

The Relationship between Mythology and Religion: How Do Monotheistic Religions Interpret Myth?

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Abstract

This article explores the intricate relationship between ancient Mesopotamian mythology and monotheistic religions, focusing on the interplay between the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Sumerian-Babylonian flood narratives, and sacred texts such as the Torah and Quran. It investigates how mythological themes, particularly those concerning divine-human relationships, morality, and the quest for transcendence, are reinterpreted and reframed within monotheistic traditions. Central to this inquiry is the hypothesis that these myths evolved from a proto-monotheistic faith represented by the *Ṣuḥuf Ibrāhīm* (Scrolls of Abraham), a lost text referenced in the Quran, which predated and influenced the theological and cultural landscapes of Mesopotamian civilizations.

Through comparative textual analysis of primary sources and their translations, the study identifies significant parallels between mythological and scriptural narratives. These include the thematic connections between the *khillah* (intimate friendship) of Abraham and God, as depicted in the Quran and Torah, and the profound bond between Gilgamesh and Enkidu in Mesopotamian mythology. The research highlights how monotheistic texts transformed inherited myths to align with their theological imperatives, embedding them in moral, covenantal, and universal frameworks.

This article contributes to the understanding of how religious traditions integrate and reinterpret cultural myths, shedding light on the dynamic process through which sacred texts evolve. By proposing that the *Ṣuḥuf Ibrāhīm* may represent an early unified monotheistic revelation, the study offers a compelling hypothesis on the origins and transformations of spiritual narratives in human history. The findings underscore the interconnectedness of religious and mythological traditions, revealing a shared human preoccupation with morality, divine justice, and the pursuit of transcendence. This exploration invites further study into the transmission and evolution of religious ideas, bridging the gap between mythology and theology in the development of cultural identity.

Keywords: Myth, monotheistic religion, Epic of Gilgamesh, Quran, Ecclesiastes, Torah, Old Testament, conscious reference to mythology.

Introduction

The relationship between mythology and monotheistic religions has long been a subject of intellectual inquiry, raising questions about the origins and evolution of sacred texts. This complexity is particularly evident in the myths of ancient Mesopotamia, such as the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Flood narratives, which are re-contextualized in sacred scriptures like the Torah and the Quran. What does this continuity between myth and religion signify? Can religious texts be considered reconfigurations of ancient myths, imbued with new theological meanings?

This article explores the hypothesis that the ancient myths of Mesopotamia, particularly Sumerian and Babylonian narratives, were incorporated into the monotheistic traditions of the Torah and Quran as extensions of a lost Abrahamic faith native to Mesopotamia. Over time, these stories underwent transformations, evolving into myths, only to be reframed later within a sacred context. The Quran, in particular, highlights the "mythologization" of religious stories, often pointing to the distortion of divine narratives over time.

To examine this hypothesis, a comparative textual analysis is employed, focusing on primary sources from Mesopotamian mythology and their earliest translations into modern languages, including English and Arabic. The research draws on foundational translations and analyses by notable scholars such as Stephanie Dalley from Oxford University, Alexander Heidel from the University of Chicago, Taha Baqir from the University of Baghdad, and Firas Al-Sawah from Beijing University. By juxtaposing these with corresponding texts from the Torah and Quran, it becomes possible to uncover parallels, divergences, and the underlying process of transformation from mythological narrative to religious doctrine.

Ancient Mesopotamia, often regarded as the cradle of civilization, produced a wealth of myths that served as both literary and theological archetypes. Among these, the Epic of Gilgamesh stands out as a cornerstone of ancient literature. The narrative explores existential questions about mortality, the divine, and human legacy, themes that resonate deeply with monotheistic scriptures. Within this corpus, the Flood narrative offers one of the most compelling parallels. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the hero Utnapishtim recounts a divine warning about a catastrophic flood, his construction of an ark, and the preservation of life. This story bears striking similarities to the narrative of Noah in the Torah and

Quran, raising critical questions about transmission, adaptation, and theological reinterpretation. The flood in Gilgamesh is presented as a divine reaction to humanity's excesses, a theme mirrored in the Torah and Quran but reinterpreted within a moral and covenantal framework. The Quran, unlike the Torah, reframes the Flood narrative with an emphasis on monotheistic obedience and prophetic authority, positioning Noah as a moral exemplar rather than merely a survivor.

The Torah and Quran inherit and transform these mythological narratives, embedding them within a broader theological narrative. While the Torah often presents these stories as historical events interwoven with moral and covenantal themes, the Quran frequently criticizes the "mythologization" of earlier narratives, emphasizing their divine origin and subsequent distortion. This process of transformation suggests an underlying continuity, where recurring motifs of covenant, divine justice, and human responsibility are reframed within monotheistic scriptures to align with their theological imperatives. In the Torah, these themes are linked to the chosenness of the Hebrew people, whereas the Quran universalizes them, emphasizing their relevance to all humanity while condemning distortions introduced by earlier traditions.

