

The Atra-Hasis

The Tablet of the Covenant

The Tablet of the Covenant is based upon the Babylonian epic of Atrahasis (Ziusudra in Sumerian). It is a tale of the early days of earth, when mankind was still young, and the gods were upon the earth. It is the tale of mankind's corruption and the subsequent cleansing of the world by the flood weapon of the gods. It is the story of a man, favored by the gods, who built a great ship to escape the floodwaters that doomed the earth. It is believed by many scholars to be the source of the biblical tale of Noah and his ark.

The Tablet of the Covenant (*'The Epic of Ziusudra'*)

When the gods instead of man did the work, bore the loads, the gods' load was too great, the work too hard, the trouble too much, the great Anunnaki made the Igigi carry the workload sevenfold.

An their father was King, their counselor warrior Enlil, their chamberlain was Ninurta, their canal-controller Enuggi.

They took the box of lots, and cast the lots; the Gods made the division. An went up to the sky, and Enlil took the earth for his people. The bolt which bars the sea was assigned to far-sighted Enki.

When An had gone up to the sky, and the gods of the Abzu had gone below, the Anunnaki of the sky made the Igigi bear the workload. The Gods had to dig out canals, had to clear channels, the lifelines of the land. The gods dug out the Tigris river bed and then dug out the Euphrates. In the deep they set up the Abzu of the land, and roofed it as the mountains.

They were counting the years of loads; for 3600 years they bore the excess, hard work, night and day. They groaned and blamed each other, grumbled over the masses of excavated soil:

'Let us confront our Lord the chamberlain, and get him to relieve us of our hard work! Come, let us carry the Lord, the counselor of gods, the warrior, from his dwelling. Come, let us carry Enlil, the counselor of the gods, the warrior, from his dwelling.'

Then Gibil made his voice heard and spoke to the gods his brothers,

'Come! Let us carry the counselor of the gods, the warrior, from his dwelling. Come! Let

*us carry Enlil, the counselor of the gods, the warrior, from his dwelling. Now, cry battle!
Let us mix fight with battle!*

The gods listened to his speech, set fire to their tools, put aside their spades for fire, their loads for the fire-god, they flared up.

When they reached the gate of the warrior Enlil's dwelling, it was the night, the middle watch, the house was surrounded, the god had not realized.

It was night, the middle watch, E-Kur was surrounded, Enlil had not realized. Yet Kalkal, Enlil's gate master was attentive, he had the gate closed, he held the lock and watched the gate.

Kalkal roused Nusku. They both listened to the noise of the Igigi, then Nusku roused his master, made him get out of bed:

'My Lord, your house is surrounded, a rabble is running around your door! Enlil, your house is surrounded, the Igigi are running around your door!'

Enlil had weapons brought to his dwelling. Enlil made his voice heard and spoke to the vizier Nusku,

'Nusku, bar your door, take up your weapons and stand firm in front of me.'

Nusku barred his door, took up his weapons and stood in front of Enlil. Nusku made his voice heard and spoke to the warrior Enlil,

'O my Lord Enlil, your face is sallow as tamarisk! Why do you fear your own sons? Send for An to be brought down to you, have Enki fetched into your presence.'

He sent for An to be brought down to him, Enki was fetched into his presence, An King of the Sky was present, Enki King of the Abzu attended. The Great Anunnaki were all present. Enlil got up and the case was put.

Enlil made his voice heard and spoke to the Great Gods,

'Is it against me that they have risen? Shall I do battle with them? What did I see with my own eyes? A rabble was running around my door!'

An made his voice heard and spoke to the warrior Enlil,

'Let Nusku go out and find out the word of the Igigi who have surrounded your door.'

Enlil made his voice heard and spoke to the vizier Nusku,

'Nusku, open your door, take up your weapons and stand before me! In the assembly of all the gods, Bow, then stand and tell them, "Your Father An, your counselor warrior Enlil, your chamberlain Ninurta, and your canal-controller Enuggi have sent me to say, who is in charge of this rabble? Who is in charge of this fighting? Who declared war? Who ran to the door of Enlil?"'

