

Symbolism in Flood Myths around the World: A Comparison of Universal Values and Human Nature in Different Cultures

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The Creation Myths around the world are some of the most interesting pieces of literature for me. All the stories are full of symbolism and messages that describe to us some cultures' ideologies and ways of living in the past. They reflect universal values and convey the essence of our human nature. Many myths around the world have the same plots and try to teach the way people are supposed to act based on their culture values. One of the things that struck me as surprising before starting this project was seeing the similarities in the symbolism used by different cultures. A culture in South America could share the same ideas from a culture in Africa. After starting my research, I discovered that one of the most recurrent myths in all cultures is the flood myth. This myth is in almost every culture around the world. The different versions of this myth come from the oral tradition, and most of them have the same symbols. In this research paper, I will show what those symbols are and explain what their meaning is; I will also discuss what the origin of this myth is and its veracity.

Flood myths have always been considered true to every culture. Most myths are always respected as being historical facts by the people who follow a religion (Young, 171). For example, many Christians believed that what happened in the story of Noah is real. There is no doubt about it for them. It is the same for Aztecs in Mexico and Incas in Peru, they don't doubt about the root of these myths because they come from a long tradition. They come from their religious figures as well, and they cannot doubt about the origin of these stories because that would make them dubious about their faith. Because of this, it has been difficult to analyze the symbols in these stories without people arguing about their veracity, and there are many scholars trying to find information about this cataclysm because they find surprising that flood myths are all over the world. Based on the different accounts of this catastrophe, some scholars argue that there may have been a flood that covered vast areas of the Earth while others have written books challenging this idea. Some scholars say that there could "in theory have been an actual deluge, either local or global, but at the same time one of the reasons why the flood

narrative might have diffused as widely as it undoubtedly has... could be attributable to its symbolic content" (Dundes, 1).

Considering the flood stories only as records of a geological event underestimates their symbolic value. It is true "that floods were common and that everyone had heard stories of or seen terrible floods. Flood tales were born to explain this reality of nature" (Van, 306) It is also true that this story is found in many cultures, but there is more to it than just facts. Flood myths' "geographical incidence and prevalence indicate that the theme of world destruction by water preoccupied people in the pre-historical period, especially riparian settlers, and is still a major concern for modern societies" (Birrell, 213). People were not only trying to show their fear for this natural disaster. The purpose of a myth is to show the ideology, life and customs from a culture. The flood myths don't only narrate a story of people fearing a flood and being punished by the gods. The flood stories, though very common, cannot be attributed to just one source. Then we can say there is more to it. There are some symbols that we weren't paying attention to years ago.

The reason why we cannot consider the flood myths as completely true is also because they have passed from generation to generation thanks to the oral tradition. There are also other factors as stories being modified for immigrants who arrived to certain countries. For example, a flood myth in Peru "The Llama and the Great Flood" cannot be considered as completely true because this "version was changed somewhat by the Spanish historians of the sixteenth century, and as a result we do not know exactly when the flood was supposed to have happened in that region." (Alexander, 38). Many elements could have been modified too, not only the date that happened. For example, the Spanish were Christians while Peruvians were part of a polytheistic religion. In this story, no god is mentioned, and that strikes me as very strange because the image of gods in Peruvian myths is always present. The fact that no god is mentioned shows that Spanish people may have taken them away from the story with the purpose of forcing natives to change their ideology and make them be part of their religion. The same happened with the myth in the Bible, this story may have been based in a Mesopotamian story and then introduced with the many elements from their culture, but we don't have enough prove of that fact. It can be believed that the flood really happened in that area, and the tale is being told from a different point of view. However, "the flood was a means of gracious deliverance and salvation for Noah and his family. The stress of Scripture is really on the combined judgmental and preservative character of the flood rather than on its geological effects" (Young, 173). Another scholar, M.E.L. Mallowan says "that the Flood mentioned in the

Old Testament was not a Universal Flood, but was written down for a didactic purpose and given the appearance of a world-wide catastrophe.” (80)

During the past century, “several types of interpretation have emerged. They are the literal, symbolic, anthropological, psychological, historical, and political” (Birrell, 254). But because of the fact that there is not enough prove that the flood really happened and because there are many elements that are worth to be observed and compared. I will concentrate on the different symbols found in these stories. It has been suggested “that flood myths ‘are closely linked with creation myths; the flood wipes out the old creation and a new creation begins.’ However, it might be more apt to say that the flood is not so much a creation myth as a re-creation myth.” (Dundes, 4) The flood represents a story of social and world renewal.