The parallels between Mesopotamian mythology and monotheistic texts highlight shared human concerns—mortality, divine justice, and the quest for meaning. For instance, Ecclesiastes in the Torah grapples with the inevitability of death and the search for lasting significance, much like Gilgamesh, yet introduces a distinctly monotheistic resolution by emphasizing reverence for God as the ultimate answer. The Quran, on the other hand, acknowledges the mythological elements of earlier traditions while asserting their divine origins, reframing them as signs of God's ongoing engagement with humanity.

The relationship between mythology and monotheistic religion is not one of simple borrowing but of profound reinterpretation. Ancient myths served as a cultural and theological substrate upon which monotheistic traditions constructed their narratives, transforming myths into sacred texts imbued with divine authority. The hypothesis that these scriptures represent a continuation of a lost Abrahamic faith sheds light on the enduring power of these narratives. By convicting the "mythologization" of religious stories, the Quran invites readers to reflect on the essence of divine revelation and the ways in which human cultures preserve, distort, and reinterpret it over time.

Through a comparative analysis of Mesopotamian myths, the Torah, and the Quran, this study reveals the complex interplay between mythology and theology, offering a deeper understanding of how sacred narratives are shaped by and transcend their cultural contexts. By reframing mythological motifs within a sacred context, monotheistic religions create a timeless dialogue between the ancient and the divine, ensuring their relevance across generations.

Understanding Myth as a Cultural Phenomenon

Myth serves as a foundational cultural element across societies, encompassing narratives that fulfill significant roles within spiritual, social, and intellectual domains. Scholars differentiate between the vernacular use of "myth," which implies falsehood, and its academic interpretation, where factual accuracy is secondary to cultural function and meaning (Deretic 2020; Bascom 1965). Often intertwined with religious and secular authority, myths have been regarded by many cultures as factual accounts of their distant past. These narratives, particularly creation myths, articulate primordial events and explain societal customs, institutions, and values (Dundes 1984; Eliade 1998).

From the 17th to the 19th centuries, anthropologists began exploring myths, framing them as imaginative yet unscientific expressions of early human thought. This view, prominent among Romantic writers, underscored myths' imaginative richness and their potential for literary adaptation (Al-Ruwaili 2000; 'Awad 1978). These early scholarly efforts marked the beginning of modern mythological studies. The publication of James Frazer's seminal work *The Golden Bough* further advanced these studies. Spanning twelve volumes between 1890 and 1915, Frazer's analysis deeply examined myths' symbolic and cultural roles, emphasizing the intricate connections between myth and ritual (Frazer 1963, 1981, 1994). Meanwhile, Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung explored myths as expressions of humanity's subconscious. He proposed that myths, like dreams, symbolized attempts to comprehend universal phenomena such as creation, growth, and death, framing them as integral to the collective human psyche (Jung 1997).

The integration of mythology into literature gained momentum through works like T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*, which drew heavily on mythological motifs. Translations of this poem and similar works catalyzed interest in myths among literary figures, demonstrating their capacity to enrich modern literature and cultural discourse (Abu Sayf 2005; Halawi 1997). Through these evolving perspectives, myths have been re-contextualized not merely as relics of ancient imagination but as dynamic cultural artifacts. Their enduring influence underscores their role as a profound and versatile medium for understanding human experience.

The term "myth" (*isṭūra*) appears in the Qur'an as the plural "asāṭīr", mentioned nine times across various chapters. The meaning of the term as used in the Qur'an parallels its definitions in classical Arabic lexicons, referring broadly to falsehoods or ancient tales crafted by earlier peoples. These references are often made by those sceptical of the Qur'anic message, dismissing it as merely a collection of old fables. The context and interpretation of these verses provide insight into the reception of the Qur'anic message in its early Islamic setting.

One such instance occurs in *Sūrat al-An'ām* (6:25), where disbelievers claim that the Qur'an is "nothing but tales of the ancients." Similarly, in *Sūrat al-Anfāl* (8:31), the mockery continues, with a disbeliever likening the Qur'anic narrative to stories of Rustam and Isfandiyar from Persian traditions, emphasizing their rejection of its divine origin (*al-Ṭabrisī*, 1992, pp. 350–351). In *Sūrat al-Nahl* (16:24), when asked about the revelations, the disbelievers respond by labelling them as mere fictions passed down through generations, further solidifying the association of "asāṭīr" with the fabricated and fantastical (*al-Ṭabrisī*, 1992, p. 716).

The term is also used in *Sūrat al-Mu'minūn* (23:83), where those sceptical of resurrection describe the Qur'anic promises of an afterlife as groundless myths. Classical exegesis, such as that of *al-Ṭabrisī*, interprets this verse as reflecting the disbelief of the Quraysh in divine accountability, considering the stories in the Qur'an to be baseless writings of previous generations (1992, pp. 108–109). This interpretation is echoed in *Sūrat al-Furqān* (25:5), where detractors accuse the Prophet Muhammad of transcribing old tales and presenting them as divine revelation (*al-Ṭabrisī*, 1992, pp. 138–139; *al-Tha'labī*, 1987, pp. 130–131).