Nusku opened his door, took up his weapons, went before Enlil. In the assembly of all the gods he bowed, then stood and delivered Enlil's message.

Then Gibil, leader of the Igigi revolt, made his voice heard and spoke to Nusku,

'Every single one of us gods declared war! We have put a stop to the digging. The load is too excessive, it is killing us! Our work is too hard, the trouble too much! So every single one of us gods has agreed to complain to Enlil.'

Nusku took his weapons, went and returned to Enlil. There Nusku delivered the answer of the Igigi. Enlil listened to his speech. His tears flowed. Enlil spoke guardedly, addressed the Sky King An,

'Noble One, take a decree with you to the sky, show your strength while the Anunnaki are sitting before you, call up one rebellious god and let them cast him for destruction!'

An made his voice heard and spoke to the gods his sons,

'What are we complaining of? Their work was indeed too hard, their trouble was too much. Every day the Earth resounded with their groans and cries. The warning signal was loud enough, we kept hearing the noise, but we ignored them! They have every right to revolt and complain to the house of Enlil!'

Enlil was enraged with his father's answer.

Then far-sighted Enki stepped in and offered a wise solution to the trouble. Enki made his voice heard and spoke to the gods his brothers,

'Why are we blaming them? Their work was too hard, their trouble was too much. Every

day the Earth resounded with their groans and cries. The warning signal was loud enough, we kept hearing the noise, but we ignored them! There is an answer to this problem. Noble An, call forth Belet-ili the Womb-goddess into your presence. When Belet-ili the womb-goddess is present - Let her create offspring, let her create a mortal man so that he may bear the yoke, the work of Enlil, let man bear the load of the gods!

They called up the goddess, asked the midwife of the gods, wise Mami,

'You are the womb-goddess to be the creator of mankind! Create a mortal, that he may bear the yoke! Let him bear the yoke, the work of Enlil! Let man bear the load of the gods!'

Nintu made her voice heard and spoke to the great gods,

'It is not proper for me to make him. That work is Enki's. It is not proper that I should make a mortal slave. I shall create a co-worker, a co-creator, but I will not make a slave! This is the work of Enki; he must make everything pure! If Enki gives me the clay, then I will do it.'

Enki made his voice heard and spoke to the great gods,

'Wise Mami, mother of the gods your sons, your wisdom is noted and shall be made to pass. On the first, seventh and fifteenth of the month I shall make a purification by washing. Then one Anunnaki God should be chosen for sacrifice, and the gods can be purified by immersion. Nintu shall mix clay with his flesh and blood. Then a god and a man will be mixed together in clay. Let us hear the drumbeat of his heart forever after, let a ghost come into existence from the gods' flesh, let her proclaim it as his living sign, and let the ghost exist so as not to forget the slain god.'

They all answered, 'Yes!' in the assembly, the great Anunnaki who assign the fates.

On the first, seventh, and fifteenth of the month Enki made a purification by washing. Geshtu-e, a pure young god who had intelligence, they slaughtered in their assembly. Nintu mixed clay with his flesh and blood. They heard the drumbeat forever after. A ghost came into existence from the gods' flesh, and Nintu proclaimed it as his living sign. The ghost existed so none would forget the slain god. After she had mixed that clay, she called up the Anunnaki, the great gods. The Igigi, the great gods, spat spittle upon the clay.

Mami made her voice heard and spoke to the great gods,

'I have carried out perfectly the work that you ordered of me. You have sacrificed a god together with his intelligence. I have relieved you of your hard work, I have imposed your load upon man, but only as a co-worker, not a slave. You would have bestowed noise and woe upon mankind, but I have undone the fetter and granted freedom!'

They listened to this speech of hers, and were freed from anxiety, they fell down and kissed her feet:

'We used to call you Mami but now your name shall be Mistress of All Gods.'

Far-sighted Enki and wise Mami went into the Room of Fate. The womb-goddesses were assembled. Enki trod the clay in her presence; Mami kept reciting the incantation, for Enki, staying in her presence, made her recite it. When she had finished her incantation, she pinched off fourteen pieces of clay, and set seven pieces on the right, seven on the left. Between them she put down a mud brick, she made use of a reed, split it open so that it was sharp, to cut the umbilical cords, she called up the wise and knowledgeable womb-goddesses, seven and seven.