The oldest known flood story comes from the Babylonian times. This story is very similar to the one in the Bible, and many scholars think that Atrahasis’ story may have inspired Noah’s (Schomp, 47). This story has all the basic elements of the flood myths. Atrahasis is a king that is loved by one god, Enki. Enki liked him because he was a good citizen, respectful of the rules and was always sending his prayers and offerings to the Gods. Atrahasis is the chosen person in this story. The gods are resentful because the human race is not acting properly nor following their commands. Other of the gods just wants to destroy the whole human race, but Enki believes that Atrahasis deserve to be warned. Enki cannot warn Atrahasis directly, so he uses the wind and a wall to communicate the message. In this case, the wind and wall act as messengers from the gods. Atrahasis is told to build a giant boat and fill it with living beings. The boat represents the vehicle of salvation, and the living beings represent the importance of preserving life. He builds the boat helped by crafted people, and he takes them with him. The storm starts seven days after Enki’s message and lasts seven days and nights as well. The earth got flooded with water. The boat landed on the tip of a mountain. On the last day, Atrahasis sent bird to see if the earth was safe to be inhabited again. A raven was the bird that doesn’t come back proving that it is safe to leave the boat. All animals and things that existed were destroyed because of the flood. There is devastation of everything on Earth. The gods after realizing that the existence of humans is important sent a rainbow as a promise that the flood won’t happen again.

Most of the stories I have read have the same elements. Some of the stories I explored come from the Greek culture from the book the Metamorphoses, the Bible from the Hebrew tradition, oral accounts from the Inca culture, the Huichol from Mexico, Babylonian times and Sumerian culture. However, these myths are also found in other regions of the world such us Egypt,

Scandinavia, Persia, China, and many areas in Africa. Most of them come from the oral tradition. The gods are angry at humans because they don't respect their rules. We have a person that is the chosen and is different to the rest. We have a messenger who carries the warning. There is a vehicle to help people be saved from the flood. Living beings, the partner of the chosen person and/or family can be saved. The flood takes over all Earth and destroys everything that is in there. The time frame when this happens is mentioned. There is a mountain where this vehicle lands or where people stay. Everything goes back to normal at the end, and the gods make this a new beginning for the world.

In all the stories, there is always a protagonist, but this, in myths, is not just to make a story entertained. There is a story behind this idea. The protagonist is a chosen person by the gods. This person has good qualities such as being a hard worker, obedient, religious, or generous; also "leadership qualities of heroism and political subservience are prerequisites for flood control work." (Birrell, 255) The people chosen to be saved from the flood have outstanding qualities. They are completely different from the average person in the world, and that is why the gods decide to make an exception to save them. In Atrahasis story, for example, not only he is saved, but crafty people in the world. These people have good qualities that make the gods think they deserve to be saved. In a Mexican story, "The tree that rains" a dog is saved too because she is as hard-working as her master. In some Asian myths, it is a woman and her dog, or just a woman (Van, 310). This chosen person has a duty and has to be obedient to a god to achieve a goal. In this case, building an ark and saving the living creatures in the world; their duty is to create change.

The fact that humans were not being obedient to the gods shows the chaos before creation. For being a creation myth, the flood myth doesn't happen when the Earth is just chaos. However, the flood is "a return to the pre-creation state described in Gen. 1" (Petersen, 441). This myth starts with an Earth that is already populated, but it is not going well. The gods don't know what to do with their people. They want to see change, but it is just not happening, and there is only one solution: destroy everything and renew it – going back to chaos. Not everything is bad in the world though, there is darkness, but there is light. In this case, the chosen people represent this light and the rest of the human beings represent life. These people have to go back to order. The flood "is not a punishment from heaven but stems from the necessity for humankind to be reborn" (Van, 317).

The flood myth also represents the rules imposed by certain cultures. In some cultures in the past, obedience was one of the most important values. Gods loved to be obeyed in every sense, and based on how people acted, people were rewarded. Some people who were more obedient were chosen as favorites. We see this in Atrahasis myth; he is the chosen one because he is always giving offering the gods. He always pleases them. We also see this in one of the myths that comes from the Hindu culture. Manu is saved by a fish, who is a god actually, because he is obedient to him. He never hesitated to obey him. And this story is repeated in every myth. It is not only in those two. The chosen ones need to obey the messenger. They need to follow the rules to be obeyed. With this, we see one of the important characteristics in mythology. Myths show the main characteristic from a culture. In the flood myth, the message is very clear: obey the gods because if you don't, they can take away the life they gave you. We see the hard side of the gods who don't feel affected about destroying humankind. It is true that we see their compassionate side too, but it is just for the chosen people. There are no second chances for the rest.

In all the flood stories, there is a vehicle which protects the chosen ones to be saved: an ark, a boat or a ship. The Ark is either a universal symbol for a "divine 'vehicle'" or "the house of God" (Scott, 7). The ark protects the animals and people. This is a symbol of the power of God and the new opportunity living beings are given. The ark stands everything. It is a strong vehicle that could protect people from a storm that destroyed the entire world. The ark is special also because it was constructed by the people who rode it. The time to do it wasn't short either. In most stories, constructing it takes about the same time that the storm lasts. The ark is the new shelter, represents a new home, a new opportunity to survive. This opportunity is only given by the effort the chosen ones made. Constructing it wasn't an easy job, but the most important part is that it was the gods who commanded the chosen ones to construct it. This ark has the blessings from the gods. They didn't help the chosen ones to build it, but this vehicle has their divine magic since it was them who told the chosen ones to construct it.

