

1

MESOPOTAMIAN VALUES: IDEAS ABOUT
THE NATURE OF LIFE AND DEATH

Unlike the waters of the beneficent Nile, whose annual floods were predictable and controllable, those of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers proved erratic and often devastating. This factor, combined with the harshness of the physical terrain, the absence of protective natural barriers, and the steady intrusion of invaders who used the element of surprise, superb leadership, and technological advantage to gain temporary hegemony over the region, prompted a complex outlook that found expression in the eclectic civilization that evolved in ancient Mesopotamia. The Sumerians, whose creative genius provided the cultural foundations of the region, perceived humans as lowly mortal servants to a pantheon of immortal gods and goddesses, and they viewed the state of humanity as a consequence of human failure to obey divine commands. These views, frequently reiterated in the literature of the region, are best expressed in the great Babylonian heroic tale, *The Gilgamesh Epic*. This poem was preserved in 12 tablets that were recovered during 19th-century excavations of Ashurbanipal's (668–627 B.C.E.) palace library in Nineveh. It is the first known piece of written literature in the world.

Heavily indebted to a variety of older oral stories, the epic describes the vain quest of its hero, Gilgamesh (ca. 2800 B.C.E.), fifth ruler of the first dynasty of Uruk, to secure immortality. By recounting the perilous ventures and hardships of Gilgamesh, the poem reaffirms that valiant personal efforts cannot prevent one's inevitable death and suggests that energy should instead be directed toward enjoying and making the most of life. During his quest, Gilgamesh sought and found Per-napishtim, the Babylonian Noah, who had secured immortality because of his piety. Tablet XI focuses on their meeting and provides Per-napishtim's account of the great deluge. A genetic relationship between his account and that of the Hebrews in Genesis is obvious, but the historical relationship between them is uncertain.

Some historians have found *The Gilgamesh Epic* pessimistic, but these views have been disputed. How do you interpret this example of Mesopotamian values?

Epic literature developed in many early civilizations—not only that of Mesopotamia, but also in Hebrew, Greek, and Indian cultures. How would tales like *Gilgamesh* help shape and express a civilization's values? What purpose did these stories serve?

THE GILGAMESH EPIC

Gilgamesh

[From the shore Utnapishtim, the favorite of the gods, now relates the story of the deluge to the hero, who, sitting in his ship, is listening to him.]

Utnapishtim then said unto Gilgamesh:

"I will reveal unto thee, O Gilgamesh, the mysterious story, and the mystery of the gods I will tell thee.

The city of Shurippak, a city which, as thou knowest, is situated on the bank of the river Euphrates.

That city was corrupt, so that the gods within it decided to bring about a deluge, even the great gods, as many as there were: their father, Anu;

their counsellor, the warrior Bel;

their leader, Ninurta;

their champion, the god Enlil.

But Ea, the lord of unfathomable wisdom, argued with them.

Their plan he told to a reed-hut, (saying):

'Reed-hut, reed-hut, clay-structure, clay-structure!

Reed-hut, hear; clay-structure, pay attention!

Thou man of Shurippak, son of Ubara-Tutu,

Build a house, construct a ship;

Forsake thy possessions, take heed for thy life!

Abandon thy goods, save (thy) life,

and bring living seed of every kind into the ship.

As for the ship, which thou shalt build,

let its proportions be well measured:

Its breadth and its length shall bear proportion each to each, and into the sea then launch it.'

I took heed, and said to Ea, my lord:

'I will do, my lord, as thou hast commanded;

I will observe and will fulfil the command.

But what shall I answer to (the inquiries of) the city, the people, and the elders?'

Ea opened his mouth and spoke,

and he said unto me, his servant:

'Man, as an answer say thus unto them:

"I know that Bel hates me.

No longer can I live in your city;

Nor on Bel's territory can I live securely any longer;

I will go down to the 'deep,' I will live with Ea, my lord.

Upon you he will (for a time?) pour down rich blessing.

He will grant you fowl [in plenty] and fish in abundance,

Herds of cattle and an abundant harvest.

Shamash has appointed a time when the rulers of darkness at eventide will pour down upon you a destructive rain."

7

Bel, just, most
powerful, but one
is opposed.