Seven created males, seven created females, for the womb-goddess is the creator of fate. Enki paired them two by two, he paired them two by two in her presence.

Mami made these rules for people:

'In the house of a woman who is giving birth the mud brick shall be put down for seven days. Belet-ili, wise Mami shall be honored. The midwife shall rejoice in the house of the woman who gives birth and when the woman gives birth to the baby, the mother of the baby shall sever the cord herself. A man shall cleave unto a woman, a boy to a girl. A girl shall be ready by the sign of her bosoms, a young man, by the beard upon his cheek. In the gardens and the waysides they shall cleave unto each other, a wife and her husband shall choose each other.'

The womb-goddesses were assembled and Nintu was present. They counted the months, called up the ninth month as the term of fates. When the ninth month came, she slipped in her staff and opened the womb. Her face was glad and joyful. She covered her head, performed the midwifery, put on her belt, said a blessing. She made a drawing in flour and put down a mud brick in the center of it:

'I myself have created it, my hands have made it. The midwife shall rejoice in the house of the priestess. Wherever a woman gives birth and the baby's mother severs herself, the

mud brick shall be put down for nine days. Nintu the womb-goddess shall be honored. She shall call the womb-goddess "Mami". She shall honor the womb-goddess, shall lay down the linen cloth, and when the bed is laid out in their house, a wife and her husband shall choose each other. Inanna shall rejoice in the wife-husband relationship, in the father-in-law's house, celebration shall last for nine days, and they shall call Inanna "Ishtar" On the fifteenth day, the fixed time of fate, she shall call upon the womb-goddess and Inanna for blessings upon the child.'

Enlil was very pleased with the work of far-sighted Enki and wise Mami. The new mortals grew quickly and soon they took hold of tools, made new picks and spades, made big the canals so as to feed the people and sustain the gods.

60 times 3600 years had passed, and the country became too wide, the people too numerous. In those days the Anunnaki sent the Watchers to the Earth, they took for themselves wives of the daughters of man, and begat children of great stature and renown. The holy sons and daughters of the Anunnaki Watchers became the leaders of the Land.

In those later days, the country was as noisy as a bellowing bull. The God grew restless at their racket, Enlil had to listen to their noise.

Enlil organized his assembly, he addressed the great gods,

'The noise of mankind has become too much, I am losing sleep over their racket. Give the order that the suruppu-disease shall break out, let Namtar put an end to their noise straight away! Let sickness: headache, suruppu, asakku, blow in to them like a storm!'

The gods gave the order, and suruppu-disease was unleashed upon the people of the land. Namtar put an end to their noise straightaway. Sickness: headache, suruppu, asakku, blew into them like a storm.

Now in those days, in the city of Shuruppak, there was one Ziusudra, a son of the Anunnaki, a leader of the people, whose ear was open to his god Enki. He would speak with his god and his god would speak with him.

Ziusudra made his voice heard and spoke to his Lord,

'How long will the gods make us suffer? Will they make us suffer illness forever? Oh Lord, the people are grumbling! Sickness from the gods is consuming the country! Since you created us, you ought to cast off this unholy sickness.'

Enki listened to his speech then made his voice heard, speaking to his servant Ziusudra,

'Call the elders, the senior men! Start an uprising in your own house, let heralds proclaim, let them make a loud noise in the land: Do not revere your gods, do not pray to your goddesses, but search out the door of Namtar. Bring a baked loaf into his presence. Make the flour offering reach him, may he be shamed by the presents and wipe away his punishing "hand".'

Ziusudra took the order, gathered the elders of the city to his door. Ziusudra made his voice heard and spoke to the gathered elders, telling them all that Enki had told him.

