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## Great flood stories: Inter-religion similarities

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### Abstract

The narrative of a Great Flood is found in various ancient religious texts and mythologies across different cultures of the world. These stories of great flood have religious significance and are generally considered as acts of divine retribution. Though the narratives vary in characters, plot, and even their meaning in each religion or culture; but the common themes in all these stories are the mighty flood sent by God to destroy the civilisation and giving salvation to few chosen ones who then repopulate the earth with pious people. Despite variations in details, these narratives often convey universal themes such as divine judgment, redemption, rebirth, and the preservation of life. The present article explores the Great Flood stories in different religions, highlighting their similarities, differences, and underlying messages. These included the religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrian, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam; and the cultures like Mesopotamia, Greek, Chinese, and aboriginals of Australia. The study focused on close examination of the narratives and the comparison of their commonalities. Almost in all stories, the flood waters were described as the measure to cleanse the humanity and prepare for rebirth. Further, all these flood stories contain a cultural hero, who represents the human craving for life. Despite all these similarities, the consequences of the great floods varied from story to story based on prevailing local settings. All these flood stories have scientific base and could be very well interpreted as the outcome of geological phenomenon like glacier melting at the end of ice age leading to earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, etc.

**Keywords:** Great flood stories, religion, culture, inter-religion similarities

### Introduction

In the contemporary world, there are many religions and cultures which are dominant in different parts of the world. These religions and cultures have some similarities as well as differences in their mythologies and ideologies. On such similarities is the story of the great flood. The Great flood (commonly known as flood myth) is a saga in which a mighty flood is usually sent by a deity or deities to destroy the civilisation which had been polluted greatly. It is generally considered as an act of divine retribution. One such story can be traced in Hinduism from *Matsya Purana* where Lord *Vishnu* descends on earth in the form of fish. Similar versions of great flood are found in texts of other religions like the episode of Noah in Biblical story, Deucalion in Greek mythology, Utnapishtim in the Epic of Gilgamesh, etc. If we analyse all these episodes, striking similarities can be found out amongst them. In all episodes, the flood waters were described as the measure to cleanse the humanity and prepare for rebirth. All these flood stories contain a cultural hero, who “represents the human craving for life.” These flood stories also have scientific roots and can be interpreted through science. The flood stories can be explained by geological phenomenon like glacier melting at the end of ice age leading to earthquakes, floods, volcanoes, etc.

### The Hindu Flood Story in *Matsya Purana*

In *Hinduism*, the Great Flood story is found in the ancient texts of the *Matsya Purana* (Ramachandra, 1935; Michael, 1995; Gupta, 2010) [8, 6, 2]. According to the story, the universe goes through cycles of creation and destruction, and the flood is a part of this cycle. Lord *Vishnu* assumes the form of a fish and warns the righteous king *Manu* about an impending flood. *Manu* builds a massive boat and saves various animals, seeds, and sages. After the flood subsides, *Manu* helps in the restoration of life and is regarded as the progenitor of humanity. The *Matsya Purana* is one of the eighteen *Mahapuranas* in *Hinduism*. It covers a vast area of knowledge in 291 chapters. It is one of the oldest and best preserved puranic genre of Sanskrit literature. The story of great flood is found in the first section of the *Matsya Purana*.

The central characters of the great flood in *Matsya Purana* were the *Matsya* (fish incarnation of Lord *Vishnu*) and *Manu* (the first man). In Sanskrit, human is known as *Manava*, which means the children of *Manu*. The story goes like this: - In *Satya yuga*, the *Vaivasvata Manu* left his throne and engaged in severe austerities. One day when he was offering water to the departed souls (*tarpana*), a small fish fell into his hand along with the water. Then the small fish requested *Manu* not to put him back in the water as bigger fish will kill him. In order to protect the life of the fish, the sage put it into a water jar. But this fish grew so big that the jar could not hold it. It was then thrown into a well but its size soon grew to be more than what a well could accommodate. The sage noticed this and took it to the Ganges and found that these, too, proved insufficient to accommodate and finally it was taken to the ocean. To the *Manu's* astonishment, the fish went on expanding until it filled the vast expanse of the sea. The sage came to know that it was not an ordinary fish but something more than that. Then *Manu* prayed to God to let him know the true form of the fish. The fish soon showed itself to be *Vasudeva*. He addressed the *Manu* that in order to save humanity from the calamity he took the form of fish or *matsya avatar*. The *matsya* instructed the *Manu* to collect seeds of all the plants, pairs of all animals of the world and *saptarishis* (seven great Sages) with his family and bring them all to the shore of the sea. God showed him the boat, which was fastened with the horn of the fish to avoid capsizing. When the boat floating in the dark waters, *Vasudeva* (God) in the form of fish addressed the *Matsya Purana* to *Manu*. After the great flood, the boat reached the Malaya mountains. *Manu's* family and *saptarishi* then repopulated the earth.