These dismissive attitudes are not limited to specific verses. In *Sūrat al-Aḥqāf* (46:17), a rebellious son accuses his parents' warnings, derived from divine scripture, of being mere myths of the ancients. This use reflects a broader pattern where myths are equated with deception, falsehood, or fiction that lacks a foundation in reality (*al-Ṭabrisī*, 1992, pp. 474–475; *al-Naysabūrī*, 1990, p. 121).

The Qur'anic references to "asāṭīr" consistently pair the term with "of the ancients" (*al-awwalīn*), emphasizing their association with inherited tales of questionable authenticity. According to exegetical traditions, these stories were considered by the Qur'anic audience as exaggerated or fabricated accounts passed down through generations, often laden with elements of the fantastical or the supernatural. Consequently, the term became synonymous with falsehood and fabrications that lacked any grounding in reality.

Beyond these explicit mentions, the Qur'an also contains narratives with mythological underpinnings that resonate with Mesopotamian and Babylonian traditions. For example, the story of Dhū al-Qarnayn in *Sūrat al-Kahf* matches the epic of Gilgamesh, portraying a powerful figure who traverses the ends of the earth. Similarly, the account of Noah's flood in various chapters of the Qur'an echoes the Babylonian flood narrative, as found in the *Epic of Atrahasis* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. These similarities suggest a shared mythological substrate between the Qur'anic narratives and ancient Mesopotamian stories, providing a fascinating intersection of sacred texts and regional mythology.

By referencing "asāṭīr" and drawing on mythological elements, the Qur'an engages with and reinterprets the cultural and literary heritage of its time, transforming these elements into moral and theological lessons. This process underscores the Qur'an's dialogic relationship with its contemporaneous audience and reflects the broader interaction between myth, scripture, and cultural identity in the ancient world.

The Themes of Myth in the Torah

The relationship between myth and the Torah, particularly in the books of the Old Testament such as *Song of Songs*, *Isaiah*, *Jeremiah*, and others, has sparked extensive debates in modern research. While Arabic translations, such as the Van Dyke-Bustani version (1991), seldom mention "myth," readers encounter complex issues concerning the interaction between ancient Sumerian-Babylonian myths and biblical texts. Scholars like Kamāl al-Ṣalībī, (1986, 1988) have explored these connections, identifying parallels that at times appear strikingly similar (Al-Sawah, 1999, 2007).

In exploring these connections, one finds significant thematic and narrative parallels. For instance, Al-Sawah (2007) highlights similarities between Sumerian-Babylonian myths and biblical accounts, such as creation stories, the Flood narrative, and the concept of paradise. These parallels are not merely coincidental but suggest a shared cultural and literary tradition within the broader Near Eastern context. One of the most compelling examples is the Flood narrative. The Akkadian legend of Sargon recounts the story of his mother, a priestess, who bore him in secret and placed him in a reed basket sealed with bitumen, casting him into a river. He was carried to Akki, the gardener, who adopted and raised him (Al-Sawah, 2000, pp. 20–21). This narrative resonates with the Torah's depiction in *Genesis*, where Noah, finding favor in God's eyes, constructs an ark to preserve life during the great flood. The text describes specific dimensions and materials for the ark, aligning with Mesopotamian flood myths.

Moreover, the narrative of sending out a raven and a dove to gauge the receding waters underscores the thematic continuity across these cultural traditions (*Genesis* 6:5–8; 7:11–24).

These narratives illuminate how ancient texts often adapted pre-existing myths to align with evolving theological frameworks. In the case of the Torah, such adaptations reflect the monotheistic worldview of ancient Israel, demonstrating a dynamic interplay between inherited mythological motifs and emerging religious ideologies.

In brief, the relationship between mythology and the Quran and the Torah reveals a complex interplay of continuity, reinterpretation, and divergence. Both texts engage with ancient mythological narratives, integrating and reframing them within their distinct theological frameworks. While they share thematic and narrative parallels with earlier Mesopotamian and Babylonian traditions—such as creation stories, flood myths, and motifs of divine-human interaction—the Quran and the Torah transform these elements to serve monotheistic and moral imperatives.

In the Quran, mythological elements are frequently recontextualized to underscore divine unity, prophetic authority, and the moral responsibilities of humanity. The Quran's engagement with the concept of "myth" (*asāīr*) often reflects a critique of earlier narratives as distorted accounts of divine truths, challenging their authenticity while reasserting their original sacred intent. Conversely, the Torah integrates mythological motifs more seamlessly into its narrative structure, presenting them as historical accounts intertwined with covenantal themes that emphasize the chosenness of the Hebrew people and their unique relationship with God.

