

Gilgamesh said to Urshanabi: "This is the miraculous plant.  
 This is the plant which restores life.  
 I will take this miraculous plant to Uruk, the city of sheep,  
 Whose citizens will eat it. . . .  
 I will call it ' . . . the fountain of youth.'  
 I will eat it myself, and regain my youth."

After fifty miles Gilgamesh and Urshanabi stopped to eat,  
 After seventy-five miles they dropped anchor for the night.  
 Gilgamesh saw a spring whose water was cool.  
 He went to bathe in the water.

A serpent smelled the fragrance of the plant.

It came up from the water,

And carried off the plant.

As it returned to the water, the serpent shed its skin.

Gilgamesh sat down and wept,

Tears ran down his face.

" . . . for whom have my hands toiled,

For whom has my heart pounded?

I have nothing to show for my work.

I have worked for this serpent,

But the tide will have carried the serpent fifty miles away.

When I dove to the well cap at the bottom of the sea,

I found the miraculous plant which was a sign for me.

Let us finish the journey on foot, leave the boat on the shore."

After fifty miles they stopped to eat.

After seventy-five miles they stopped for the night.

When they arrived at Uruk, Gilgamesh said to Urshanabi:

"Climb up and walk the walls of Uruk.

Inspect their foundations, examine their brickwork,

Their brick is fired.

Seven sages laid their foundation.

Uruk is one part city, one part orchard, one part pasture.

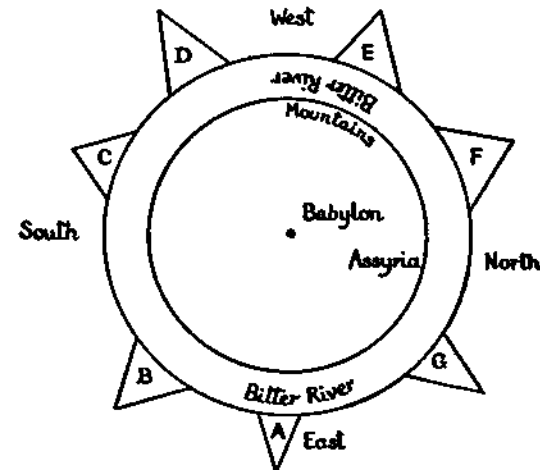
The land of Ishtar consists of three parts,

Not counting the clay quarries."

## STORIES OF ATRAHASIS

☞ Copies of the stories of Atrahasis in the Babylonian and Assyrian dialects of Akkadian, written in cuneiform, have been recovered by archaeologists at various sites in Mesopotamia and Syria-Palestine. These tablets are housed today in the British Museum in London, the Archaeological Museum in Istanbul, Turkey, and in the Musée de l'Art et d'Histoire in Geneva, Switzerland.

The stories of Atrahasis begin in a world populated only by the warriors (Akkadian: *iggigi*) and the elders (Akkadian: *anunnaki*) of the divine assembly. Eventually the young warriors revolt, refusing to do all the work that is necessary to keep their world running properly. Ea-Enki negotiates a settlement with them, in which workers (Akkadian: *lullu*) will be created to take care of the world, especially by dredging its canals. The elders ratify Ea-Enki's proposal, but assign Nintu-Mami the actual task of carrying out the project. In time, these workers, too, revolt against the divine assembly and



Clay tablet of about 2000 B.C.E. with a map of the world with Babylon at the center.

refuse to do their work. Initially, the divine assembly uses epidemics and famines to control these workers, but without lasting effect. Finally, they create a flood from which only the household of Atrahasis in its ark survives.

Parallels between the stories of Atrahasis and the Bible include the stories of the heavens and the earth (Gen 1:1–2:4a) and the flood stories (Gen 6:1–11:26) in the book of Genesis.

## I:192–5

“Summon Nintu, the divine midwife!

Let her create workers to labor for the divine assembly.”

So, the divine assembly summoned Nintu-Mami,

They called the wise woman before them.

“Midwife the *lullu*,” they commanded,

“Create workers to labor for us.

Let the *lullu* bear the yoke,

Let them work for Enlil,

Let them labor for the divine assembly.”

