

Ancient Civilizations of the Middle East—Mesopotamia

Literature

The Epic of Gilgamesh

retold by Anita Feagles



ABOUT THE READING *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a collection of stories about a Sumerian king who lived in Babylonia on the River Euphrates in modern Iraq around 2500 BC. The people of Mesopotamia called this epic *He Who Saw Everything*. The oldest written copy of the tale comes from twelve clay tablets that were written in cuneiform around 900 BC. In the following excerpt, Gilgamesh has asked about the secret to everlasting life.



As you read the passage below, think about how this tale may resemble another story.

Utnapishtim said, “I will tell you the secret.”

In the old days, the world became full of people, and the noise became so great that it bothered the gods. They had a meeting and said, “It is so noisy we cannot sleep!” So they decided to cause a flood. But Shamash, one of the gods, warned me. He said, “Tear down your house and build a boat. This will save your life. Make the boat as long as it is wide, and put a roof on it, and take the living creatures into the boat.”

When I understood, I said to the god, “I will do what you command. But how shall I explain to people what I am doing?”

The god answered, “Tell them that the gods are angry with you, and that you must move away.”

So early the next morning, I gathered my family together and we started building the boat according to his instructions, with seven decks. I gathered in supplies, oil and meat and wine. After seven days we

Utnapishtim is the only man to whom the gods have given everlasting life.

Shamash is the sun god.

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were ready to board the boat. We loaded the boat with my family and my workers, and with both wild and tame animals. Shamash said to board the boat in the evening, and as soon as we had done this the rain started. There were great black clouds and thunder and lightning, and the storm grew so terrible that even the gods became frightened and were sorry they had ordered the flood. At last the wind and rain stopped, and it was over. When we looked out we saw nothing but water. We sent out a bird to find land for us, but she came back. Then we sent out another bird, but it never came back. We all prayed to the gods, and they had a great discussion. One was angry because I had been saved, but the one who had warned me said that I had learned about this in a dream. Another god made a speech and said what a sad thing it was that the flood had destroyed mankind. He said it would have been better if the people had been punished in some other way. And so at last, since I had lived through the flood, the gods decided to allow me to live forever.

Why do you think they sent a bird to find land?

ANALYZING LITERATURE

1. Main Idea Why did the gods decide to cause a flood?

2. Critical Thinking: Making Comparisons Do you recognize any similarities between this epic and the story of Noah and the flood from the *Bible*? What are they?

ACTIVITY

Research other ancient cultures that have stories of floods that destroy humankind. Why might certain cultures have these stories while others do not?