Ea wants to
prevent, tells to
build a ship.
2.

What to do when
others require.
3.

4. *Preparations*

All that was necessary I collected together.
 On the fifth day I drew its design;
 In its middle part its sides were ten gar high;
 Ten gar also was the extent of its deck;
 I added a front-roof to it and closed it in.
 I built it in six stories,
 thus making seven floors in all;
 The interior of each I divided again into nine partitions.
 Beaks for water within I cut out.
 I selected a pole and added all that was necessary.
 Three (variant, five) shar of pitch I smeared on its outside;
 three shar of asphalt I used for the inside (so as to make it water-tight).
 Three shar of oil the men carried, carrying it in vessels.
 One shar of oil I kept out and used it for sacrifices,
 while the other two shar the boatman stowed away.
 For the temple of the gods (?) I slaughtered oxen;
 I killed lambs (?) day by day.
 Jugs of cider (?), of oil, and of sweet wine,
 Large bowls (filled therewith?), like river water (i.e., freely) I poured out
 as libations.
 I made a feast (to the gods) like that of the New-Year's Day.
 To god Shamash my hands brought oil.
 [* * *] the ship was completed.
 [* * *] heavy was the work, and
 I added tackling above and below, [and after all was finished,]

The ship sank into water two thirds of its height.
 With all that I possessed I filled it;
 with all the silver I had I filled it;
 with all the gold I had I filled it;
 with living creatures of every kind I filled it.
 Then I embarked also all my family and my relatives,
 cattle of the field, beasts of the field, and the uprighteous people—all them
 I embarked.

5. *The flood*

A time had Shamash appointed, (namely):
 'When the rulers of darkness send at eventide a destructive rain,
 then enter into the ship and shut its door.'
 This very sign came to pass, and
 The rulers of darkness sent a destructive rain at eventide.
 I saw the approach of the storm,
 and I was afraid to witness the storm;
 I entered the ship and shut the door.
 I intrusted the guidance of the ship to Purur-bel, the boatman,
 the great house, and the contents thereof.
 As soon as early dawn appeared,
 there rose up from the horizon a black cloud,
 within which the weather god (Adad) thundered,

The Flood

and Nabu and the king of the gods (Marduk) went before.
 The destroyers passed across mountain and dale (literally, country).
 Dibbara, the great, tore loose the anchor-cable (?).
 There went Ninib and he caused the banks to overflow;
 the Anunnaki lifted on high (their) torches,
 and with the brightness thereof they illuminated the universe.
 The storm brought on by Adad swept even up to the heavens,
 and all light was turned into darkness.
 [***] overflowed the land like [***]
 It blew with violence and in one day (?) it rose above the mountains (?).
 Like an onslaught in battle it rushed in on the people.
 Not could brother look after brother.
 Not were recognised the people from heaven.
 The gods even were afraid of the storm;
 they retreated and took refuge in the heaven of Anu.
 There the gods crouched down like dogs, on the inclosure of heaven they
 sat cowering.
 Then Ishtar cried out like a woman in travail,
 and the lady of the gods lamented with a loud voice, (saying):
 'The world of old has been turned back into clay,
 because I assented to this evil in the assembly of the gods.
 Alas! that when I assented to this evil in the council of the gods,
 I was for the destruction of my own people.
 What I have created, where is it?
 Like the spawn of fish it fills the sea.'
 The gods wailed with her over the Anunnaki.
 The gods were bowed down, and sat there weeping.
 Their lips were pressed together (in fear and in terror).
 Six days and nights
 The wind blew, and storm and tempest overwhelmed the country.
 When the seventh day drew nigh the tempest, the storm, the battle
 which they had waged like a great host began to moderate.

6.
Resurrection

The sea quieted down; hurricane and storm ceased.
 I looked out upon the sea and raised loud my voice,
 But all mankind had turned back into clay.
 Like the surrounding field had become the bed of the rivers.
 I opened the air-hole and light fell upon my cheek.
 Dumbfounded I sank backward, and sat weeping,
 while over my cheek flowed the tears.
 I looked in every direction, and behold, all was sea.
 Now, after twelve (days?) there rose (out of the water) a strip of land.
 To Mount Nisir the ship drifted.
 On Mount Nisir the boat stuck fast and it did not slip away.
 The first day, the second day, Mount Nisir held the ship fast, and did not let
 it slip away.

