

# Buchbesprechungen

**Irving Finkel:** *The Ark Before Noah. Decoding the Story of the Flood.* London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2014. 352 S. 16,3 × 23,6 cm. ISBN 978-1-444-75705-7. Preis: £ 25,00.

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Reading the book under review is a joy! Irving Finkel, Assistant Keeper in the Department of the Middle East at the British Museum in London and curator of the world's largest cuneiform collection, has succeeded in writing a book which is highly informative, amusing and sometimes invites contradiction. It aims at a wider public but the professional cuneiformist too will profit a great deal from Finkel's extraordinary knowledge of cuneiform tablets.

The discovery and edition of the "Ark Tablet" (ch. 5) lies at the heart of the book. This small cuneiform tablet came to Great Britain in 1948 in the possession of Leonard Simmons. The tablet is a witness of the popular Mesopotamian tradition about the deluge, the most famous echo of which we find in the Biblical story of Noah. More precisely, it belongs to the tradition which calls the Mesopotamian Noah by the name *Atramḫasis*. The fragmentary tablet relates the flood warning (ch. 6) and above all the construction and loading of the ark with many details hitherto unknown. Finkel has put a lot of effort into understanding and reconstructing the shape and building of the ship (ch. 7 and 8), however not always successfully (see the remarks below).

Several chapters are devoted to subjects related to the Ark Tablet. Finkel starts with the emergence and role of writing (ch. 2 and 3) and continues with the flood tradition from ancient Sumer to the Qur'ān (ch. 4). The fragmentary l. 52 of the tablet is restored by Finkel so as to give the information, for the first time in the cuneiform tradition, that the animals board the ark "two by two" (*šana*). "Life on board" (ch. 9) leads Finkel, just "for fun" (p. 199), to give a list of animals known in Ancient Mesopotamia. A comparison between the Babylonian and Biblical flood stories (ch. 10) leads to tell the story of the Judaeans exile in Babylonia (ch. 11). The question of the transmission of the flood motive from Mesopotamia to the Bible is answered by Finkel with the statement, worthy of discussion, "Judaeans learnt to read cuneiform" (p. 255). Ch. 12 deals with an exciting join of a small fragment to the famous Babylonian map of the world; the resulting text, though still fragmentary, is understood by Finkel to mention the landing spot of the ark – an interpretation which is, to my

mind, not entirely certain. Ch. 13 develops the provoking idea that the Ark Tablet is not simply intended to be read but used in some kind of "public performance" (p. 304).

All of this is presented by Finkel together with many illustrations and seasoned with humorous reminiscences of his study days and of more or less strange Assyriologists, as the professionals of the discipline are still frequently labelled today in an old-fashioned manner.

The appendix 4 on pp. 357–368 offers a transliteration of the Ark Tablet together with a translation and a short commentary; the latter rather addresses the wider public than scholars. Photos of the tablet are found on pp. 107, 109, on the plates after p. 150, and on pp. 188 and 309. There is no hand-copy of the tablet.

Remarks on the edition of the Ark Tablet:

l. 10–11: *ka-an-nu aš-la-a tāmu[r] ša [eleppim?] lip-tilkum ...*, transl. by Finkel "You saw *kannu* ropes and *ašlu* ropes/rushes for [a coracle before!] Let someone (else) twist ...": *ašlā* contains the distributive suff. *-ā* (see M. Powell, ZA 72 [1982] 89–102) and is a measure of length (= 10 *nindanu* = ca. 60 m) here. The sequence preterite–precativum can best be translated by a temporal clause: "Ropes, each (one) *ašlu* long – (when) you have found (them) for [the ship(?)], then may somebody twist ..."

l. 17: read *ḫi-in-ni-ša* (instead of *šā*).

ll. 18–20, 24 and 57 of the text contain the sign sequence ŠU ŠI, always used in measurements of ESIR "bitumen" (ll. 18–20) or *nāḫum* "lard" (ll. 24, 57), substances needed for caulking and launching (see below) the boat. Finkel interprets this sequence as a logogram ŠU.ŠI "finger" (ca. 1,6 cm). Thus he translates l. 18: 1 ŠU.ŠI ESIR *kidātiša aprus* "I apportioned one finger of bitumen for her outsides" (similarly in ll. 19 and 20), and l. 24: 5 ŠU.ŠI *nāḫam<sup>1</sup> uredđi* "I added five fingers of lard" (similarly l. 57). But there is a serious problem: the logogram for "finger" is ŠU.SI, never ŠU.ŠI (although in Susa there is a spelling A.ŠI, s. CAD U, 3), a fact duly mentioned but passed over too quickly by Finkel himself (p. 174). Moreover, it would be highly unusual that substances like bitumen and lard are measured in units of length and not in units of capacity

