

Irving Finkel, 2014 *The Ark Before Noah: Decoding the Story of the Flood*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, ISBN 9781444757057, 421pp, 17 plates, many figures, £25.00.

Reviewed by Alan Millard

What was Noah's Ark? Everyone knows it was a boat with a large cabin on the deck - that's what all the pictures show and is the model for all the children's toys. Yet Genesis does not call the vessel a 'boat'! None of the Hebrew words for 'boat, ship' are used. The word used means 'a box' (Hebrew *tēbā*). It is the word also used for the 'basket' in which Moses' mother placed him in the river Nile and is actually a word borrowed from ancient Egyptian (*db.t, tb.t*). The Greek translation of Genesis uses a word for 'box' (*kibōtos*) and the Latin uses *arca* 'box', whence English 'ark'. When Noah was in the Ark he did not need to steer it, it only needed to float, so a keel was not necessary. A new discovery alters that picture, claims Irving Finkel.

Since the Babylonian Flood Story was made known in 1872, its similarities to the Hebrew account have led many to suppose the story of Noah was based on it. One reason is simply that no copies of Genesis are known which were made before about 200 BC, but the earliest Babylonian copies date from the 18th or 17th centuries BC. That is not a sound argument. The New Testament tells of various rulers and events in Palestine which are also reported by the Jewish historian Josephus. There are New Testament manuscripts from the second, third and fourth centuries, but no copy of Josephus' works is more than about one thousand years old. Yet no-one supposes Josephus drew on the New Testament books in composing his histories!

In 1985 a man came to the British Museum with a Babylonian clay tablet, which his father had acquired in Iraq in the 1940s. The museum's specialist was astonished as he read the cuneiform signs: it was part of a Babylonian story of the flood! Alas, the owner would not leave the tablet for study. The expert, Irving Finkel, was bereft! Not until 2009 was he allowed to examine it at leisure. In this book he enthusiastically describes his patient decipherment and growing understanding of a text written almost 4,000 years ago. After relating how he became an Assyriologist by accident, he sets the context for his study of the tablet by explaining how cuneiform writing works and the range of text now available. He then summarises previously-known Babylonian flood stories, each one damaged and incomplete. Most famous is the version in Epic of Gilgamesh, Tablet 11, known from copies made about 700 BC and later. About a millennium older is the version in the Epic of Atrahasis, on which the Gilgamesh narrative is based. Comparisons between each of these, some lesser fragments and the Genesis account run through the Finkel's chapters.

In six pages he presents his translation of the new text, which he calls The Ark Tablet. The styles of script and language show it was copied between 1900 and 1700BC. The tablet, small enough to hold in the hand, is not part of an historical inscription, but is an extract from a longer story or an exercise in imagining the conversations and computations; perhaps the work of a student or even a playwright.

The text opens with a speech known from the Atrahasis and Gilgamesh Epics to be given by the god Enki, also known as Ea, to his devotee Atrahasis, also known as Ut-napishti. As already known, Enki is instructing him to pull down his reed hut and build a boat: "Wall, wall, reed wall, reed wall, Atrahasis, pay attention to my advice". Then comes the first surprise, "Draw out the boat that you will make on a circular plan, let her length and breadth be equal". There follow details about palm fibre ropes. The text then switches, without introduction to Atrahasis who relates his obedient actions: "I set in place thirty ribs," followed by detailed measurements of parts of the structure and the materials used. Aided by a mathematician, Finkel concludes the vessel was an enormous coracle entirely made of reeds, a circular craft almost 70m (222 feet, 74 yards) in diameter, with walls 6m. (about 20 feet) high and a floor area 14,400 cubits square, a figure reproduced in the Gilgamesh version and amazingly close to the 15,000 cubits square of Noah's Ark. The whole was coated with bitumen of various kinds within and without, including the 'cabins' inside. The damaged reverse of the tablet tells of Atrahasis' anxiety, then the arrival of wild animals, entering the vessel 'two by two'. The tablet ends with him ordering the workmen, "When I have gone into the boat, caulk, that is, 'seal', its door". Whatever the purpose of the tablet, it offers improvements to the known text of the Atrahasis Epic. Finkel is able to show, with a high degree of certainty, that the Epic also described a circular vessel and had some animals entering in pairs.

Inevitably, Finkel compares the Babylonian accounts with Genesis. Assuming the traditional source analysis of the Hebrew text, dividing it between the 'J' writer and the 'P' writer, he creates a scenario of Judaeans exiles in Babylon who were taught the cuneiform script and the Babylonian language, like Daniel and his friends, adapting the Flood Story for themselves. In Babylonia, too, he suggests, the exiles met the concept of a single god, Marduk, who incorporated all the other gods, which sharpened their faith in one God alone. There is not the place to discuss all the matters he introduces.

