

On Floods and the Fall of Nineveh: A Note on the Origins of a Spurious Tradition*

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The association between the fall of Nineveh and overwhelming flood waters is a well-established one in both critical and pre-critical traditions regarding the fall of the city. This association, which has only recently been cast into doubt, is the consequence of several apparent references to the contribution of the surrounding rivers to the fall of Nineveh, in the Greek account of Diodorus Siculus (in the *Bibliotheca historia*, at this point largely based on the work of Ctesias) and in biblical Nahum. In a recent article Pinker has examined these and other related accounts, concluding that the claim that Nineveh was brought low as a result of its water sources should be abandoned.¹

It is not the aim of the present enquiry to question the accuracy of Pinker's conclusions. It will, however, suggest that the idea that Nineveh fell as a result of flooding is not as inexplicable as the geographical and meteorological obstacles to the idea at first suggest. Indeed, it is quite comprehensible once an awareness of the common language used to describe the destruction wrought during military campaigns in the ancient Near East is

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¹ Aaron Pinker, "Nahum and the Greek Tradition on Nineveh's Fall", *JHS* 6 (2006): n.p.; cf. David Stronach, "Notes on the Fall of Nineveh", in *Assyria 1995*, ed. S. Parpola and R.M. Whiting (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 319-323 and Peter Machinist, "The Fall of Assyria in Comparative Ancient Perspective", in *Assyria 1995*, ed. S. Parpola and R.M. Whiting (Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 189-195, both of whom suggest that the flooding was limited and symbolic, undertaken after the city's defeat.

brought to bear on the language of these texts. I will first examine Nahum, which has generally constituted the focus of biblical scholarship on this subject, particularly the language of flood in Nah. 1:8 and the language of the gates of the rivers in Nah. 2:7, before turning briefly to the classical material.

Pinker rightly notes with regard to Nah. 1:8 that the simile “like a flood” is regularly used in the Assyrian royal inscriptions’ descriptions of the king’s conquest of various cities. This type of language appears in the inscriptions of Tiglath-pileser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib, Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal.² Pinker concludes that “the poet of the theophany in Nahum used with respect to God a simile that was frequently used to describe the magnificent achievements of the great Assyrian kings”.³ He denies that the language in Nahum has anything particularly to do with Nineveh’s own fall, although he concedes that the use of this language, which he understands as particularly Assyrian, may relate to the rest of the book’s focus on that city and on Assyria.

² Among many such references see Hayim Tadmor and Shigeo Yamada, *The Royal Inscriptions of Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727 BC) and Shalmaneser V (726-722 BC), Kings of Assyria*, RINAP 1 (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 39 9; 47 2; 51 2; Andreas Fuchs, *Die Inschriften Sargons II. aus Khorsabad* (Göttingen: Cuvillier, 1994), Ann. 373; W.R. Mayer, “Sargons Feldzug gegen Urartu – 714 v. Chr.: Text und Übersetzung”, *MDOG* 115 (1983), 76:90; A. Kirk Grayson and Jamie Novotny, *The Royal Inscriptions of Sennacherib, King of Assyria (704-681 BC), Part 1*, RINAP 3/1 (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2012), 1 25; 19 ii’ 12’; 24 vi 7’; 26 i 14’; 34 6b; Erle Leichty, *The Royal Inscriptions of Esarhaddon, King of Assyria (680-669 BC)*, RINAP 4 (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2011), 1 ii 69; 6 ii’ 14’; 8 ii’ 11’; 104 i 41; 105 ii 32; 114 ii 2; 116 13’; 127 12’); Riekele Borger, *Beiträge zum Inschriftenwerk Assurbanipals* (Weisbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996), 82:2; 84:56.

³ Pinker, “Nahum and the Greek Tradition”, 11.

Research on ancient Near Eastern conceptions and depictions of military activities, however, suggests that this language need not be understood as deriving solely from the Assyrian subject, while also developing our understanding of Nahum's use of this particular terminology. To address the latter first: the background to the Assyrian language of royal destruction as like that wrought by a flood is to be found in the divine epic *Enuma elish*, in which Marduk (alternatively Assur and Ištar) battles chaos, manifest as the goddess Tiamat.⁴ In the process he employs conventional weaponry as well as the forces of nature: flood, wind and storm.⁵ As a reward for his victory, Marduk is crowned king of the gods.