Despite their differing approaches, both scriptures reflect a shared cultural and literary heritage, drawing upon the mythological substrate of the ancient Near East. Their adaptations reveal not only theological distinctions but also an ongoing dialogue with the myths of their time. By examining the Quran and the Torah's treatment of myth, this section explores how each text engages with, critiques, and transforms these ancient narratives, highlighting both their shared origins and the unique theological trajectories that define them.

The Sumerian Flood Narrative

The correspondences between the Sumerian Flood narrative, as depicted in the eleventh tablet of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, and the biblical Flood story in *Genesis* reveal a deep cultural and literary interplay between ancient Mesopotamian mythologies and the biblical tradition. Both narratives share remarkable similarities, including divine warnings, the construction of a vessel, the preservation of life, the cataclysmic nature of the flood, and the eventual use of birds to assess the receding waters. However, they also reflect the unique theological and cultural contexts of their respective traditions.

In the Sumerian narrative, the protagonist Utnapishtim (also referred to as Ziusudra in earlier traditions) receives divine instructions from the god Ea (Enki). The text vividly describes the warning and the detailed commands given to Utnapishtim:

Shuruppak, a city that you surely know, situated on the banks of the Euphrates: it was ancient, and the gods within it decided to bring a flood. But the god Ea, because of his oath, warned me in a dream. He whispered to my house of reeds, 'Reed hut, reed hut, wall, wall! Listen to my instructions: Tear down this house, build a boat! Leave possessions, look for life. Despise worldly goods and save your soul alive! Put aboard the seed of all living things into the boat. The boat you are to build shall have equal dimensions: its length and width shall be equal; cover it with a roof, as the abyss is covered.' (Al-Sawah, 2002, pp. 217–226; Al-Sawah, 2007, pp. 151–180).

The Sumerian narrative presents a compelling image of divine intervention, where the god Ea, bound by an oath, delivers a warning to Utnapishtim through cryptic yet direct instructions. The poetic repetition in "Reed hut, reed hut, wall, wall!" underscores the urgency and sacred nature of the message. The command to abandon worldly possessions and focus solely on survival highlights a theme of spiritual and material renunciation. The explicit dimensions and the act of covering the boat with a roof, "as the abyss is covered," imbue the narrative with a sense of cosmic balance and preparation against inevitable chaos. The preservation of "the seed of all living things" is central, symbolizing a broader concern for life's continuity.

This passage mirrors *Genesis* 6:13–15, where God provides Noah with specific instructions for constructing the ark:

So God said to Noah, 'I am going to put an end to all people, for the earth is filled with violence because of them. I am surely going to destroy both them and the earth. So make yourself an ark of cypress wood; make rooms in it and coat it with pitch inside and out. This is how you are to build it: The ark is to be three hundred cubits long, fifty cubits wide, and thirty cubits high.'

In Genesis, the directive from God to Noah carries a tone of moral reckoning. The instructions reflect precision and purpose, emphasizing divine justice and the response to a world filled with violence. The details regarding the ark's dimensions and the use of pitch mirror the practical concerns found in the Sumerian version but are framed within a narrative of covenant and renewal. The focus on cypress wood and the specific measurements highlights a divine plan meticulously designed for survival and redemption. The call to preserve "the seed of all living things" conveys a shared theme of safeguarding life while introducing a theological layer of divine promise.

Both accounts emphasize divine communication, meticulous craftsmanship, and the symbolic importance of preserving life. The use of pitch to seal the vessel appears in both texts, reflecting a shared cultural understanding of practical engineering in flood narratives. However, the Sumerian account, rooted in a polytheistic worldview, portrays Ea acting covertly to warn Utnapishtim, while the Genesis narrative frames the event within a monotheistic paradigm, with God directly addressing Noah in a covenantal relationship. The Sumerian ark's equal dimensions suggest a symbolic representation of balance and cosmic order, whereas Noah's rectangular ark prioritizes functionality and capacity, reflecting the practical theology of survival and continuity. These similarities and differences highlight the rich interplay of cultural and theological traditions across ancient narratives.

The descriptions of the flood itself reveal both shared motifs and distinctive features. In the Sumerian version, the flood's devastation is vividly depicted:

The storm came up. The flood broke over the people like a battle. One person could not see another; they could not recognize each other in the catastrophe. The deluge raged for six days and seven nights, flattening the land. On the seventh day, the storm subsided. The sea grew calm, the flood was stilled. I looked at the weather; silence reigned; and all mankind had turned to clay. The landscape was as flat as a roof. (Al-Sawah, 2002, pp. 217–226; Al-Sawah, 2007, pp. 151–180).

