

## The Epic of Gilgamesh: Tablet XI

### Introduction

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the most famous work of Mesopotamian literature, and rightly so. It is the longest poem written in cuneiform Akkadian, as well as the most emotional and human of the mythical works from the Near East. It tells of the adventures of Gilgamesh, who was a real or at least legendary king of Uruk in the 2600s BC, but it is not a historical document. Instead, it is a mythological celebration of a determined man who, in his search for fame and immortality, overcomes challenges set by the gods, forges a friendship, suffers loss, and eventually realizes and confronts his own mortality. While there were individual stories about Gilgamesh written in Sumerian, it was not until the first Babylonian Dynasty (19th–16th c. BC) that an extended narrative evolved. This “epic” of Gilgamesh was extremely popular and became what might be called an international sensation; copies, or at least fragments of copies, have been found in many different locations in several of the main Near Eastern literary languages. The most important sources for the epic are the extensive fragments discovered in the Library of Ashurbanipal (668–627 BC) in Nineveh, from which the tablet translated below comes.

In Tablet XI, the discovery of which caused a great stir in London in 1872, Gilgamesh asks Utanapishtim (“He who found life,” also called Atrahasis, “Exceedingly Wise”) his great question: How were he and his wife the only ones to escape the universal fate of the human race? In answer, Utanapishtim relates the story of the flood, which is found in its original context in *Atrahasis* (see next selection). In the *Atrahasis*, humans have multiplied so much and become so rowdy that Enlil, the chief god on earth, tries to obliterate the human race in a number of ways, culminating in a destructive flood. His plans are frustrated by Ea (Enki), god of wisdom, who warns the mortal Utanapishtim of the impending flood, as is also the case in *Gilgamesh*. Because he has taken an oath not to reveal Enlil’s plan to mortals, Ea directs his warning to the wall of a reed enclosure that Utanapishtim had built near the water. He advises Utanapishtim to build a boat, and he loads onto it his family, possessions, every type of animal, and skilled individuals. In the ark they survive the deluge sent by the rain god Adad, and after disembarking from the boat, which had come to rest on Mount Nimush, he prepares sacrifices for the gods, who “crowded round the sacrificer like flies” (line 166). The gods decide to keep the human population in check by other, less catastrophic means, and they make Utanapishtim and his wife immortal.

After Utanapishtim tells his story, he tells Gilgamesh that he must remain awake for six days and seven nights to obtain the eternal life he seeks. Gilgamesh instead sleeps for the entire period, and Utanapishtim orders his boatman, Ur-Shanabi, to take Gilgamesh away, both never to return. Thus, Gilgamesh is denied eternal life and humans no longer have access to Utanapishtim. As the two prepare to embark, Utanapishtim’s wife asks him to give Gilgamesh something to show for his quest. He tells Gilgamesh where he could find the “plant of rejuvenation,” which Gilgamesh obtains by diving into the depths of the sea, but as he bathes on his homeward journey, a snake devours the plant and rejuvenates itself by shedding its skin. Having lost eternal life and eternal youth, Gilgamesh returns to Uruk.

### Text

#### Gilgamesh Asks Utanapishtim How He Gained Eternal Life

Gilgamesh said to him, to Utanapishtim the Distant One:

As I look upon you, Utanapishtim,  
Your limbs are not different, you are just as I am.  
Indeed, you are not different at all, you are just as I am!  
Yet your heart is drained of battle spirit,  
You lie flat on your back, your arm <idle>.

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You then, how did you join the ranks of the gods and find eternal life?  
Utanapishtim said to him, to Gilgamesh:

I will reveal to you, O Gilgamesh, a secret matter,  
And a mystery of the gods I will tell you.  
The city Shuruppak, a city you yourself have knowledge of,  
Which once was set on the <bank> of the Euphrates,  
That aforesaid city was ancient and gods once were within it.  
The great gods resolved to send the deluge,  
Their father Anu was sworn,  
The counselor the valiant Enlil,  
Their throne-bearer Ninurta,  
Their canal-officer Ennugi,  
Their leader Ea was sworn with them.

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He repeated their plans to the reed fence:

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‘Reed fence, reed fence, wall, wall!  
Listen, O reed fence! Pay attention, O wall!  
O Man of Shuruppak, son of Ubar-Tutu,  
Wreck house, build boat,  
Forsake possessions and seek life,  
Belongings reject and life save!  
Take aboard the boat seed of all living things.  
The boat you shall build,  
Let her dimensions be measured out:  
Let her width and length be equal,  
Roof her over like the watery depths.’

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I understood full well, I said to Ea, my lord:  
‘Your command, my lord, exactly as you said it,  
I shall faithfully execute.

