclusion on a hook. In contrast, Heidel, who has been recognized for some of the best thinking on the issue, admits that he does not know whether the Old Testament originates from Babylonian sources. Chiera likewise describes the ambiguity, saying, “It is very unusual if after a talk on Babylonian literature someone in the audience does not ask this question: ‘Do the cuneiform texts prove or disprove the Bible? As one can easily surmise, it is impossible to answer that question with ‘yes’ or ‘no.’”

Regardless, knowledge of Babylonian and Assyrian literature provides cultural context for understanding the Old Testament. Ancient Hebrew has been made more understandable through linguistic studies in Babylonian, Assyrian, Akkadian, Sumerian, and the other Near Eastern languages. Translations for words and expressions used infrequently in the Hebrew Old Testament have been clarified through contextual support derived from the abundant Mesopotamian texts.

The deluge account comes from the larger Gilgamesh Epic. Not until 1913 did this tie for the epic appear in newsprint. Initially, the hero from whom the epic receives its name had been called Nimirud or Izdubar, and his comrade, now known by Enki, was called Heabani. The new names have become more accurate due to advances in linguistic skill.

In 1930, the first compilation of all the disparate tablets was published by R. Campbell Thompson in England under the title The Epic of Gilgamesh. He drew heavily from the twelve-tablet Standard Version discovered in Ashurbanipal’s library, from which came the original eleventh tablet deciphered by Smith. The tablets from Nineveh were written in Assyrian, but are believed to have been originally copied by Mesopotamian assumptions.

Kovacs also observes that although Gilgamesh has much to offer the casual reader, it has usually been popular solely within academic circles. For this reason, among others, Gilgamesh is included in the curriculum of most core undergraduate literature courses. Jennifer Pastoor and Jonathan Himes, both professors at John Brown University, teach the epic in courses on world literature. The university does not require Gilgamesh to be taught, but it provides a natural starting place.

The text is accessible to students, with the ability “to strike a chord in readers today,” as it “obviously did...in readers in ancient Mesopotamia.” Pastoor observes that students tend to like the story, and Himes explains that themes of adventure and mystery found in the epic give it certain appeal. Himes also chooses to use Gilgamesh because it is the first of its kind, and as such, offers a neat contrast for later classical epics. It also contributes nicely to a multicultural sampling of texts from around the world.

Pastoor and Himes, along with the authors of recent translations, note that Gilgamesh is fascinating, interesting, spell-binding, and even humorous. They value qualities such as the portrayal by Kovacs: “human relationships and feelings—loneliness, friendship, love, loss, revenge, regret, and the fear of the oblivion of death.” The last of her stated emotions is especially significant. Himes commented on how the hero Gilgamesh first tries to cheat death and then attempts to gain eternal life. Unlike the Hebrews, who assumed life with God was a present reality, the Mesopotamians expressed a longing for the eternal. Despite the obvious parallels between portions of the Gilgamesh Epic and Genesis, their messages differ considerably. Pastoor explains how “Genesis, with its radically different assumptions about the nature of God and humankind, is nothing less than a polemic against Mesopotamian assumptions.”

These philosophical distinctions do not in any way undervalue Gilgamesh. Himes personally appreciates how the “remarkable friendship” shared between Gilgamesh and Enkidu shows that brotherly comradery and intimacy was admired “remarkable friendship” shared between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Himes personally appreciates how the “remarkable friendship” shared between Gilgamesh and Enkidu shows that brotherly comradery and intimacy was admired as well. Our understandings of human origins have become more complex, while the biblical narrative can now be studied within the context of its historical surroundings. Through the more and less sophisticated searching for those curious clay tablets, knowledge was gained and questions were raised to significantly enrich the Christian faith and humanity as a whole.

EndNotes

3 San Francisco Bulletin (CA), December 19, 1872.
The ancient institution of slavery changed whenever it was employed by new civilizations. Whenever societies became more or less dependent on its implementation, forced labor proportionally changed. Two examples of slavery are compared in the report: Roman slavery and slavery in the American South. Both societies initially placed a ‘non-crucial’ emphasis on the institution. However, both cultures also received proportionally larger influxes of slaves, as the slave population rose, the value and treatment of slaves declined. My comparison focuses on that shift in slave treatment as a measure of the variability of the institution.

The institution of slavery existed within some of the earliest human civilizations, and was arguably one of the most important elements involved in forming human thought and opinion. Robert Fogle wrote, “Slavery is not only one of the most ancient, but also one of the most long-lived and important elements involved in forming human thought and opinion.” Slavery forced cultures to collide and intermingle, and the divides in time and culture of those examples to base his idea that, “This glimpse of the variety and malleability of slavery indicates one of the difficulties that the scholar on the subject explained that religions like Christianity, Islam, and Judaism have, at different times, justified attaining slaves. He used the divides in time and culture of those examples to base his idea that, “This glimpse of the variety and malleability of slavery indicates one of the difficulties...