The Sumerian depiction of the flood captures its catastrophic force with visceral imagery, likening it to a battle where chaos reigns supreme. The description, "One person could not see another; they could not recognize each other in the catastrophe," highlights the utter disarray and the inescapable nature of the deluge. The passage's poetic rhythm intensifies the sense of destruction, culminating in a landscape "as flat as a roof," symbolizing a complete erasure of human existence. The eventual calm on the seventh day introduces a sense of resolution, emphasizing the cyclical movement from chaos to order, a hallmark of ancient Mesopotamian cosmology. This echoes the biblical account in Genesis 7:17–24:

For forty days the flood kept coming on the earth, and as the waters increased, they lifted the ark high above the earth. The waters rose and covered the mountains to a depth of more than fifteen cubits. Every living thing that moved on land perished—birds, livestock, wild animals, all the creatures that swarm over the earth, and all mankind. Only Noah was left, and those with him in the ark.

The Genesis account presents the flood as an all-encompassing act of divine judgment, with the waters rising steadily and methodically. The precise description of the flood's impact—covering mountains to great depths and destroying "every living thing that moved on land"—underscores the thoroughness of this divine intervention. Unlike the Sumerian focus on chaos, the biblical narrative is framed within the context of moral cleansing, with Noah and those in the ark representing the hope for renewal. The deliberate inclusion of measurements and details reflects the organized and purposeful nature of the flood in Genesis.

Both accounts portray the flood as an overwhelming and universal force that wipes out humanity, leaving a single figure and those in their protection as survivors. The shared motifs of destruction, calm, and eventual subsidence of waters illustrate a common cultural memory of such cataclysmic events. However, the Sumerian narrative emphasizes the gods' capriciousness and the chaotic nature of the flood, while Genesis presents it as a calculated act of divine justice. The Sumerian flood lasts six days and seven nights, with a dramatic and sudden resolution, while the Genesis flood extends over forty days, reflecting a slower, more deliberate unfolding of divine will. These differences highlight the distinct theological frameworks of the two traditions: one rooted in polytheistic unpredictability, the other in monotheistic intentionality.

The release of birds to determine the condition of the earth further connects the two stories. The Sumerian text describes Utnapishtim releasing a dove, a swallow, and finally a raven:

I opened the window, and sunlight fell on my face. Then I let out a dove, and it flew away. Finding no resting place, it returned. Then I sent out a swallow, but it also returned. Finally, I sent out a raven. It saw that the waters had receded. It ate, flew around, cawed, and did not return. (Al-Sawah, 2002, pp. 217–226; Al-Sawah, 2007, pp. 151–180).

The Sumerian account of Utnapishtim's release of birds is a vivid and symbolic moment in the narrative. Each bird's journey reflects the gradual withdrawal of the floodwaters. The dove, unable to find a place to rest, returns, as does the swallow. Finally, the raven, upon finding evidence of dry land, does not return, signaling the flood's end. This sequence creates a sense of anticipation and resolution, with the raven's behavior marking a turning point in the story. The imagery of sunlight falling on Utnapishtim's face as he opens the window enhances the moment's significance, symbolizing the restoration of hope and light after the chaos of the flood.

Similarly, in Genesis 8:6–12, Noah releases a raven and a dove:

"Noah opened a window he had made in the ark and sent out a raven, and it kept flying back and forth until the water had dried up from the earth. Then he sent out a dove to see if the water had receded. But the dove could find nowhere to perch because there was water over all the surface of the earth; so it returned to Noah in the ark. He waited seven more days and again sent out the dove. When the dove returned to him in the evening, there in its beak was a freshly plucked olive leaf!"

In the Genesis account, Noah's release of the raven and the dove similarly marks the transition from destruction to renewal. The raven's continuous flight over the waters contrasts with the dove's repeated returns, which emphasize the lingering effects of the flood. The moment the dove brings back an olive leaf serves as a powerful symbol of renewal and the reestablishment of life on earth. This act not only signifies the subsiding of the waters but also conveys a divine assurance of a new beginning, reinforcing the theological framework of hope and covenant in the biblical narrative.

Both accounts use birds to represent the gradual progression toward restoration, with their behavior serving as a practical and symbolic measure of the flood's conclusion. In both, the raven is associated with survival and independence, while the dove symbolizes peace and renewal. However, the order and roles of the birds differ. In the Sumerian version, Utnapishtim uses three types of birds: the dove, the swallow, and the raven, each with distinct actions, whereas Noah's narrative focuses primarily on the raven and the dove, with the dove playing a more prominent symbolic role through its olive leaf.

The theological framing also diverges. The Sumerian account depicts the birds' release as part of Utnapishtim's pragmatic steps to assess the floodwaters, reflecting a practical relationship with the divine. In contrast, the Genesis account imbues the dove's actions with profound theological meaning, tying the event to God's promise of renewal. These differences highlight the contrasting cosmologies of the two traditions: one rooted in the practicalities of polytheistic myth, the other in the moral and covenantal dimensions of monotheism.

The narratives of the Sumerian Flood and Noah's story in Genesis illustrate a shared cultural heritage in their use of symbolic elements such as the release of birds to mark the retreat of floodwaters, embodying hope and renewal. However, the underlying motivations and theological frameworks differ significantly. In the Sumerian version, the gods' decision to unleash the flood reflects their capricious and anthropomorphic nature, driven by irritation at humanity's noise. In contrast, the biblical account attributes the flood to humanity's moral failings, presenting it as an act of divine justice and a path toward moral and spiritual renewal.