☞ The stories of Atrahasis describe the labor of Nintu-Mami with several different accounts of how the task was carried out. One account compares Ea-Enki with a menstruating woman, who bathes three times during the menstrual cycle: first when the new moon appears, then seven days later, and finally fourteen days later when the full moon appears. Intercourse is described as the mixing of the body of Ea-Enki, with the blood of We-ila. During pregnancy, Nintu-Mami massages the uterus of Ea-Enki just as a potter would shape a vessel. When Ea-Enki's labor comes to term, Nintu-Mami summons the workers from the womb with the command: “Live.”

## I:200–30 (Jer 18:2–6)

Nintu said to the divine assembly: “I cannot do Ea-Enki's work.

Only Ea-Enki has the clay to create.”

Ea-Enki spoke: “I will bathe to mark my time . . .

At the new moon, the seventh day, and the full moon, I will wash.

Let the divine assembly sacrifice We-ila.

Let them bathe in his blood.

Let Nintu thin my clay with his blood.

Let Nintu mix clay with blood, the human with the divine.

Let the drum mark off the days,

Count down the time.

Let We-ila's blood give these workers life,

Let the midwife call out to them: “Live!”

The divine assembly agreed,

The *anunnaki* elders consented.

At the new moon, the seventh day, the full moon, Ea-Enki bathed.

The divine assembly sacrificed We-ila the wise. . . .

Nintu thinned the clay . . . with his blood.

The drum marked off the days . . . counted down the time.

We-ila's blood gave the workers life,

Nintu-Mami called out to them: “Live!”

☞ In another version, Nintu-Mami thins clay with the saliva of the *anunnaki* and the *iggigi*.

## I:235–40 (Gen 3:20)

The divine assembly gave Nintu-Mami moisture to thin the clay.

She wet it with saliva from the *anunnaki* and the *iggigi*.

Nintu-Mami sang: “Praise to you who gave me this task,

Praise to you who sacrificed . . . We-ila to help me complete my work.

I have created workers to labor for the *iggigi* warriors. . . .

I have loosened your yoke, I have set you free.”

The divine assembly heard the hymn which Nintu-Mami sang.

The *anunnaki* and the *iggigi* kissed her feet.

“Yesterday, we called you ‘Mami.’

Today, you are ‘Mother of the divine assembly.’”

☞ Yet another version describes Ea-Enki as the godfather having intercourse with Nintu-Mami, while she sings. Nintu-Mami conceives seven sets of fraternal twins: seven males and seven females. Her midwife helps Nintu-Mami mount the birth stool, and prepare the room for her delivery.

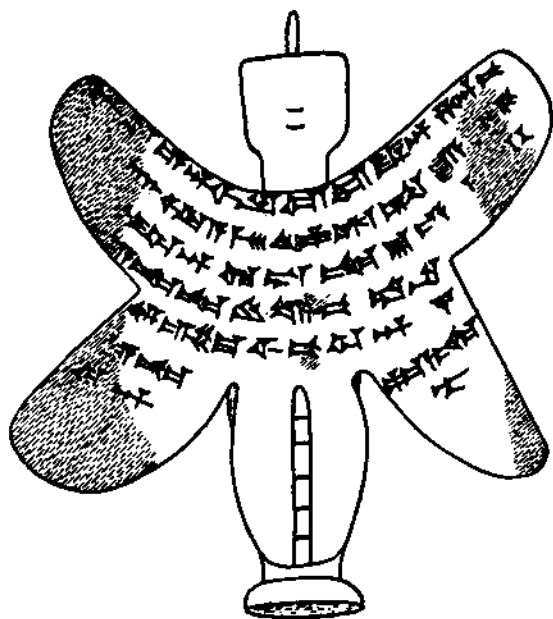
## I:250–300 (Gen 2:7; 35:17; Exod 1:16; 1 Sam 4:20)

Ea-Enki and Nintu-Mami entered their birthing room,

She summoned her midwife, he worked the clay.

She sang the sacred song,

He prayed the special prayer.



Late clay amulet with an inscription to the demon Pazazu across his body.



Small amulet of the demon Pazazu, the bringer of disease.

When Nintu-Mami finished singing,  
 She pulled off fourteen pieces of clay.  
 The midwife divided the clay into rows of seven,  
 She set up a brick for a birth stool between them. . . .