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What shall I answer the city, the populace, and the elders?  
Ea made ready to speak,  
Saying to me, his servant:

‘So, you shall speak to them thus:  
“No doubt Enlil dislikes me,  
I shall not dwell in your city.  
I shall not set my foot on the dry land of Enlil,

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I shall descend to the watery depths and dwell with my lord Ea.  
 Upon you he shall shower down in abundance,  
 A windfall of birds, a surprise of fishes,  
 He shall pour upon you a harvest of riches,  
 In the morning cakes in spates,  
 In the evening grains in rains."

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### Gilgamesh Builds a Boat

At the first glimmer of dawn,  
 The land was assembling at the gate of Atrahasis:<sup>2</sup>  
 The carpenter carried his axe,  
 The reed cutter carried his stone,  
 The old men brought cordage(?),  
 The young men ran around < . . . >,  
 The wealthy carried the pitch,  
 The poor brought what was needed of < . . . >.  
 In five days I had planked her hull:  
 One full acre was her deck space,  
 Ten dozen cubits, the height of each of her sides,  
 Ten dozen cubits square, her outer dimensions.  
 I laid out her structure, I planned her design:  
 I decked her in six,  
 I divided her in seven,  
 Her interior I divided in nine.  
 I drove the water plugs into her,<sup>3</sup>  
 I saw to the spars and laid in what was needful.  
 Thrice thirty-six hundred measures of pitch I poured in the oven,  
 Thrice thirty-six hundred measures of tar <I poured out> inside her.  
 Thrice thirty-six hundred measures basket-bearers brought aboard for oil,  
 Not counting the thirty-six hundred measures of oil that the offering  
 consumed,  
 And the twice thirty-six hundred measures of oil that the  
 boatbuilders made off with.  
 For the <builders> I slaughtered bullocks,  
 I killed sheep upon sheep every day,  
 Beer, ale, oil, and wine

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<I gave out> to the workers like river water,  
 They made a feast as on New Year's Day,  
 < . . . > I dispensed ointment with my own hand.  
 By the setting of Shamash,<sup>4</sup> the ship was completed.  
 <Since boarding was(?)> very difficult,  
 They brought up gangplanks(?), fore and aft,  
 They came up her sides(?) two-thirds (of her height).  
 <Whatever I had> I loaded upon her:  
 What silver I had I loaded upon her,  
 What gold I had I loaded upon her,  
 What living creatures I had I loaded upon her,  
 I sent up on board all my family and kin,  
 Beasts of the steppe, wild animals of the steppe, all types  
 of skilled craftsmen I sent up on board.  
 Shamash set for me the appointed time:  
 'In the morning, cakes in spates,  
 In the evening, grains in rains,  
 Go into your boat and caulk the door!'  
 That appointed time arrived,  
 In the morning cakes in spates,  
 In the evening grains in rains,  
 I gazed upon the face of the storm,  
 The weather was dreadful to behold!  
 I went into the boat and caulked the door.  
 To the caulker of the boat, to Puzur-Amurri the boatman,  
 I gave over the edifice, with all it contained.

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### The Storm God Adad and Other Gods Cause the Flood

At the first glimmer of dawn,  
 A black cloud rose above the horizon.  
 Inside it Adad was thundering,  
 While the destroying gods Shullat and Hanish went in front,  
 Moving as an advance force over hill and plain.  
 Errakal tore out the mooring posts (of the world),  
 Ninurta came and made the dikes overflow.  
 The supreme gods held torches aloft,  
 Setting the land ablaze with their glow.  
 Adad's awesome power passed over the heavens,  
 Whatever was light was turned into darkness,  
 <He flooded> the land, he smashed it like a <clay pot>!

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<sup>2</sup> Another name ("Exceedingly Wise") for Utanapishtim.

<sup>3</sup> The reference to "water plugs" is obscure but may refer to caulking, stabilizers, depth markers, water taps, or bilge drains.

<sup>4</sup> The references to Shamash (see UTU in list in the introduction to this appendix) here and in line 87 suggest that in some version of this story, now lost, Shamash, rather than Enki, warned Utanapishtim of the flood and told him how much time he had to build his ship. In the oldest account of the Babylonian story of the flood, Enki sets a timing device, apparently a water clock, to tell Utanapishtim how much time he has before the coming of the deluge.