The boat landed on a mountain.

The third day, the fourth day, Mount Nisir held the ship fast, and did not let it slip away.

The fifth day, the sixth day, Mount Nisir held the ship fast, and did not let it slip away.

When the seventh day drew nigh

I sent out a dove, and let her go.

The dove flew hither and thither,

but as there was no resting-place for her, she returned.

Then I sent out a swallow, and let her go.

The swallow flew hither and thither,

but as there was no resting-place for her she also returned.

Then I sent out a raven, and let her go.

The raven flew away and saw the abatement of the waters.

She settled down to feed, went away, and returned no more.

Then I let everything go out unto the four winds, and I offered a sacrifice.

I poured out a libation upon the peak of the mountain.

I placed the censers seven and seven,

and poured into them calamus, cedar-wood, and sweet-incense.

The gods smelt the savour;

yea, the gods smelt the sweet savour;

the gods gathered like flies around the sacrificer.

7 is a note.

From Hebrew Scripture, *The Holy Bible* (King James Version).

Genesis 6

⁵ And God saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually.

⁶ And it repented the LORD that he had made man on the earth, and it grieved him at his heart.

⁷ And the LORD said, I will destroy man whom I have created from the face of the earth; both man, and beast, and the creeping thing, and the fowls of the air; for it repenteth me that I have made them.

⁸ But Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD. . . .

¹¹ The earth also was corrupt before God, and the earth was filled with violence.

¹² And God looked upon the earth, and, behold, it was corrupt; for all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.

¹³ And God said unto Noah, The end of all flesh is come before me; for the earth is filled with violence through them; and, behold, I will destroy them with the earth.

¹⁴ Make thee an ark of gopher wood; rooms shalt thou make in the ark, and shalt pitch it within and without with pitch.

¹⁵ And this is the fashion which thou shalt make it of: The length of the ark shall be three hundred cubits, the breadth of it fifty cubits, and the height of it thirty cubits.

¹⁶ A window shalt thou make to the ark, and in a cubit shalt thou finish it above; and the door of the ark shalt thou set in the side thereof; with lower, second, and third stories shalt thou make it.

¹⁷ And, behold, I, even I, do bring a flood of waters upon the earth, to destroy all flesh, wherein is the breath of life, from under heaven; and every thing that is in the earth shall die.

¹⁸ But with thee will I establish my covenant; and thou shalt come into the ark, thou, and thy sons, and thy wife, and thy sons' wives with thee.

¹⁹ And of every living thing of all flesh, two of every sort shalt thou bring into the ark, to keep them alive with thee; they shall be male and female.

²⁰ Of fowls after their kind, and of cattle after their kind, of every creeping thing of the earth after his kind, two of every sort shall come unto thee, to keep them alive.

²¹ And take thou unto thee of all food that is eaten, and thou shalt gather it to thee; and it shall be for food for thee, and for them.

²² Thus did Noah; according to all that God commanded him, so did he.

Genesis 7

¹ And the LORD said unto Noah, Come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation.

² Of every clean beast thou shalt take to thee by sevens, the male and his female: and of beasts that are not clean by two, the male and his female.

³ Of fowls also of the air by sevens, the male and the female; to keep seed alive upon the face of all the earth.

⁴ For yet seven days, and I will cause it to rain upon the earth forty days and forty nights; and every living substance that I have made will I destroy from off the face of the earth.

⁵ And Noah did according unto all that the LORD commanded him.

⁶ And Noah was six hundred years old when the flood of waters was upon the earth.

⁷ And Noah went in, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him, into the ark, because of the waters of the flood.

⁸ Of clean beasts, and of beasts that are not clean, and of fowls, and of every thing that creepeth upon the earth,

⁹ There went in two and two unto Noah into the ark, the male and the female, as God had commanded Noah.

¹⁰ And it came to pass after seven days, that the waters of the flood were upon the earth.

¹¹ In the six hundredth year of Noah's life, in the second month, the seventeenth day of the month, the same day were all the fountains of the great deep broken up, and the windows of heaven were opened.

¹² And the rain was upon the earth forty days and forty nights.