### The Biblical Flood Story of Abrahamic Religion

Perhaps the most well-known flood story is found in the Bible, specifically in the Book of Genesis (Hamilton, 1990; Sarah, 2007) [3, 9]. According to this account, God becomes disillusioned with humanity's wickedness and chooses *Noah*, a righteous man, to build an ark (ship). *Noah*, along with his family and representatives of every species, survive the flood and emerge as the ancestors of a new world. According to Book of Genesis in chapters 6-9 of Hebrew Bible, the God became angry as the entire population of mankind had become evil and wicked. Therefore, God decided to bring a flood to the earth to destroy everyone except *Noah* and his family. God told *Noah* to prepare an ark large enough for his family (which included his wife, three sons and their wives), pair of (male and female) all the kind of creatures. When it started raining heavily, *Noah* brought all of them to the ark. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights. After reaching to a mountain for rest, *Noah* sent out a dove to find safe dry land but it returned empty hand. Again, after seven days, he sent out another dove but it returned with an olive leaf, signalling that it was safe to go onto land. After repopulating them on the safe land, God promised never to destroy the earth with a flood again and placed a rainbow in the sky as a sign of his promise.

### The Mesopotamian Flood Story

One of the earliest recorded accounts of a Great Flood comes from ancient Mesopotamia, specifically the Epic of *Gilgamesh* (Jeffrey, 2002) [5]. Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) has three major ancient empires; Sumerian empire (3<sup>rd</sup>

millennium BCE), Babylonian empire (2<sup>nd</sup> millennium BCE) and Assyrian empire (1<sup>st</sup> millennium BCE). All these empires have flood myths, share many common traits, but some elements are unique to particular myth. The oldest flood story is also found in The Epic of *Gilgamesh*. The story is recorded on 12 stone tablets. According to epic, *Gilgamesh* was a Sumerian king who ruled for 126 years. The king *Gilgamesh* began a search for immortality after the death of a friend. He then met an immortal man named *Utnapishtim*, who was the parallel character of *Manu*, as he was granted immortality after building a ship called Preserver of Life and survived the great flood. He also had an ark on which he brought with him all his relatives as well as all species of creatures in order to reform mankind and repopulate the world.

### The Greek Flood Story

In Greek mythology, *Deucalion* was a legend and the son of *Prometheus* (the creator of humankind). His son was *Hellen*, the mythical ancestor of the Hellenic race. According to Greek mythology, *Zeus*, the king of the Gods, was angry with the human population. *Zeus* told *Deucalion* to construct an ark for himself and his wife, *Pyrrha*. After nine days of flood, the world was destroyed, and the ark rested on top of Mount Parnassus. When the waters receded, *Deucalion* and his wife offered a sacrifice to *Zeus* to learn how to repopulate the earth. *Zeus* told them to throw stones over their shoulders. The stones thrown by *Deucalion* became men and those thrown by *Pyrrha* became women. *Deucalion* is considered as the equivalent of *Noah*.

### The Native American Flood Stories

Numerous Native American tribes have their own flood narratives. For example, the Ojibwe tribe tells of a great flood caused by a giant beaver. A single man, along with a select group of animals, survives by seeking refuge on a floating log. In the Pawnee tribe's story, a chief receives a warning about a flood and builds a boat to save his family and animals.

In the story of Aztec (a civilization that flourished in central Mexico before the arrival of Europeans), *Titlachahuan* (God of rain) warned the man named *Note* and his wife *Nena* about upcoming coming flood. *Nata* and *Nena* hollowed out a cypress tree, and *Titlachahuan* sealed them inside, telling them that they may only eat one ear of maize each. Here is where the story is wildly different from others. The earth is flooded, but the people were not killed, instead, they were turned into fish. After the flood, *Nata* and *Nena* disobeyed *Titlachahuan* and ate fish. So, *Titlachahuan* turned them into dogs. The story ends with the world essentially starting all over again only this time with a hearty fish population and a couple of dogs (Berdan, 1982) [1].