The elders listened to his speech; they built a temple for Namtar in the city. The Heralds proclaimed, they made a loud noise in the land. They did not revere their gods, they did not pray to their goddesses, but searched out the door of Namtar, brought a baked loaf into his presence. They made the flour offerings reach him, and he was shamed by the presents. Namtar wiped away his punishing 'hand'. The suruppu-disease left them, and sickness left the land. The gods went back to their regular offerings.

In time the land became noisy again. Enlil once again organized his assembly, and addressed the gods his sons,

'You are not to inflict disease on them again, even though the people have not diminished - they are more than ever before! I have become restless at their noise, sleep cannot overtake me because of their racket! Cut off the food from the people, let vegetation be too scant for their stomachs! Let Ishkur on high make his rain scarce, let him block the below, and not raise flood- water from the springs! Let the field decrease its yield, Let Nissaba turn away her breast, let the dark fields become white, let the broad countryside breed alkali, let the earth clamp down her womb so that no vegetation sprouts, no grain grows. Let asakku be inflicted on the people, let the womb be too tight to let a baby out!'

The Anunnaki listened to the decree of Enlil, they cut off food for the people and did all that was ordered of them. That first year the land produced no vegetation, the land produced no grain. The people sought in vain for food.

When the second year arrived, they had depleted the city storehouses.

When the third year arrived, the people's looks were changed by starvation.

When the fourth year arrived, their upstanding bearing bowed, their well-set shoulders slouched, people went out in public hunched over with the pain of starvation.

When the fifth year arrived, daughters would suspiciously eye their mothers. Mothers would not open their doors for their daughters. Daughters would watch the scales at the sale of their mothers into slavery. Mothers would watch the scales at the sale of their daughters.

When the sixth year arrived, they served up daughters for their meals, they served up sons for food. When only a few households were left, their faces covered with scabs like malt, people stayed alive by taking the life of others.

Now in those days, Ziusudra again approached Lord Enki, Ziusudra made his voice heard and spoke to his Lord,

'O Lord Enki, how long must the people suffer at the hands of the gods? How long will the Anunnaki punish the children of men and the children of gods? Why are we made to starve? Why has Ishkur ceased his rain, why has he ceased his fertile flood? The people are eating one another, none are safe. Happiness is no longer in the land.'

Enki listened to his speech, and as before, Enki ordered Ziusudra to do just as he had done when Namtar sent sickness to the land. Ziusudra followed his orders, called the elders to his house, and gave them the orders of Enki.

The people built a temple for Ishkur in the city, made offerings to him, and Ishkur was shamed by the presents. Ishkur withdrew his 'hand' from the land. He made mist form in the morning, and in the night he stole out and made dew drop, he opened his clouds and released the rains. He delivered to the field a harvest of its' produce nine fold. The drought left the land and the gods went back to their regular offerings.

Now Enlil was furious with the Igigi, he convened the assembly and made his voice heard, speaking to the gods his sons,

'We, the great Anunna, all of us, agreed together on a plan. An and Ishkur were to guard above, I was to guard the earth below, where Enki went, he was to undo the chain and set us free, he was to release the produce for the people, he was to exercise control by holding the balance. But Enki has instead bestowed upon mankind, the secrets of our heavens, he is the one who has caused knowledge to increase, he has corrupted mankind. Enki is to blame for our woes.' Enlil made his voice heard and spoke to his vizier Nusku, *'Have Enki fetched for me! Have him brought into my presence straight away!'*

Enki was fetched for him. He was made to wait before the assembly. The gods grew anxious as he sat. In the gods' assembly worry gnawed at Enki, he grew anxious as he sat. They were furious with each other, Enki and Enlil. Finally the warrior Enlil addressed Enki,

'We, the great Anunna, all of us, agreed together on a plan. An and Ishkur were to guard above, I was to guard the earth below. Where you went, you were to undo the chain and set us free! You were sent to release produce for the people! You were to exercise control by holding the balance.'

'But instead, you have given wisdom to the people, you gave them forbidden knowledge. Your creations have despoiled the earth. You agreed to a different plan, you betrayed the gods by teaching man to shame the gods, you caused that Ishkur should release his rains, that Namtar should stay the sickness, against the holy will of the gods.'