Water is the main symbol in these myths. The Earth is covered by water and everything dies because of it. Nothing is left in Earth but the people and animals that are in the ark. This symbol of water is found in many cultures, and it shows us that "purification is done only by water and not by other elements" (Van, 318). The Earth needs to change and be renewed. Water is the element that is in charge of doing this. Not only did water cover a particular city but it "cover[ed] the land and drown[ed] everything that lived on the Earth" (Ganeri, 28). Everything needed to disappear to be reborn. Water is also "an element predicting a good event, a symbol of life and

fruitful harvests” (Van, 318). It represents the symbol of renewing life. Water is the main element in the harvesting process. In this sense, we can see the flood myth as a fertility myth too. We have the Earth first with life but corrupted, then the flood comes, and everything is reborn because of it.

This myth represents also the trip to the Underworld that we see in most myths and legends. The flood stories, however, don't show a hero going through this process of rebirth. It is the entire world which goes through this process. The world is the one that needs change. Being covered completely makes it go below the standards. The world become darkened; “the sky was black with rain clouds even during the day time” (Ganeri, 28). The Earth became the Underworld. This process was not fast, nor pleasant. In many of the stories even the strong gods “became frightened of the storm's fury” (Schomp, 51). Everything died there. The Earth needed to die to renew itself and to start over new as the epic heroes in mythology. This process of dying gives the opportunity be reborn and improve.

Binaries are important elements in these stories as well. Not in all the stories, a female and male animal are asked to be part of the ark. However, there is always a companion for the chosen person. This companion can be an animal or a partner. We see the idea of two. As we see light and dark, we also see the female and male. We see a world dying, but then a world that is reborn. This idea represents the fact that everything in the Earth is a complement of another thing, and each of them “has equal power and importance” (Fernandez, Web). Light cannot exist without darkness. It also represents the idea of female and male complementarity. This idea shows us that the union between men and women is important because they complement each other. Females have certain roles and males also have them. It is important to have both parts in a creationist story because they also represent reproduction. One cannot exist without the other. If the world needs to be reborn, we need these binaries principles.

The mountains also are an essential part of these stories. In the story “Llama and the Great Flood,” people are saved because they stayed in a very high mountain called Willka Qutu. In this story, there is no vehicle of salvation but the mountain. Most of the rest of stories end after the ark lands in the top of a mountain. Mountains are all over the world. They are enormous, and they are the biggest representation of nature. They are “the closest we can get to the heavens on earth and this says much about their symbolic significance in stories” (Fraim, Web). The mountain is the place that is closest to heaven. In this place, everything can be seen. The mountain in the flood stories represents being close to heaven, being close to God after the bad moments. From the top of this mountain, everything starts again. This is the moment of

resurrection in the stories. Being in the mountains represents the ascension of the living beings into a better place. After being into the Underworld, they ascend to heaven for them to come back to Earth after this.

The flood also represents a symbol of cyclic regeneration (Baird, 189). The flood happens over and over again as the seasons. There is life, death and then life again. It is a never-ending cycle. The idea of cycles in the world is represented also in the myths. People tried to explain the different cycles of us as society and our world through myths. One myth told by the Hopi Indians of North America talks about humans going through different cycles. We live now in the fourth one according to them, and they believe that “a great flood devastated the third world” (Ganeri, 35). The Aztecs have a similar legend: “They believed that the first world had been eaten by jaguars, the second blown apart by a great hurricane, the third devastated by fire, and the fourth by a flood” (Ganeri, 35). Based on this, the flood myth is just a representation of the regeneration process of Earth, nature and society. People “die in order to be born again with new social mechanisms and new cultures” (Van, 317). Human’s bad behavior “is submerged, often in a judgmental cataclysm, leading to a new, reformed or wiser human society” (Baird, 189).

The process of regeneration in these myths always takes a specific number of days or years. In the story of Atrahasis, the rain goes for 7 days. In a Babylonian story, it is also the same time. In the Bible story, the flood goes for 40 days. In the Hindu story “How the Fish Saved Manu,” the storm lasted 12 years. And in stories from North America and South America, it is either 5 days or 5 years. All these numbers are set because of a reason. Numbers serve as symbols to represent important ideas in cultures. Seven has always represented a perfect number. All these numbers have religious connotations. The number five symbolizes the elements in earth. In Christianity, the number 40 represents a period of testing. In the Hindu culture, twelve represents how they classify things: they have twelve important gods, time is divided in 12, and a goddess is worshipped every twelve years. These numbers become an additional element to the stories to give more information about their culture.

The flood myth as we have observed have many symbols that are essential for their understanding. These myths give us a more profound message than the one we simply read in stories as children. That’s why religions consider these myths essential. It is part of their magic. The flood myth offers a message of renewal to mankind, one that connects the divine with the terrestrial side of our world. This myth proves that there is an opportunity of be reborn as human beings and being forgiven if we past certain tests. In addition, these stories offer examples of

great story-telling and reveal the central values of other cultures. And when comparing them, it is easier to identify how cultures are different. Flood myths are the creation myths that give us the opportunity to compare our different world cultures and familiarize ourselves with symbolism.

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