Language evoking this divine battle is used by the Assyrian kings in order to articulate the purpose of their own military endeavours; like the royal god, they are battling chaotic forces which threaten the order and security of the universe. Thus Sargon's annals

⁴ Recent editions of *Enuma elish* include Philippe Talon, *Enūma Eliš: The Standard Babylonian Creation Myth* (SAACT 4; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 2005) and Thomas R. Kämmerer and Kai A. Metzler, *Das babylonische Weltschöpfungsepos Enūma eliš* (AOAT 375; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2012). On the variability of the deity, see Wilfred G. Lambert, "The Assyrian recension of Enūma Eliš", in *Assyrien im Wandel der Zeiten: XXXIXe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Heidelberg 6.-10. Juli 1992*, ed. H. Waetzoldt and H. Hauptmann (HSAO 6; Heidelberg: Heidelberger Orientverlag, 1997), 77-79; C.L. Crouch, *War and Ethics in the Ancient Near East: Military Violence in Light of Cosmology and History* (BZAW 407; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2009), 131; C.L. Crouch, "Ištar and the Motif of the Cosmological Warrior: Assurbanipal's Adaptation of *Enūma eliš*", in *Thus Speaks Ishtar of Arbela': Prophecy in Israel, Assyria and Egypt in the Neo-Assyrian Period*, ed. Robert P. Gordon and Hans M. Barstad (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2013), 129-141.

⁵ Especially En.el. IV 35-49 and repetitions.

speak in terms of flood (*abūbu*), fog (*imbaru*), storm (*meḥû*) and net (*sapāru*).⁶ Sennacherib goes so far as to identify his Babylonian enemy as being in the “likeness of a *gallû*-demon”, one of Tiamat’s minions in *Enuma elish*.⁷ In using this language the king aligns himself with the acts of the god in fighting against chaos, drawing the authority of the deity into his own actions against his earthly enemies. In the Assyrian material the language of flood and related natural phenomena is not used to depict the king in isolation but relies on the depiction in *Enuma elish* of the deity in battle against divine enemies, invoking this imagery and paralleling both god and king in the ongoing struggle against earthly chaos.

In the biblical text the use of language of flood and storm may be observed in the tradition about a primordial battle between YHWH and chaos, manifest as the sea, as well as in the application of this language to the paralleled battle of the human king against his earthly enemies. Though no Hebrew rendering of YHWH’s battle at creation has survived, vestiges of YHWH’s battle against the sea may still be seen in a number of texts and is especially recognisable in the imagery of the psalms, including Psalms 18; 89; and 93.⁸ Psalm 93, for

⁶ Fuchs, *Die Inschriften Sargons*, Ann. 69; Ann. 296; Ann. 373; Mayer, “Sargons Feldzug”, 88:194; 90:215.

⁷ Elnathan Weissert, “Creating a Political Climate: Literary Allusions to *Enūma Eliš* in Sennacherib’s Account of the Battle of Halule”, in *Assyrien im Wandel der Zeiten: XXXIXe Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale, Heidelberg 6.-10. Juli 1992*, ed. H. Waetzoldt and H. Hauptmann (HSAO 6; Heidelberg: Heidelberger Orientverlag, 1997), 191-202. For further references and discussion see Crouch, *War and Ethics*, 21-28, 35-64, 119-155.

⁸ John Day, *God’s Conflict with the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament* (COP 35; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985) (contra Rebecca S. Watson, *Chaos Uncreated: A Reassessment of the Theme of “Chaos” in the Hebrew Bible* [BZAW 341; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2005], who rejects the idea of a biblical *Chaoskampf*

example, acclaims YHWH's kingship in relation to his strength over the sea; Ps. 89:11 praises YHWH's military might with the declaration that "You rule the raging of the sea / when its waves rise, you still them. / You crushed Rahab like a carcass / you scattered your enemies with your mighty arm". Psalm 18, in the context of a lengthy description of the joint efforts of the human and divine kings, speaks of YHWH's weapons in meteorological terms (Ps. 18:11-15): his chariot is the wind, he is clothed in clouds and his actions culminate with "then the channels of the sea were seen, and the foundations of the world were laid bare" (Ps. 18:16).

The psalms are also clear in rendering the king and god in parallel; thus, in Psalm 89 the psalm says of YHWH that "You have a mighty arm / strong is your hand, high your right hand" (Ps. 89:14). "My hand", responds YHWH, "shall always remain with him [the king]; my arm also shall strengthen him...I will set his hand on the sea and his right hand on the rivers" (Ps. 89:22, 26). YHWH explicitly declares in Ps. 89:20 that he has conferred his power upon the king. Similarly, in Psalm 18 a number of verbs associated with YHWH's military activities as well as certain military imagery (bow, arrow, shield) are used to correlate YHWH and the king.⁹

because of the lack of a standard version). For further discussion see Crouch, *War and Ethics*, 29-32, 65-80.

⁹ Klaus-Peter Adam, *Der Königliche Held: Die Entsprechung von kämpfendem Gott und kämpfendem König in Psalm 18* (WMANT 91; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchner Verlag, 2001). On the shared weaponry of divine and human kings, see Nicholas Wyatt, "Degrees of Divinity: Some Mythical and Ritual Aspects of West Semitic Kingship", in *"There's Such Divinity Doth Hedge a King": Selected Essays of Nicholas Wyatt on Royal Ideology in Ugaritic and Old Testament Literature* (SOTSMS; Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 151-189.