### The Flood Story in Buddhism

The flood story in Buddhism is known as *Samudda-vāṇija Jātaka*. In a village once lived 1000 families of dishonest carpenters. These carpenters would take the money from villagers and never deliver any goods. To escape from the wrath of villagers, they quickly needed to find a new place to live. They built a ship and sailed until they found a beautiful island. The island was haunted by spirits. The spirit's only rule was that every time a human needed to defecate or urinate, they needed to dig a hole and cover it up

when they were finished. The spirits wanted to keep their island clean and who can blame them. The carpenters loved the island and decided to have a big party to celebrate their new home. However, they became drunk on fermented sugar cane and quickly ignored the rules and defecated and urinated all over the island. The spirits were furious and decided to flood the island with a giant wave, on the full moon. These 1000 carpenter families were ruled by two men, one wise and one very foolish. While the wise carpenter believed in spirits warning and told his people to build a ship for escaping in case of flood; the foolish carpenter did not believe in the warning and told the people to stay, relax, and enjoy the party. On the day of the full moon, as the spirits promised, a giant wave came up and flooded the whole island. The wise man set sail with his people while the foolish man and his people died.

### The Chinese Flood Story

In Chinese mythology, there are many stories on flood with repopulation tale. One popular story says that, one day a farmer managed to capture and imprison a thunder God. The farmer warned his children to stay far away from the caged deity and went to nearby town. The children took pity on the thunder God and released him. In gratitude the God warned them there was going to be a great flood. He gave the children a large gourd and told them that they would be safe from the waters as long as they are inside the gourd. Then the rains came. The brother and sister got inside the gourd. They were the only people to survive the flood. Brother and sister as the only survivors, made the repopulation story a little tricky as incest is a taboo in many cultures. However, there were different endings to this story. In one version, the brother and sister were given a special "pass" from the heaven, like "It's okay just this one time."

### The Zoroastrian Flood Story

In *Videdad* (the religious book in *Zoroastrianism*), it is mentioned that when the world had become overwhelmed by the constant multiplication of its immortal beings, *Ahura Mazda* (the God of Zoroastrianism, religion of ancient Persia, present-day Iran) decided to enlarge the earth for a new beginning. He cautioned the king *Yima* that a great flood was coming to cleanse the world and the king had to protect himself and two of each species in his castle located on the top of the highest mountain. The flood came, and the world, except for *Yima's* castle and its inhabitants, was destroyed. When the flood passed, *Yima* opened his doors and the world was inhabited again (Jacques, 2023)<sup>[4]</sup>.

### The Thai Flood Story

According to Thai mythology, Grandfather *Sangkasa* and Grandmother *Sangkasi* (*Pu Sangkasa-Ya Sangkasi*) were the first man and woman created by the Supreme God, *Phu Ruthua*. As time passed, their descendants became wicked and did not worship the Supreme God. The god got angry and punished them with a great flood. Fortunately, some descendants survived because they fled into an enormous magical gourd. After many months, the Supreme God had compassion on the humans and sent two deities *Khun Luang* and *Khun Lai* from heaven to drill the enormous gourd and take the surviving humans to a new land. The deities helped the surviving people and led them to the new land. When everyone arrived in the land called *Mueang*

*Thaen*, the two deities taught the humans how to cultivate rice and build house (Siriporn, 1996)<sup>[11]</sup>.

### The Egyptian Flood Story

In Egyptian mythology, the flood story involves the God *Ra* and his daughter *Sekhmet*. *Ra* sent *Sekhmet* to destroy part of humanity for their disrespect and unfaithfulness which resulted in the Gods overturning wine jugs to simulate a great flood of blood. This is commemorated as wine drinking festival in annual Nile flood.

### The Flood Story of Aboriginals in Australia

The word 'Aboriginal' is used in Australia to describe the original inhabitants. There is a popular folklore amongst aboriginals which is commonly known as story of Lizards vs. Platypuses. According to the folklore, the world became overpopulated with birds, reptiles, and other animals. Therefore, a meeting took place in the Blue Mountains to find way to reduce the population. Tiger Snake (a large venomous snake found in Australia) planned that birds and animals having good mobility should migrate to a new country. The lizards, who knew about rainmaking, decided to free the world of the platypuses, instructed all of their families to perform the rain ceremony. The lizards fled to mountain tops, before a flood covered the land below and destroying most of the world. The flood eventually ended and there were no platypuses (Peters and Mika, 2017)<sup>[7]</sup>.