'Therefore, since you imposed your loads upon man, you bestowed noise on mankind, you slaughtered a god together with his intelligence, you must now use your power to create a flood. As your punishment, it is indeed your power that shall be used against your people! You agreed to the wrong plan! I will have it reversed! Let us make far-sighted Enki swear an oath to this end, that his power shall inundate the earth and wipe away all life.'

Enki made his voice heard and spoke to his brother gods,

'Why should you make me swear an oath? Why should I use my power against my people? The flood that you mention to me - What is it? I do not even know! Could I give birth to a flood? That is Enlil's kind of work! Let him choose destruction, let Enlil choose his champions. Let his envoys march ahead, let them pull loose the mooring poles, let Ninurta march, let him make the weirs overflow.'

The assembly listened to his speech, but they did not listen to his plea. The gods gave a specific command. Enki was forced to swear the oath, and Enlil performed a bad deed to the people.

Now Ziusudra sought his master day and night, but could find him nowhere. He spoke to him, but he would not answer, for Enki was sworn to silence. Instead, Enki came to Ziusudra in a dream and instructed him to go to the temple, put his ear to the wall and listen for his god.

Ziusudra awoke and made his voice heard, speaking to his master,

'Indicate to me the meaning of this dream, let me find its' portent.'

With that, Ziusudra went to the temple and placed his ear to the reed wall. Enki spoke through the wall and made his voice heard, speaking to his servant,

'Make sure you attend the message I shall tell you! Listen constantly to me! Dismantle the house of the god, build a boat with its' materials, reject possessions and save living things. The boat you build, roof it like the Abzu so that the sun cannot see inside it! Make upper decks and lower decks. The tackle must be very strong, the bitumen strong, to give strength. I shall make rain fall on you here, take a wealth of birds, a hamper of fish for your journey.'

Enki opened the sand-clock and filled it, he told Ziusudra that the sand needed for the Flood was seven night's worth. Ziusudra received the message.

Ziusudra gathered up the elders at his door. he made his voice heard and spoke to the elders,

'My God is out of favor with your God. Enki and Enlil have become angry with each other. They have driven me out of my house. Since I always stand in awe of Enki, He told me of this matter. I can no longer stay in Shuruppak, I can no longer set my foot in Enlil's territory again. I must go down to the Abzu and stay with my god. I must build a boat to take me there. That is what he told to me.'

The elders heard his words, and called the carpenters and all manner of workman to his aid. Everything he needed was fetched to him, everything was built according to plan.

All manner of life was placed aboard the boat, Ziusudra selected the best of all species and placed them on the boat. He invited his people to a feast. He put his family and friends on board the vessel. They were eating, they were drinking, but Ziusudra went in and out, pacing the decks of his boat, he could not stay still on his haunches, his heart was breaking, and he was vomiting bile.

The face of the weather changed. Ishkur bellowed from the clouds. When Ziusudra heard this noise, bitumen was brought to him, and he sealed up the door with it. While he was closing the door, Ishkur kept bellowing from the clouds, the winds were raging even as he went up and cut through the ropes, he released the boat. Anzu was tearing at the sky with his talons, the bolt of Abzu broke open and the Flood came out.

The Flood went against the people like an army. No one could see anyone else clearly, none of them could be recognized in the catastrophe. The Flood roared like a bull, like a wild ass screaming the winds howled. The darkness was total, there was no sun. The bodies of man and the children of the gods floated on the surface like fat white sheep, their corpses pushed by the Flood into heaps like piles of dead dragonflies in the marsh. The earth was inundated with the power and noise of the Flood.

In the heavens, An went berserk, he called the gods his sons before him. As for Nintu the Great Mistress, her lips became encrusted with rime. The great gods, the Anunna, stayed parched and famished.

The Goddess watched and wept, midwife of the gods, wise Mami:

'Let daylight return. Let daylight return and shine forth! However could I, in the assembly of the gods, have ordered such destruction with them? Enlil was strong enough to give a wicked order. He ought to have cancelled that order! I heard their cry levelled at me, against myself, against my person, beyond my control my offspring have become like bloated white sheep. As for me, how am I to live in a house of bereavement? My noise has turned to silence. Could I go away, up to the sky and live as in a cloister? What was An's intention as decision-maker? It was his command that the gods his sons obeyed, he who did not deliberate, but sent the Flood, he who gathered the people to catastrophe.'