or weight. Finally, l. 24, quoted above, makes no sense: how can lard poured into the kiln be measured in fingers? Therefore, there is no doubt that the correct reading in all these cases is syllabic *šu-ši* “60”, and the unit of measure is elliptically not mentioned. The omission of the unit of measure occurs frequently in Akk. texts and can also frequently be observed elsewhere in the Ark Tablet: ŠÁR×8 ‘ESIR.UD.DU.A’, “28.000 (units of) dry bitumen” l. 21; ŠÁR ESIR, “3.600 (units of) bitumen” l. 22; ŠÁR×4 + 30, “14.430 (units of rope?) l. 12; 5 KAŠ, “5 (units of) beer” l. 53, 1/3 ukulû, “1/3 (unit of) fodder” l. 57. In the first three cases, Finkel understands the omitted unit of measure as *sûtu* (ca. 6 l), which is difficult for rope but might be possible for bitumen. However, ll. 57 and 58 suggest a different interpretation: 1 šūši nāḫam ana girimadê ... ezub 30 GUR upazzirû ummi’ânû “1×60 (or 60×60?) (units) of lard for the poles, apart from the 30 kor (ca. 300 l) which the workmen had stowed away”. Since l. 58 explicitly mentions GUR it is reasonable to assume the same unit of measure also in l. 57. Thus l. 18 (and similarly ll. 19, 20) can be translated “I apportioned 1×60 (or 60×60?, but why then not ŠÁR?) (kor of) bitumen for her outsides”, and l. 24 “I added 5×60 (kor of) lard (to the bitumen in the kiln)”. This interpretation changes all calculations made on pp. 174–176 and 352–355 of Finkel’s book.

ll. 21, 25: *uštarkib* is not Št “I caused to be loaded”, but perfect Š “I loaded”; note that also the preceding l. 20 has a perfect *aštapak* “I poured”.

l. 25: read prob. *ki-ra-ti-[ia]* “my kilns” as in l. 21.

ll. 33, 58: restore *um-mi-[a-nu]/um-mi-<sup>l</sup>a<sup>l</sup>-[nu]* instead of *-ni*: in both instances the word is nominative. Moreover, *ezub* is here not “out of” but “apart from”.

l. 35: *k[i-i]m<sup>l</sup>sa<sup>l</sup>-al-la-at* “kith and kin” are two nouns in the absolute state (like *zikar sinniš* “man and woman”). There is no need to restore *ki-im-<tu>*.

l. 57: the syllabic spelling <sup>l</sup>*gi-ri<sup>l</sup>-ma-de-e* proves that the same word must be read in Gilg. SB XI 79 (instead of <sup>l</sup>*gi-ir<sup>l</sup> tarkullī*(MÁ.MUG!))<sup>l</sup>*meš<sup>l</sup>*, as was proposed by A. R. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* [2003] 706 and comm. on p. 883). The wording “lard for (ana) the *girimadû*”, to my mind, excludes an interpretation of *girimadû* as “wooden roller’ ... for smoothing over the surface of the bitumen” in order to apply oil for caulking the boat (Finkel p. 181, see also 182f.). Moreover, the procedure described in ll. 57–58 follows the boarding, the celebrations, the loading of the supplies for the animals and is the last action before closing the door. It hardly makes sense that the scribe resumes the caulking of the boat here, which had already been finished before all these events in l. 33. In the epic of Gilgamesh, the text explicitly states *eleppu gamrat* “the boat was finished” (XI 77) before the *girimadû* are applied

(XI 79). Therefore, I prefer the traditional interpretation of *girimadû* as “poles for the slipway”. The lard is applied at the poles as a lubricant.

l. 58: *û-pa!*?(instead of *pâ*)-*az-zi-rû* as in l. 33.

The date of the Ark Tablet:

Finkel dates the tablet to the early or middle Old Bab. period between “1900–1700 BC”. His arguments are the “shape and appearance of the tablet itself, the character and composition of the cuneiform signs and the grammatical forms and usages” (Finkel p. 105f.). C. Hess, in: P. Delnero/J. Lauinger (ed.), *Texts and contexts. Approaches to textual transmission in the cuneiform world. SANER 9* (Berlin 2014) 253 n. 6, suggests “a later date” for orthographic reasons; he obviously thinks of an (early?) Middle Bab. date, although he is not explicit about this. Some of Hess’ arguments are well-founded: the syllabic values *ár*(UB) in *ár-ti* “frond” l. 11; *rû*(RUM) in *û-pa-az-zi-rû* “they stowed away” ll. 33, 58; *pît*(BAD) in *pît ba-bi-<sup>l</sup>ša<sup>l</sup>* “opening of its door” l. 60. Another post-Old Bab. syllabic value not mentioned by Hess is *qab* in *ta-qab-bi-am* “you will give order(?)” l. 12.

However, the form *kannû* in l. 10 (quoted above) is, in my interpretation, not diagnostic: this is not an accusative in *-û* (the text elsewhere only has accusatives in *-am*, *-î*, and *-âtî*, s. ll. 4, 5, 11, 17, 18, 20, 24, 25, 27, 49, 57), but a nominative as *casus pendens*.

Whether the *l/r* change in *še-ri* for *šēli* “ribs” ll. 13, 29 is diagnostic (Hess 253 n. 6 and 259 n. 20), is difficult to ascertain: S. Dalley, *CUSAS 9* (2009) 15 only mentions a single example in the PN (*W*)*arad-ur-maš-ši-ti* = <sup>u</sup>*UL.MAŠ-tum*, and I do not know of any further examples, neither in Old nor in Middle Bab.

Other features of the text follow normal middle Old Bab. usage, such as the almost consistent preservation of mimation, the preservation of /w/ in *a-wa-t[um]* (both features were mentioned by Hess), the spelling *ús* instead of *us* in *ar-ku-ús* and *ap-ru-ús* ll. 17–19 (normal in middle Old Bab. except for southern Babylonia, which uses *us* in similar cases), and the dissimilation in *ka-aq-qâ-ar-š[a]* l. 9.

Summing up, the younger syllabic values mentioned above leave no doubt that the text must be younger than the middle Old Bab. period. On the other hand, the text does not give the impression to be normal Middle Bab., although we have to take into account archaisms in literary texts, as Hess rightly states. A date somewhere between the end of the Old Bab. and the beginning of the Middle Bab. period seems probable.