### Inter-Religion Similarities

The presence of Great Flood stories in different religions and cultures highlights the shared human experience of struggle with the forces of nature and the search for meaning in the face of disaster. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam all recognize Abraham as their first prophet and collectively known as Abrahamic religions. Noah's ark is common in all Abrahamic religions. There are lot of similarities between the Manu flood story and the Noah' ark. These similarities are: both Manu and Noah were described as a virtuous individual. Both had three sons before flood. *Charma*, *Sharma* and *Yapeti* were the sons of *Manu*; and *Ham*, *Sham* and *Japheth* were the sons of Noah. In the Old Testament it is mentioned that God saved *Noah* by instructing him to build an ark. Similarly in *Matsya Purana*, Lord instructed *Manu* to build a boat and fill it with animals and seeds to repopulate the earth. After the flood, *Noah' Ark* was rested on the mountains of Ararat and *Manu's* boat was positioned at the top of the Malaya range of the mountains. Both Manu and Noah were said to repopulated the earth and all the humans were their descendants.

The biblical flood story underscores the themes of obedience, faith, and divine judgment, along with the promise of a covenant between God and humanity. The Hindu flood story emphasizes the cyclical nature of existence, with the universe being created and destroyed in endless cycles. The Native American flood stories often emphasize the significance of respecting nature and living in harmony with the environment. While the stories may have originated in different geographical and cultural contexts, they continue to captivate and resonate with people around the world, bridging the gaps between diverse religious traditions and reminding us of our common humanity.

### Scientific Evidences of The Great Flood

Recently the scientists and archaeologists have found the evidences of the great flood. According to some scholars, the flood did happen during the last Ice Age (c.115000-11700 years ago). This might have inspired the stories of great flood all over the world and found in different religious texts. According to two marine biologists Walter Pitman and William Ryan, nearly 12,000 years ago, the Black Sea was a fresh water lake separated by Bosphorus Strait (land strip) with Mediterranean Sea. The shore of the Black Sea was fertile and used by early farming societies. When ice sheets of northern hemisphere started to melt, the sea level started to rise. It is said around 7600 years ago. The water of Mediterranean Sea broke into the fresh water of Black Sea and the black sea level began to rise. This led to the settlers moved to different higher grounds. This traumatic story might have transmitted orally for about 3000 years and then it was first recorded in Epic of the *Gilgamesh*. The renowned archaeologist B. B. Lal in his article on *Manu's* flood had linked flood with the disappearance of river Saraswati through archaeological evidences (Sharma, 2017) <sup>[10]</sup>. He wrote that archaeologically the flood of the Saraswati took place around 2,000 -1900 BCE this was exactly the time of the *Manu's* flood. Prof. K S Valdiya said that Saraswati River had nurtured human settlements of Harappan civilisation and un-sustained human developments resulted the river being reduced to a misfit river in which only flood waters flow. All these arguments show us that 7000 years back due to climatic and geological phenomena, the earth experienced may changes might have led to great floods and migration of human population.

### Conclusion

The myth and reality are the both sides of the same coin. Previously people believed that the stories presented in religious text were generally myths. But now with the help of the science, we known that all the religious stories are not just myths but have scientific explanations, and the morals behind them have great learnings to human society. Our ancestors wanted us known that God or nature is more powerful than us. We can modify our surrounding to some extent or to great extent for some time, but not all the times. We are still very much under the control of the nature. In the stories of great flood, the qualities of the characters, the reasons of the floods, and their results appear to be similar. Because of the similarities between these stories, many historians believe there was actually a historical flood that likely covered the large part of the world. On the contrary, many scholars also consider the flood stories as a myth. Because through flood, life is destroyed and then built up again, very much like the creation narrative. The great flood story in *Matsya Purana* tells us that old order changes yielding place to new. From this episode, we learnt that the new creation began with mass destruction. This is the rule of the nature. Similar stories in different other cultures tell us that human began to migrate during last ice age due to the climatic and geological changes that were occurring throughout the world. Scientists believe that during this time the great flood might have occurred. The big question for future is that will there be another catastrophic flood? With increased deforestation, climate change and rising sea levels, it seems we are heading in that direction to create a new flood story of our very own time. Because, the

consequences of sea level rise due to the anthropogenic climate change will have series of disastrous impacts like increased flood risk and submergence, salinisation of surface and ground waters, and morphological change, such as erosion and wetland loss. It will cause unbelievable damage to live and property.

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