

A 4000-year-old tablet from ancient Mesopotamia contains the specifications for an ark pre-dating the story of Noah

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IT'S a few notches older than the 4000-year-old clay tablet. But what it reveals about the ancient biblical story of Noah's ark has scholars crowing the world over.

The British Museum yesterday put the recently deciphered clay tablet from ancient Mesopotamia - now Iraq - on display.

It's claimed to be one of the most important archaeological discoveries ever.

What it contains are specifications for the legendary Ark which was said to have saved two of each animal - and a handful of humans - from a catastrophic flood.

But some of the details are different to the generally known version.

It describes a circular vessel known as a coracle, not the rectangular vessel of modern mythology.

"It was really a heart-stopping moment - the discovery that the boat was to be a round boat," the tablet's discoverer, Irving Finkel said. "That was a real surprise."



The tablet records a Mesopotamian god's instructions for building a giant vessel - two-thirds the size of a soccer field in area - made of rope, reinforced with wooden ribs and coated in bitumen.

Etched in the clay is one of the story's key elements: It describes how the animals must enter "two by two".

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The British Museum says the detail contained in the tablet can be analysed by naval architects to determine if such a vessel could have actually sailed.

Mr Finkel is the British Museum assistant keeper of the Middle East. He is releasing a book on the tablet titled: "The Ark Before Noah".

"(The tablet is) one of the most important human documents ever discovered," he said.

And the newly revealed design, he said, was "perfect".

"It never sinks, it's light to carry."



Coracle versus ocean-going streamlined design? Inset top, a sketch of the design of a common river-going coracle. Source: Supplied

But Finkel said that while the design appear sound, but he isn't sure a "coracle" of that scale would have floated

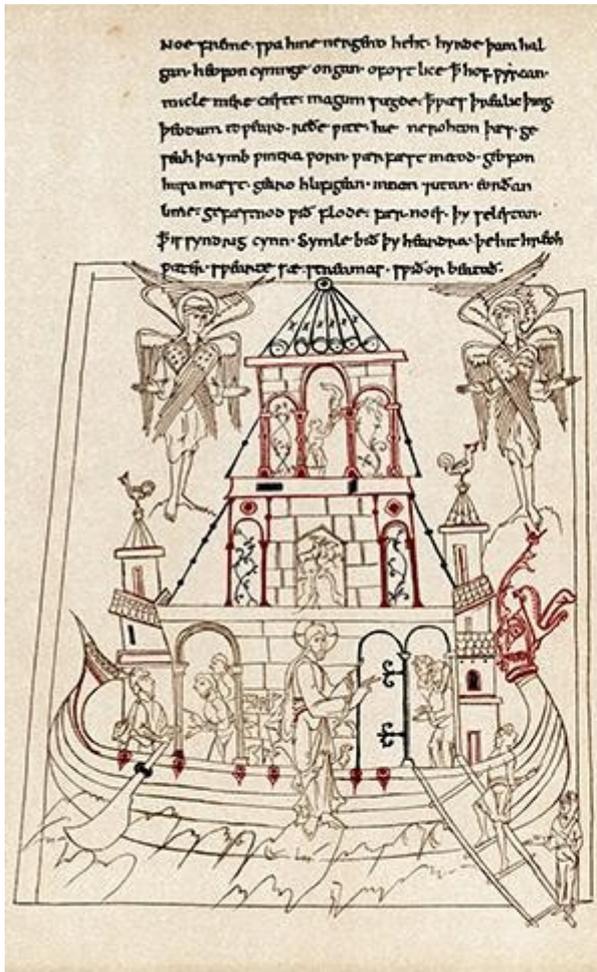
David Owen, professor of ancient Near Eastern studies at Cornell University, said the British Museum curator had made "an extraordinary discovery."

Elizabeth Stone, an expert on the antiquities of ancient Mesopotamia at New York's Stony Brook University, said it made sense that ancient Mesopotamians would depict their mythological ark as round.

This is not the first time the ancient story of the ark has been found outside of the bible. But it is the earliest.

The flood story recurs in later Mesopotamian writings including the "Epic of Gilgamesh."

Finkel says the discovery may cause dissent among believers in the biblical story. When 19th-century British Museum scholars first learned from cuneiform tablets that the Babylonians had a flood myth, they were disturbed by its similarities to the story of Noah.



Varied visions ... An interpretation of Noah's ark from a medieval manuscript, left, and one of the common concepts contained in modern children's stories. Source: Supplied

"Already in 1872 people were writing about it in a worried way - What does it mean that Holy Writ appears on this piece of Weetabix?" he joked to Fox News, referring to a cereal similar in shape to the tablet.

"I'm sure the story of the flood and a boat to rescue life is a Babylonian invention," he said.

A television documentary due to be broadcast later this year will follow attempts to build the ark according to the ancient manual.

Does Finkel think the ark was real?

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"I don't think the ark existed - but a lot of people do," he said. "It doesn't really matter. The Biblical version is a thing of itself and it has a vitality forever."