The modes of divine communication also highlight these differences. Ea's covert warning to Utnapishtim underscores the tension and secrecy within a polytheistic pantheon. Meanwhile, God's direct command to Noah reflects the personal and covenantal bond characteristic of monotheistic theology. Additionally, the design of the vessels in each story conveys distinct cultural and symbolic priorities: the Sumerian ark, with its symmetrical, cubic form, suggests cosmic balance, while Noah's rectangular ark emphasizes practicality and the preservation of life.

Together, these narratives underscore the dynamic interplay of mythological and theological traditions in the ancient Near East. While the biblical account adapts and re-contextualizes shared motifs, it does so within a framework that emphasizes justice, mercy, and a covenantal relationship between the divine and humanity, transforming the mythological into a narrative of profound moral and spiritual significance.

Two Kings: Biblical and Sumerian Perspectives on Life and Mortality

The biblical text in *Ecclesiastes* presents the image of a wise and powerful king searching for the meaning of life and the secret to immortality. Ultimately, the king realizes that death is the fate of all humans, leading him to conclude that the joys of life should be embraced. The text advises:

"Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart; for God has already approved what you do. Let your garments always be white, and let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the wife whom you love, all the days of your

vain life that he has given you under the sun, because that is your portion in life."
(Al-Sawah, 2002, pp. 269–270)

Similarly, the Sumerian-Babylonian mythology recounts the tale of Gilgamesh, the great king of Uruk, who embarks on a journey to overcome death and discover the secret to immortality. Known as both a wise and powerful ruler, Gilgamesh is described as a figure with divine qualities who undertakes great architectural feats, such as building the walls of Uruk. Despite his immense strength and wisdom, Gilgamesh ultimately learns that the gods have decreed mortality for humans. Accepting his fate, he resolves to savor the pleasures of life, as recorded in Tablet X of the Epic of Gilgamesh:

"Fill your belly. Day and night make merry. Let days be full of joy. Dance and make music day and night. Wear fresh clothes, keep your head washed, and bathe in water. Cherish the child who holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace. This is the lot of humanity." (Al-Sawah, 2002, p. 270)

The parallels between these two texts are striking, as both convey the central message that humans should relish life's pleasures and refrain from becoming burdened by concerns that may lead to anguish. Both figures—the wise king in *Ecclesiastes* and Gilgamesh in his epic—reach a shared realization that immortality is unattainable and that the true purpose of life lies in enjoying its blessings. These texts reflect a universal human concern with mortality and the search for meaning, offering a perspective that underscores the transient nature of existence while advocating for the celebration of life's simple joys.

While the biblical text in *Ecclesiastes* and the Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh* share thematic parallels in their reflections on mortality and the value of life's pleasures, they differ in significant ways. The framework of *Ecclesiastes* is monotheistic, rooted in a covenantal relationship with a single God. The advice to "eat your bread with joy" and "enjoy life" is given under the assurance that God has "approved what you do." This reflects a moral and spiritual alignment, emphasizing divine blessing and the inevitability of death as part of a divine plan. The focus is on reverence for God and the acceptance of life's fleeting nature as part of a larger, divinely ordained order. By contrast, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* operates within a polytheistic framework, involving a pantheon of gods whose decisions are often arbitrary and unpredictable. The acceptance of mortality comes not through alliance with divine will but through the realization that the gods have deliberately denied humans immortality. This worldview is more existential, emphasizing individual agency and the celebration of human experiences as a response to divine limitations.

In addition, mortality in *Ecclesiastes* is presented as a natural part of human existence, woven into the fabric of divine creation. Death is inevitable and universal, but life's meaning is found in enjoying God's blessings and living virtuously within the constraints of mortality. The tone is contemplative and reconciliatory, offering a sense of peace through acceptance of divine wisdom. In contrast, *Gilgamesh* portrays mortality as a limitation imposed by the gods, contrasting sharply with the immortality enjoyed by the divine. Gilgamesh's quest for immortality highlights his struggle against this imposed boundary, and his eventual acceptance is more a resignation to the gods' decree than a peaceful resolution. The tone here is more tragic and defiant, reflecting the tension between human aspiration and divine restriction.

Moreover, wisdom plays a central but distinct role in each narrative. In *Ecclesiastes*, wisdom is portrayed as the highest human pursuit, leading to the understanding that fearing God and keeping His commandments is the whole duty of humanity. The king's wisdom culminates in practical advice for living a fulfilled life within God's framework, linking wisdom with divine understanding and moral conduct. In contrast, *Gilgamesh* presents wisdom as a product of experience and personal suffering. His journey—from arrogance to enlightenment—reflects a transformation through encounters with mortality, friendship, and the natural world. This wisdom is not divine in origin but arises from his human struggle, tied to existential growth and self-awareness rather than divine command.