¹³ In the selfsame day entered Noah, and Shem, and Ham, and Japheth, the sons of Noah, and Noah's wife, and the three wives of his sons with them, into the ark; . . .

¹⁷ And the flood was forty days upon the earth; and the waters increased, and bare up the ark, and it was lift up above the earth.

¹⁸ And the waters prevailed, and were increased greatly upon the earth; and the ark went upon the face of the waters.

¹⁹ And the waters prevailed exceedingly upon the earth; and all the high hills, that were under the whole heaven, were covered.

²⁰ Fifteen cubits upward did the waters prevail; and the mountains were covered.

²¹ And all flesh died that moved upon the earth, both of fowl, and of cattle, and of beast, and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth, and every man:

²² All in whose nostrils was the breath of life, of all that was in the dry land, died.

²³ And every living substance was destroyed which was upon the face of the ground, both man, and cattle, and the creeping things, and the fowl of the heaven; and they were destroyed from the earth: and Noah only remained alive, and they that were with him in the ark.

²⁴ And the waters prevailed upon the earth an hundred and fifty days.

Genesis 8

¹ And God remembered Noah, and every living thing, and all the cattle that was with him in the ark: and God made a wind to pass over the earth, and the waters assuaged;

² The fountains also of the deep and the windows of heaven were stopped, and the rain from heaven was restrained;

³ And the waters returned from off the earth continually: and after the end of the hundred and fifty days the waters were abated.

⁴ And the ark rested in the seventh month, on the seventeenth day of the month, upon the mountains of Ararat.

⁵ And the waters decreased continually until the tenth month: in the tenth month, on the first day of the month, were the tops of the mountains seen.

⁶ And it came to pass at the end of forty days, that Noah opened the window of the ark which he had made:

⁷ And he sent forth a raven, which went forth to and fro, until the waters were dried up from off the earth.

⁸ Also he sent forth a dove from him, to see if the waters were abated from off the face of the ground;

⁹ But the dove found no rest for the sole of her foot, and she returned unto him into the ark, for the waters were on the face of the whole earth: then he put forth his hand, and took her, and pulled her in unto him into the ark.

¹⁰ And he stayed yet other seven days; and again he sent forth the dove out of the ark;

¹¹ And the dove came in to him in the evening; and, lo, in her mouth was an olive leaf pluckt off: so Noah knew that the waters were abated from off the earth.

¹² And he stayed yet other seven days; and sent forth the dove; which returned not again unto him any more.

¹³ And it came to pass in the six hundredth and first year, in the first month, the first day of the month, the waters were dried up from off the earth: and Noah removed the covering of the ark, and looked, and, behold, the face of the ground was dry.

¹⁴ And in the second month, on the seven and twentieth day of the month, was the earth dried.

¹⁵ And God spake unto Noah, saying,

¹⁶ Go forth of the ark, thou, and thy wife, and thy sons, and thy sons' wives with thee.

¹⁷ Bring forth with thee every living thing that is with thee, of all flesh, both of fowl, and of cattle, and of every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth; that they may breed abundantly in the earth, and be fruitful, and multiply upon the earth.

¹⁸ And Noah went forth, and his sons, and his wife, and his sons' wives with him:

¹⁹ Every beast, every creeping thing, and every fowl, and whatsoever creepeth upon the earth, after their kinds, went forth out of the ark.

²⁰ And Noah builded an altar unto the LORD; and took of every clean beast, and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar.

²¹ And the LORD smelled a sweet savour; and the LORD said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man's sake; for the imagination of man's heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done. . . .

Reflection Questions:

1. What are the main features of the flood story in *The Gilgamesh Epic*?
2. What are the main features of the flood story in *Genesis*?
3. What are important similarities and differences between the Babylonian and Hebrew accounts?
4. What religious beliefs does *The Gilgamesh Epic* express? What is the nature of divinity? Of evil? What is the relationship of humans to the gods?
5. What religious beliefs does *Genesis* express? What is the nature of divinity? Of evil? What is the relationship of humans to God? Compare and contrast to *The Gilgamesh Epic*.
6. Is *The Gilgamesh Epic* a pessimistic account? How does it compare to later religions that began in the Middle East—to Judaism, to Christianity, to Islam?