Attempting to strengthen his case for dependence, Finkel presents a late sixth century BC Babylonian tablet concerning boats. Between two occurrences of the normal word for 'boat' (*eleppu*), it mentions something called *tu-bu-ú*. He assumes it means a boat of some sort and tries to equate it with the Hebrew word for Noah's vessel, *tēbā*, which has a different initial consonant and is com-

monly recognised as an Egyptian word. He deduces that the Judaeans encountered the Akkadian boat word *tubbû* used for the Ark in the [Flood] story and Hebraised it as *tēbā*. ‘In this case’, he asserts, ‘the original consonants are less important ...’ In some Babylonian version of the Flood story no longer extant, he says, ‘the word *tubbû* must have occurred in place of *eleppu*, “boat”’. This is really far-fetched, explaining an obscure Hebrew word by a more obscure Babylonian one!

In the Gilgamesh 11 account of the Flood, the vessel is described as a cube, which is quite impractical, but Finkel takes the oblong shape of Noah’s wooden Ark as a development of it. He has to assume unknown variations to the existing Babylonian versions to explain other differences, so any changes could have occurred much earlier. Despite his arguments for the era of the Exile, the Babylonian texts are inconclusive. While the Babylonian compositions reflect the local situation, where reed vessels were normal, the Hebrew account does not tell of a reed vessel but a wooden one, which would be less appropriate in Babylonia where wood was scarce. The following sections of Genesis also indicate a region unlike Babylonia, for Noah planted a vineyard (9: 20), and people moved to the plain of Shinar, according to Genesis 11: 1. If we believe the Hebrew account is the original, we shall have to assume the oblong wooden ark, which was perhaps better suited to a different region of the Near East, was re-imagined as an enormous reed coracle in Babylonia with approximately the same floor area as Noah’s Ark. The many agreements between the Babylonian and the Hebrew narratives have to be balanced against the many disagreements, as has often been done. The ‘Ark Tablet’ adds to both! It does not prove the Hebrews borrowed the Flood narrative from the Babylonians; both may have had a common ancestor.

Engaging incidents in Finkel’s work keep the reader’s interest alive. When he gave a volunteer a box of odd fragments of tablets to sort, she found a strange one which he saw fitted into the famous Babylonian Map of the World and suggests that the Babylonian Ark rested in the region of Mount Ararat! However, other Babylonian tales placed it nearer to Iraq, in the mountains to the east or north, while Genesis simply says ‘in the mountains of Ararat’ which could suit any of the locations.

Experts will discuss details of the cuneiform tablet while biblical scholars assess its significance for years to come. Intelligibly explaining technical aspects, *The Ark Before Noah* relates a new discovery brilliantly, sharing the excitement of a leading expert as he disentangles part of one version of an ancient story.

Eric H. Cline, 2014 1177 B.C.: The Year Civilization Collapsed, Turning Points in Ancient History Series, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, ISBN 9780691140896, xx+264pp, US\$20

Reviewed by Christopher J. Davey

This book was the winner of the 2014 *Best Popular Book* award by the American Schools of Oriental Research and its author was reportedly nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 2014. It is certainly an easy book to read, but its designation as ‘popular’ should not be construed to mean simple. Cline draws on current scholarship to provide a systematic narrative of the Late Bronze Age in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean in all its complexity.

Eric Cline is Professor of Classics and Anthropology, Director of the Capitol Archaeological Institute, and former Chair of the Department of Classical and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at The George Washington University, in Washington DC. He was educated at Dartmouth, Yale, and the University of Pennsylvania and he has archaeological field experience in Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Cyprus, Greece, Crete, and the United States. He is currently Co-Director of the excavations at Tel Kabri. At least three of his 16 books, *The Trojan War: A Very Short Introduction* (2013), *Digging for Troy* (2011) and *The Battles of Armageddon: Megiddo and the Jezreel Valley from the Bronze Age to the Nuclear Age* (2000), overlap with the subject of this book.

The book is dedicated to James Muhly, Professor Emeritus of Ancient Near Eastern History in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations at the University of Pennsylvania, former Director of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, and preeminent scholar on Bronze Age metallurgy. Professor Muhly, who is a meticulous and gracious scholar, will no doubt be pleased with this book although he may not think the 28-page bibliography sufficient.

The main benefit of the book is the inclusion of recent research; the Uluburun shipwreck and new Ugaritic inscriptions are cases in point. Also important is the breadth of its coverage and its scene-setting explanations. Paradoxically, while Cline describes an inter-related Late Bronze Age in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, today’s academia is such that scholars are often quite unaware of research developments in neighbouring regions. This book, while intended for a popular audience, may help to address this insularity; its currency and the status of its author should promote a more scholarly readership.

The first three chapters describe the Late Bronze Age and its inter-relatedness. There are many interesting stories here that benefit from their context in the overall narrative of the period. Chapter Four describes the evidence for destruction, site by site, and the last chapter discusses the reasons for the end of the Bronze Age. Destructions are far from widespread, and some areas such as Lebanon appear to have none, although Ugarit to the north and