Nintu was wailing,

'Would a true father have given birth to the rolling sea? Would a true father drown his children so that they would clog up the rivers like the bodies of dragonflies? They are washed up like a raft on the bank. I have seen them, and wept over them! Shall I ever finish weeping for them?'

She wept, she gave vent to her fellings, Nintu wept and fuelled her passions. The gods wept with her for the country. She was sated with grief, she longed for beer in vain. Where she sat weeping, there the great gods sat too, but, like sheep, could only fill their windpipes with bleating. Thirsty as they were, their lips discharged only the rime of famine. For seven days and seven nights the torrent, storm and Flood came on.

After the seventh day had passed, the torrent ceased, silence fell upon the earth. The sun came out and began to shine. When Ziusudra heard the silence, he opened a window in the boat and saw that the sun was shining. He took a raven and released it from the boat. The raven never returned. The waters receded and the boat of Ziusudra came to rest upon the mountaintops. Ziusudra put down the door of his boat and let out all the animals and people within. He put down an offering for the gods, provided food for the gods, he made a burnt offering for the Anunnaki. The gods smelt the fragrance, and gathered like flies over the offering.

When they had eaten the offering, Nintu got up and blamed them all,

'Whatever came over An who makes the decisions? Did Enlil dare to come for the smoke offering? Those two who did not deliberate, but rather, sent the Flood, who gathered the

people to catastrophe - You agreed to the destruction. Now the bright faces of our children are dark forever!

Enki looked upon the bodies of his children which lay scattered about the land, he summoned his powers and turned them all into great flies. Enki wept in sorrow for what Enlil had forced him to do.

Nintu went up to the big flies which Enki had made, and declared before the gods,

'His grief is mine! My destiny goes with his! He must deliver me from evil, and appease me! Let me go out in the morning, let these flies be the lapis lazuli of my necklace by which I may remember them daily, forever.'

It was then that Enlil and An arrived. Enlil spotted the boat and was furious with the Igigi.

'We, the great Anunna, all of us, agreed together on an oath! No form of life should have escaped! How did any man survive the catastrophe?'

An made his voice heard and spoke to the warrior Enlil,

'Who but Enki would do this? He made sure that that the reed wall disclosed the order.'

Enki then spoke up and made his voice heard before all the gods,

'I did it, in defiance of you! I made sure life was preserved on the earth! Exact your punishment from the sinner, and whoever contradicts your order, but I have given vent to my feelings!'

Enlil made his voice heard and spoke to the far-sighted Enki,

'Come, summon Nintu the womb-goddess! Confer with each other in the assembly.'

Enki made his voice heard and spoke to the womb-goddess Nintu,

'You are the womb-goddess who decrees destinies. You have created the destinies of the people, you have created the destinies of the gods, whatever you say shall be made so. I propose a covenant, a bond of Heaven and Earth, and make Enlil swear to it just as he made me swear to his oath.'

With that, Nintu drew a pattern of flour upon the ground and heaped up a mound and placed it in the center, she commanded that Enlil be fetched before her.

Enlil was fetched, and made to stand upon the holy mound. Upon this mound did Enlil swear to the covenant known as *Duranki*, the *Bond of Heaven and Earth*, never again to harm the people of the land, and never again to allow the Anunnaki to cohabit with the children of man. And so the years passed, and mankind flourished, and the gods were made happy by the people of the land.

Thus Concludes the Tablet of the Covenant.