Besides, the tone and style of the two works also differ markedly. The tone of *Ecclesiastes* is reflective and didactic, with a focus on imparting life lessons and guidance. It addresses a community, aiming to provide collective moral clarity through structured, philosophical insights. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, however, is dramatic and epic, recounting grand adventures and existential struggles. Its tone is intensely personal, focusing on Gilgamesh's confrontation with life's limits, and its poetic style is filled with vivid imagery and emotional intensity.

And, the purpose of life's pleasures is framed differently in each text. In *Ecclesiastes*, life's pleasures are gifts from God, meant to be enjoyed responsibly as part of a moral and reverent life. This perspective offers a sense of balance—pleasures are not ends in themselves but are part of a life lived in harmony with God's will. In *Gilgamesh*, pleasures are humanity's only refuge against the

inevitability of death. They serve as a form of resistance to the gods' denial of immortality, emphasizing pleasure as a means of affirming human existence despite its inherent limitations. Thus, although both *Ecclesiastes* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* ultimately advocate for embracing life's joys in the face of mortality, *Ecclesiastes* frames this within a divine and moral order, *Gilgamesh* highlights human resilience and existential struggle. The former offers consolation through faith and divine wisdom, while the latter underscores the bittersweet nature of human existence and the pursuit of meaning beyond divine constraints.

Abrahamic Friendship in the Quran, the Torah, and the Epic of Gilgamesh

In Tablet VI of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, we find the following passage:

Yes, Enkidu, delighted with life,
I will show you Gilgamesh, a man of pleasures.
He is the companion who helps in times of distress.
Mightiest of the wilderness, with great strength,
Resolute as the piercing star of Anu.
You have leaned on him as one leans on a woman,
And this means he will never abandon you.
That is the meaning of your dream.

This passage illustrates the deep bond of friendship between Gilgamesh and his companion, Enkidu—a bond highlighted throughout the epic. This profound friendship inevitably calls to mind the concept of *khillah* (intimate friendship) as portrayed in the Quran and the Torah. Specifically, this is seen in the relationship between Abraham and God, often referred to as "the friend of God." Abraham's title, *Khalīl Allāh* (the friend of God), is rooted in his intellectual and spiritual journey toward divine unity and his rejection of idolatry.

In the Quran, Abraham's journey toward recognizing the one true God unfolds through a process of elimination. For example, in *Surah Al-An'am* (6:78), the Quran narrates: "When he saw the sun rising, he said, 'This is my lord; this is greater.'" But when it set, he said, "O my people, I am free from what you associate [with Allah]."

Classical interpretations, such as Al-Qurtubī's commentary (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*), explain that Abraham sought an ideal relationship of trust and closeness with the ultimate creator. Initially, he considered celestial bodies as potential divine entities due to their perceived perfection, but their impermanence led him to reject them. Ultimately, he arrived at the concept of a singular, transcendent God—complete and unchanging (Al-Qurtubī, 2006).

This intellectual quest mirrors medieval *Ṣūfī* interpretations, which suggest that Abraham's friendship with God stemmed from his rational pursuit of the *causa prima* (the first cause) and *causa secunda* (secondary causes). By recognizing the imperfection of creation, he sought union with the ultimate perfection of God. Sufi scholars emphasize that Abraham reached the highest form of friendship (*khillah*) through intellect and devotion, transcending ordinary companionship.

Similarly, the Torah describes Abraham's profound relationship with God, emphasizing his rejection of idolatry and his unwavering faith in the one true Creator. In *Joshua* (24:2-3), the text notes that Abraham's ancestors worshiped other gods, including the Babylonian moon god Nanar. Abraham, however, abandoned these practices, placing his faith in the God of heaven and earth. The Torah further highlights Abraham's personal relationship with God, describing him as not only a follower but as someone with a deep spiritual partnership. For example, in *Genesis* (15:14-18) and *Genesis* (18:14-19), Abraham's dialogues with God demonstrate a unique closeness and mutual trust.

This relationship earned Abraham the title "friend of God," a distinction mentioned in the Torah on multiple occasions (e.g., *1 Chronicles* 20:7; *Genesis* 14:22-24).

The narratives from both scriptures affirm Abraham's rejection of his forefathers' idolatry and highlight his intention to establish a new monotheistic faith. These texts suggest that Abraham's beliefs may have influenced later theological frameworks and narratives, which evolved over time into new legends and interpretations.

Returning to the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, particularly after Enkidu's death, resonates with the spiritual and personal connections seen in the Abrahamic traditions. Gilgamesh's refusal to part with Enkidu's body for three days underscores the depth of their bond, paralleling the concept of *khillah* in the Quran and Torah. These three traditions—the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the Quranic narrative, and the Torah—provide fertile ground for comparison, revealing universal themes of friendship, loyalty, and the pursuit of transcendent connections.