The point of this digression is to affirm that, within the Hebrew Bible, the imagery of YHWH battling against the sea using the weaponry of flood and other natural elements is well-established and, furthermore, is connected to the human king's ongoing battles against earthly chaotic forces, his enemies. The language in Nahum describing YHWH as having the effect of a flood is thus in keeping not only with ancient Near Eastern but also biblical language and conceptualisation about the god's involvement in earthly warfare. We may thus further illuminate Pinker's observation with regard to the ancient Near Eastern background of the language in Nahum by pointing out that this language is used also in Judah as a statement of the human king's involvement in the god's struggle against chaos, and that it is thereby no great surprise to see the poetry of Nah. 1:8 using this language of YHWH.¹⁰ That YHWH's destruction of Assyria is likened to that of a flood may be a deliberate play on the Assyrian's own use of such imagery, but it is equally at home in the cosmology and royal ideology of Judah.

This broader cosmological context for the language of flood in use during battles both human and divine is useful also in understanding the second passage in Nahum which has been traditionally thought to refer to the effect of Nineveh's rivers on its demise, Nah. 2:7. In this case we may again turn toward the ancient understanding of the origin and design of the universe and, in particular, to the idea that the chaotic waters defeated by the god at creation – and held at bay by the king in his ongoing battles – are restrained by the god from inundating the present by the upper and lower firmaments. Literal attempts to understand the

¹⁰ Note also Machinist's suggestion that Nah. 1:8 "echoes, even as it reverses" Isa. 8:7-8, in which YHWH's assault against Judah, in the form of Assyria, is described in terms of overflowing river waters ("The Fall of Assyria", 183). This surely constitutes another, unrecognised, biblical use of this imagery in articulating YHWH's earthly military endeavours.

statement that the gates of the rivers were opened have resulted in interpretations involving the opening of the sluice gates of the city's rivers (or canals) or, in efforts to avoid interpretations involving the defeat of Nineveh by flood, suggestions such as Pinker's, in which the reference is taken to involve the bridges over the rivers rather than the rivers themselves.¹¹ Far less tenuous – historically or interpretively – is the recognition that the reference to the gates of the rivers being opened constitutes a reference to the release of the chaotic waters from where they are contained behind the firmament (cf. Gen. 7:11) so that, at the deity's behest, they overwhelm YHWH's current enemy. Here too is a concept of earthly battles being marked by tumultuous conflict between chaotic waters and order: again the use of ancient Near Eastern cosmological language to describe military activities. Nineveh will be overcome by the cosmic floodwaters, unleashed by YHWH.

In neither passage in Nahum, therefore, is there any reason to understand the author as either predicting (if the text is thought to be prior to 612 BCE) or describing (if it is thought to be *ex eventu*) the fall of Nineveh as dependent in literal terms upon destruction as a result of water. Indeed, there is no reason to think that any part of this text has to do with literal water at all. In both cases the language of flood and of the rivers derives from a common ancient Near Eastern and biblical vocabulary of military defeat, coloured by the conception of royal battle as reflecting the deity's ongoing conquest of chaotic waters through the use of natural phenomena.

Having noted this, it is only a matter of a few moments to establish the origins of the language regarding water and flood in Diodorus and beyond. Reading his description of torrential rains which resulted in the flooding of the Euphrates in light of the military imagery of flood and water, it takes no great leap of the imagination to see how a writer (whether

¹¹ Pinker, "Nahum and the Greek Tradition", 11-12; cf. e.g., Scurlock, "The Euphrates Flood", 382-384.

Diodorus, his source Ctesias, or some earlier transmitter of the tradition), ignorant of the cosmological language used by more ancient sources, might have thought a reference to Nineveh having been turned into “a heap of flood ruins” meant that the city’s demise had arisen as a result of an actual flood and that torrential rains must have occurred to cause such a flood, rather than recognising the mythological reference of this image.

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Abbreviations

AOAT	Alter Orient und Altes Testament
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
COP	Cambridge Oriental Publications
En.el.	<i>Enuma elish</i>
HSAO	Heidelberger Studien zum alten Orient
<i>JHS</i>	<i>Journal of Hebrew Scriptures</i>
<i>MDOG</i>	<i>Mitteilungen der Deutschen Orient-Gesellschaft zu Berlin</i>
RINAP	Royal Inscriptions of the Neo-Assyrian Period
SAACT	State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts

SOTSMS	Society for Old Testament Study Monograph Series
WMANT	Wissenschaftliche Monographien zum Alten und Neuen Testament