Atra-Hasis

Atra-Hasis ("exceedingly wise") is the protagonist and namesake of an 18th century BCE Akkadian epic. An "Atra-Hasis" appears on one of the Sumerian king lists as king of Shuruppak in the times before the flood. The Atra-Hasis tablets include both a creation myth and a flood account, which is one of three surviving Babylonian deluge stories. The oldest known copy of the epic tradition concerning Atrahasis^[1] can be dated by colophon (scribal identification) to the reign of Hammurabi's great-grandson, Ammi-Saduqa (1646–1626 BCE), but various Old Babylonian fragments exist; it continued to be copied into the first millennium BCE. The Atrahasis story also exists in a later fragmentary Assyrian version, having been first rediscovered in the library of Ashurbanipal, but, because of the fragmentary condition of the tablets and ambiguous words, translations had been uncertain. Its fragments were assembled and translated first by George Smith as *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*; the name of its hero was corrected to *Atra-Hasis* by Heinrich Zimmern in 1899.

In 1965 W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard^[2] published many additional texts belonging to the epic, including an Old Babylonian copy (written around 1650 BCE) which is our most complete surviving recension of the tale. These new texts greatly increased knowledge of the epic and were the basis for Lambert and Millard's first English translation of the Atrahasis epic in something approaching entirety.^[3] A further fragment has been recovered in Ugarit. Walter Burkert^[4] traces the model drawn from Atrahasis to a corresponding passage, the division by lots of the air, underworld and sea among Zeus, Hades and Poseidon in the *Iliad*, in which "a resetting through which the foreign framework still shows".

In its most complete surviving version, the Atrahasis epic is written on three tablets in Akkadian, the language of ancient Babylon.^[5]

Synopsis

Tablet I contains a creation myth about the Sumerian gods Anu, Enlil, and Enki, gods of sky, wind, and water, "when gods were in the ways of men" according to its *incipit*. Following the Cleromancy (casting of lots), sky is ruled by Anu, earth by Enlil, and the freshwater sea by Enki. Enlil assigned junior divines^[6] to do farm labor and maintain the rivers and canals, but after forty years the lesser gods or dingirs rebelled and refused to do strenuous labor. Instead of punishing the rebels, Enki, who is also the kind, wise counselor of the gods, suggested that humans be created to do the work. The mother goddess Mami is assigned the task of creating humans by shaping clay figurines mixed with the flesh and blood of the slain god Geshtu-E, "a god who had intelligence" (his name means "ear" or "wisdom").^[7] All the gods in turn spit upon the clay. After ten months, a specially made womb breaks open and humans are born. Tablet I continues with legends about overpopulation and plagues. Atrahasis is mentioned at the end of Tablet I.

Tablet II begins with more overpopulation of humans and the god Enlil sending first famine and drought at formulaic intervals of 1200 years to reduce the population. In this epic Enlil is depicted as a nasty capricious god while Enki is depicted as a kind helpful god, perhaps because priests of Enki were writing and copying the story. Tablet II is mostly damaged, but ends with Enlil's decision to destroy humankind with a flood and Enki bound by an oath to keep the plan secret.



Cuneiform tablet with the Atra-Hasis Epic in the British Museum

Tablet III of the Atrahasis Epic contains the flood story. This is the part that was adapted in the Epic of Gilgamesh, tablet XI. Tablet III of Atrahasis tells how the god Enki warns the hero Atrahasis (“Extremely Wise”) of Shuruppak, speaking through a reed wall (suggestive of an oracle) to dismantle his house (perhaps to provide a construction site) and build a boat to escape the flood planned by the god Enlil to destroy humankind. The boat is to have a roof “like Apsu” (a subterranean, fresh water realm presided over by the god Enki), upper and lower decks, and to be sealed with bitumen. Atrahasis boards the boat with his family and animals and seals the door. The storm and flood begin. Even the gods are afraid. After seven days the flood ends and Atrahasis offers sacrifices to the gods. Enlil is furious with Enki for violating his oath. But Enki denies violating his oath and argues: “I made sure life was preserved.” Enki and Enlil agree on other means for controlling the human population.