This thematic overlap invites further exploration of the intersections between ancient mythology and monotheistic scriptures, particularly in their shared emphasis on the transformative power of friendship and devotion.

This resemblance between the mythological and the religious, particularly in the context of *khillah* (intimate friendship), sheds light on profound cultural and theological intersections. The Torah's reference to Abraham's origins in the ancient city of Ur—a central hub of Mesopotamian and Sumerian mythology—provides a significant clue to these connections. Ur was not merely a birthplace of Abraham but also a cradle of mythological narratives, home to revered deities such as the moon god Nannar and his consort Ningal. The myths and religious practices of Ur deeply influenced its culture, shaping the beliefs of its inhabitants.

Given Abraham's rejection of idolatry and his revolutionary embrace of monotheism, as described in both the Quran and the Torah, it is plausible to consider that Abraham's spiritual worldview emerged as a counterpoint to the mythological traditions of his homeland. This contrast between his unique belief in one transcendent God and the prevailing polytheistic systems suggests the existence of an earlier unified religious text—a proto-monotheistic revelation that predated and possibly inspired both the myths of the Sumerians and Babylonians and the later codification of religious scriptures. This text, referred to in Islamic tradition as the *Ṣuḥuf Ibrāhīm* (*Scrolls of Abraham*), is described in the Quran as a set of divine revelations given to Abraham (Quran, 87:18-19).

The notion that the *Ṣuḥuf Ibrāhīm* served as a foundational source for Abraham's personal faith and for shaping theological ideas in Mesopotamian civilization introduces a compelling hypothesis. The intertwining of myth and theology in the Epic of Gilgamesh and the religious narratives of the Quran and Torah might thus reflect the evolution and reinterpretation of this original text. Over time, its themes of divine-human friendship, moral guidance, and the search for transcendence could have been adapted, fragmented, and mythologized to align with the sociocultural and religious frameworks of Sumerian, Babylonian, and later Abrahamic traditions.

Moreover, the thematic parallels between the intimate friendship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu and the *khillah* between Abraham and God suggest a shared human preoccupation with profound relationships—whether between individuals or with the divine. This universal theme, articulated differently across cultural and religious boundaries, points to a common ancestral narrative that predated and influenced both mythology and scripture.

Thus, the hypothesis that Abraham's *Ṣuḥuf* predated the myths of Mesopotamian civilization not only reaffirms the interconnectedness of religious and mythological traditions but also underscores the possibility of a monotheistic core that permeated early human spirituality. Further study into this relationship could unravel new insights into the transmission of religious ideas and their transformation into cultural myths, bridging the gap between the sacred and the legendary in human history.

Conclusion

This article has explored the intricate relationship between mythology and monotheistic religions, focusing on how ancient Mesopotamian myths, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Sumerian Flood narrative, intersect with and are reinterpreted within the sacred texts of the Torah and Quran. By examining these parallels, the study has illuminated how ancient myths served as cultural and theological foundations, influencing the evolution of monotheistic traditions. Central to this exploration is the concept of *khillah* (intimate friendship), a theme that bridges the mythological bond between Gilgamesh and Enkidu and the Abrahamic notion of divine friendship between Abraham and God.

This research has demonstrated that these parallels are not merely coincidental but are indicative of a shared cultural and theological substratum, possibly rooted in a proto-monotheistic faith represented by the *Ṣuḥuf Ibrāhīm* (Scrolls of Abraham). This foundational text, as hypothesized, predates both Mesopotamian myths and later scriptural traditions, providing a coherent framework for understanding the evolution of these narratives. The thematic similarities—such as divine-human relationships, moral guidance, and the search for meaning—suggest that the transmission of these ideas was a dynamic process, shaped by both the sociocultural and theological contexts of successive civilizations.

The article has also contributed to the broader understanding of how monotheistic religions reinterpret mythological elements to serve distinct theological purposes. The Torah embeds these narratives within a historical and covenantal framework, emphasizing the chosenness of the Hebrew people, while the Quran critiques and reframes them, asserting their divine origins and universalizing their moral and spiritual lessons. These reinterpretations illustrate how sacred texts not only inherit but also transform mythological motifs to align with their unique religious imperatives.

By highlighting the transformative power of *khillah* as a universal theme, this study has underscored the enduring relevance of friendship—whether between humans or with the divine—as a central concern across cultures and epochs. The juxtaposition of the intimate bond between Gilgamesh and Enkidu with the Abrahamic portrayal of divine friendship deepens our understanding of the interconnectedness of mythology and scripture.

In conclusion, this article has contributed to the ongoing dialogue on the interplay between myth and religion, offering a nuanced perspective on the continuity and reinterpretation of ancient narratives

within monotheistic traditions. It bridges the gap between the mythological and the theological, providing a framework for understanding how religious texts transcend their historical origins to address universal human concerns. This exploration invites further research into the intersections of myth, scripture, and cultural identity, offering new insights into the shared spiritual heritage of humanity.

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