The midwife helped Nintu-Mami mount the birth stool . . .  
 She counted ten months to determine her date.  
 The tenth month came,  
 Nintu-Mami went into labor.  
 Her face was beaming. . . .  
 She was full of joy.  
 The midwife put on her cap,  
 She donned her apron,  
 She began to pray.  
 She scattered the flour.  
 On the birth stool, Nintu-Mami sang: "I have created life.  
 Let the midwife rejoice in the labor room when a mother gives birth.  
 Erect the birth stool for nine days,  
 Honor Nintu-Mami and her midwife. . . .  
 Praise Nintu-Mami,  
 Praise her midwife, Kesh.

Let husband and wife lie together in their wedding room.  
 Let them do what Ishtar commands in the house of her father-in-law. . . ."

Soon the workers begin to disturb the members of the divine assembly, and Enlil tries to control them with a plague.

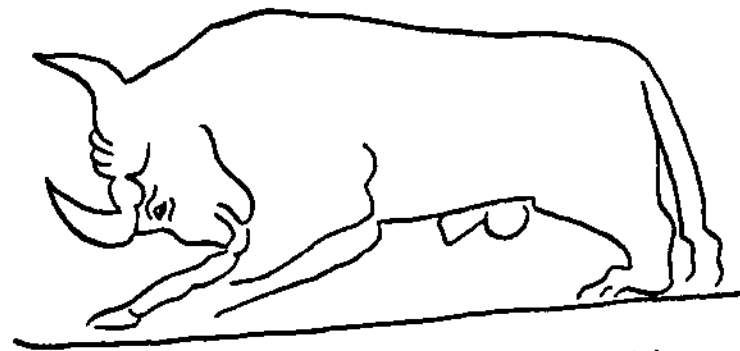
I:355-60

In less than twelve hundred years . . .  
 there were more and more workers in the land.  
 The workers multiplied.  
 The land bellowed like a bull,  
 The uproar disturbed the divine assembly.  
 When Enlil heard the noise, he complained:  
 "I cannot stand this uproar, I cannot sleep. . . .  
 Send an epidemic upon the land."

Atrahasis prays to Ea-Enki, his divine patron, for help and Ea-Enki teaches him how to end the epidemic.

I:375-83

"Command messengers to proclaim,  
 Tell them to shout throughout the land:  
 'Do not feed the gods,  
 Do not pray to the goddesses.'



A bull on a bas relief from the ancient city of Enink.

Go to the gate of the temple of Namtar.  
Place your finest bread on the threshold.  
This grain will please Namtar,  
Your gift will shame him into withdrawing his hand."

☞ *Atrahasis persuaded the elders to follow Ea-Enki's advice. They renovated the temple of Namtar, the divine patron of fate, placed offerings at the gate and Namtar stopped the plague. Over the next six years, Enlil tries other means of controlling the workers with drought and a famine. Each time, Atrahasis appeals to Ea-Enki, who advises the workers to stop feeding all the gods and the goddesses except the one member of the divine assembly responsible for their suffering. Each time, the strategy works and the workers survive and continue to multiply.*

*II.i:10-20; Isa 5:6; Hos 2:9*

"I cannot stand this human uproar,  
I cannot sleep!  
Reduce their food supply,  
Let plants become scarce.  
Adad! Withhold the rain!  
Do not allow springs to rise from the deep.  
Winds! Blow the earth dry!  
Clouds! Gather, but do not rain.  
Let harvests be reduced,  
Let Nisaba, divine patron of grain, retard growth.  
Let the joy of the harvest be gone. . . ."

*iv:11-4*

After three years . . . every worker's face was drawn with hunger.  
Every worker's face was crusted like malt.  
Every worker lived on the brink of death. . . .

*Assyrian Recension: S.vi:7-12*

After five years . . . a daughter stares as her mother goes into the house,  
. . . while her mother locks her out of the house.  
A daughter stares while her mother is sold as a slave,

mother stares while her daughter is sold as a slave.  
After six years . . . a daughter is cooked and eaten,  
and her mother is served as food.

*Every effort of the divine assembly to control the workers is blocked by Ea-Enki's advice to Atrahasis. Therefore, the divine assembly decides that only a flood will get the workers back into line. They order Ea-Enki to take an oath not to advise Atrahasis how to save the workers. Nonetheless, Atrahasis falls asleep in the temple of Ea-Enki, who sits behind his screen woven from reeds, talking to himself about the decision of the divine assembly. Atrahasis thinks the voice of his divine patron is a dream.*

*III.i:20-48 (1 Sam 3:3-4)*

"If I were you, my woven lattice,  
My braided reed screen, I would pay close attention.  
I would pull down my house,  
I would build a barge.  
I would abandon all my possessions  
. . . to save my life. . . ."