Atrahasis in History

A few general histories can be attributed to the Mesopotamian Atrahasis by ancient sources; these should generally be considered mythology but they do give an insight into the possible origins of the character. The Epic of Gilgamesh labels Atrahasis as the son of Ubara-Tutu, king of Shuruppak, on tablet XI, ‘Gilgamesh spoke to Utnapishtim (Atrahasis), the Faraway... O man of Shuruppak, son of Ubara-Tutu’.^[8] The Instructions of Shuruppak instead label Atrahasis (under the name Ziusudra) as the son of the eponymous Shuruppak, who himself is labelled as the son of Ubara-Tutu.^[9] At this point we are left with two possible fathers: Ubara-Tutu or Shuruppak. Many available tablets comprising The Sumerian King Lists support The Epic of Gilgamesh by omitting Shuruppak as a ruler of Shuruppak. These lists imply an immediate flood after or during the rule of Ubara-Tutu. These lists also make no mention of Atrahasis under any name.^[10] However WB-62 lists a different and rather interesting chronology – here Atrahasis is listed as a ruler of Shuruppak and gudug priest, preceded by his father Shuruppak who is in turn preceded by his father Ubara-Tutu. WB-62 would therefore lend support to The Instructions of Shuruppak and is peculiar in that it mentions both Shuruppak and Atrahasis. In any event it seems that Atrahasis was of royal blood; whether he himself ruled and in what way this would affect the chronology is debatable.

Literary inheritance

The Epic of Atrahasis provides additional information on the flood and flood hero that is omitted in Gilgamesh XI and other versions of the Ancient Near East flood story. According to Atrahasis III ii.40–47 the flood hero was at a banquet when the storm and flood began: “He invited his people...to a banquet... He sent his family on board. They ate and they drank. But he (Atrahasis) was in and out. He could not sit, could not crouch, for his heart was broken and he was vomiting gall.”

The flood story in the standard edition of the Epic of Gilgamesh, Chapter XI may have been paraphrased or copied verbatim from a non-extant, intermediate version the Epic of Atrahasis.^[11] But editorial changes were made, some of which had long-term consequences. The sentence quoted above from Atrahasis III iv, lines 6–7: “Like dragonflies they have filled the river.” was changed in Gilgamesh XI line 123 to: “Like the spawn of fishes, they fill the sea.” However, see comments above.

Other editorial changes were made to the Atrahasis text. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, anthropomorphic descriptions of the gods are weakened. For example, Atrahasis OB III, 30–31 “The Anunnaki (the senior gods) [were sitt]ing in thirst and hunger.” was changed in Gilgamesh XI, 113 to “The gods feared the deluge.” Sentences in Atrahasis III iv were omitted in Gilgamesh, e.g. “She was surfeited with grief and thirsted for beer” and “From hunger they were suffering cramp.”^[12]

Notes

- [1] The variant tellings are not direct translations of a single original.
- [2] Lambert and Millard, *Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum, London*, 1965.
- [3] Lambert and Millard, *Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood*, Oxford, 1969
- [4] Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Harvard) 1992, pp 88–91.
- [5] Lambert and Millard, pages 8–15
- [6] The Akkadian determinative *dingir*, which is usually translated as “god” or “goddess” can also mean “priest” or “priestess” (Margaret Whitney Green, *Eridu in Sumerian Literature*, PhD dissertation, University of Chicago [1975], p. 224) although there are other Akkadian words (e.g. *ēnu* and *ēntu*) that are also translated priest and priestess. The noun “divine” would preserve the ambiguity in *dingir*.
- [7] On some tablets the under-god Weila or Aw-ilu, was slain for this purpose.
- [8] <http://www.ancienttexts.org/library/mesopotamian/gilgamesh/tab11.htm>
- [9] <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/etcsl.cgi?text=t.5.6.1#>
- [10] <http://www-etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/section2/tr211.htm>
- [11] Tigay, pages 238–239
- [12] Of these and other editorial changes to the Atrahasis text in Gilgamesh Dr. Tigay comments, “The dropping of individual lines between others which are preserved, but are not synonymous with them, appears to be a more deliberate editorial act. These lines share a common theme, the hunger and thirst of the gods during the flood.”

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- Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, University of Pennsylvania Press, Philadelphia, 1982, ISBN 0-8122-7805-4.

External links

- British Museum: Cuneiform tablet from Sippar with the story of Atra-Hasis (http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/me/c/cuneiform_the_atrahasis_epic.aspx)

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