Place a roof over the barge,  
Cover it as Apsu, the heavens, covers the earth.  
Do not let the sun see inside,  
Enclose it completely.  
Make the joints strong,  
Caulk the timbers with pitch.  
I will gather flocks of birds for you  
. . . and schools of fish."  
Then, Ea-Enki filled the water clock,  
Set the time for the flood on the seventh night.

Atrahasis addressed the elders at his gate:  
"My god has had a dispute with your god.  
Ea-Enki and Enlil are at odds,  
So I must leave this place.  
Since I worship Ea-Enki,  
I am a partner in this conflict.  
I can no longer live here,  
I can no longer dwell in the land of Enlil."

☞ With this as his explanation, Atrahasis proceeds to construct a barge and fill it with all sorts of animals. Once he has it loaded, he stages a banquet and sends his family on board. As he sits, saddened by the impending flood, it begins to rain.

ii:48–55 (Gen 6:14)

The weather began to change. . . .  
 Adad roared within the clouds.  
 Atrahasis heard Adad's voice,  
 He closed the door  
 And sealed it with pitch.  
 Adad's roar filled the clouds,  
 The winds blew fiercely.  
 Atrahasis cut the mooring rope,  
 He let the barge float free.

III.iii:10–20, 23–40, 51–4

The noise in the land ceased,  
 Like the silence following the breaking of a pot.  
 The flood rushed forward,  
 The flood charged the people like an army.  
 One person could not see the other,  
 In the water no one was recognizable.  
 The flood bellowed like a bull,  
 The winds howled like a wild ass braying.  
 There was no sun,  
 Only the darkness of the flood. . . .

The noise of the flood terrified the divine assembly.

Ea-Enki was furious,  
 Seeing his children destroyed.  
 The lady Nintu  
 Bit her lips in anger.  
 The *anunnaki* elders sat without food to eat,  
 The mighty went without wine to drink.  
 The wise Mami wept at what she saw,  
 The divine midwife broke into tears.  
 "How could I have agreed with the divine assembly?  
 How could I have voted for a destruction so complete?"

Enlil's evil decree has gone too far,  
 His words are worse than the demon Tiruru. . . .

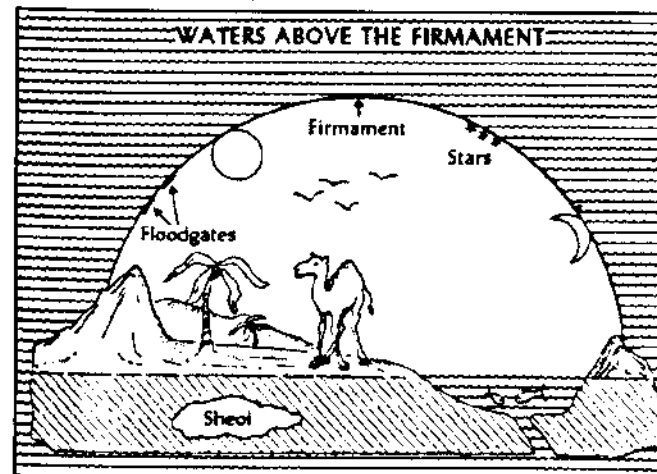
Where is Anu, our leader, now?  
 Where are the humans to carry out his commands?  
 Where is he who so thoughtlessly decreed a flood?  
 . . . who condemned his own people to destruction?"

☞ For seven days and seven nights the flood covered the earth. Nintu and the divine assembly wept. Because the temples were flooded and the humans were dead, there were no sacrifices for them to eat or drink. Although the text is broken at this point, by comparison with the stories of Gilgamesh, it can be assumed that the flood subsided and Atrahasis disembarked to prepare a sacrificial meal for the divine assembly.

III.v:34–45 (Gen 8:21)

The divine assembly smelled the aroma,  
 They swarmed like flies around his sacrifice.

After the divine assembly had eaten their fill,  
 Nintu indicted them all:  
 "Where is Anu, Our leader, now?  
 Why has this aroma not brought Enlil here?"



An artist's portrayal of the universe as understood by the ancient Semitic world.