For one day the storm wind <blew>,  
 Swiftly it blew, <the flood came forth>,  
 It passed over the people like a battle,  
 No one could see the one next to him,  
 The people could not recognize one another in the downpour. 115  
 The gods became frightened of the deluge,  
 They shrank back, went up to Anu's highest heaven.  
 The gods cowered like dogs, crouching outside.  
 Ishtar screamed like a woman in childbirth,  
 And sweet-voiced Belet-ili wailed aloud: 120  
 'Would that day had come to naught,  
 When I spoke up for evil in the assembly of the gods!  
 How could I have spoken up for evil in the assembly of the gods,  
 And spoken up for battle to destroy my people?  
 It was I myself who brought my people into the world, 125  
 Now, like a school of fish, they choke up the sea!'  
 The supreme gods were weeping with her,  
 The gods sat where they were, weeping,  
 Their lips were parched, taking on a crust. 130  
 Six days and seven nights  
 The wind continued, the deluge and windstorm leveled the land.  
 When the seventh day arrived,  
 The windstorm and deluge left off their battle,  
 Which had struggled, like a woman in labor.  
 The sea grew calm, the tempest stilled, the deluge ceased. 135  
 I looked at the weather, stillness reigned,  
 And the whole human race had turned into clay.  
 The landscape was flat as a rooftop.  
 I opened the hatch, sunlight fell upon my face.  
 Falling to my knees, I sat down weeping, 140  
 Tears running down my face.  
 I looked at the edges of the world, the borders of the sea,  
 At twelve times sixty double leagues the periphery emerged.  
 The boat had come to rest on Mount Nimush,  
 Mount Nimush held the boat fast, not letting it move. 145  
 One day, a second day Mount Nimush held the boat fast, not letting it move.  
 A third day, a fourth day Mount Nimush held the boat fast, not letting it  
 move.  
 A fifth day, a sixth day Mount Nimush held the boat fast, not letting it move.  
 When the seventh day arrived, 150  
 I brought out a dove and set it free.  
 The dove went off and returned,  
 No landing place came to its view, so it turned back.  
 I brought out a swallow and set it free,  
 The swallow went off and returned,

No landing place came to its view, so it turned back.  
 I brought out a raven and set it free, 155  
 The raven went off and saw the ebbing of the waters.  
 It ate, preened, left droppings, did not turn back.  
 I released all to the four directions,  
 I brought out an offering and offered it to the four directions.  
 I set up an incense offering on the summit of the mountain, 160  
 I arranged seven and seven cult vessels,  
 I heaped reeds, cedar, and myrtle in their bowls.<sup>5</sup>  
 The gods smelled the savor,  
 The gods smelled the sweet savor,  
 The gods crowded round the sacrificer like flies. 165

### Ea Soothes Enlil's Anger; Utanapishtim Is Given Eternal Life

As soon as Belet-ili arrived,  
 She held up the great fly-ornaments that Anu had made in his ardor.  
 'O gods, these shall be my lapis necklace, lest I forget,  
 I shall be mindful of these days and not forget, not ever! 170  
 The gods should come to the incense offering,  
 But Enlil should not come to the incense offering,  
 For he, irrationally, brought on the flood,  
 And marked my people for destruction!'  
 As soon as Enlil arrived, 175  
 He saw the boat, Enlil flew into a rage,  
 He was filled with fury at the gods:  
 'Who came through alive? No man was to survive destruction!'  
 Ninurta made ready to speak, 180  
 Said to the valiant Enlil:  
 'Who but Ea could contrive such a thing?  
 For Ea alone knows every artifice.'  
 Ea made ready to speak,  
 Said to the valiant Enlil: 185  
 'You, O valiant one, are the wisest of the gods,  
 How could you, irrationally, have brought on the flood?  
 Punish the wrongdoer for his wrongdoing,  
 Punish the transgressor for his transgression,  
 But be lenient, lest he be cut off, 190  
 Bear with him, lest he < . . . >.  
 Instead of your bringing on a flood,  
 Let the lion rise up to diminish the human race!  
 Instead of your bringing on a flood,  
 Let the wolf rise up to diminish the human race!

<sup>5</sup> The Mesopotamians sometimes burned various plants in order to produce an attractive odor when making offerings to the gods.

Instead of your bringing on a flood, 195  
 Let famine rise up to wreak havoc in the land!  
 Instead of your bringing on a flood,  
 Let pestilence rise up to wreak havoc in the land!  
 It was not I who disclosed the secret of the great gods,  
 I made Atrahasis have a dream and so he heard the secret of the gods. 200  
 Now then, make some plan for him.  
 Then Enlil came up into the boat,  
 Leading me by the hand, he brought me up too.  
 He brought my wife up and had her kneel beside me.  
 He touched our brows, stood between us to bless us: 205  
 'Hitherto Utanapishtim has been a human being,  
 Now Utanapishtim and his wife shall become like us gods.  
 Utanapishtim shall dwell far distant at the source of the rivers.'  
 Thus it was that they took me far distant and had me dwell at the source of  
 the rivers.  
 Now then, who will convene the gods for your sake, 210  
 That you may find the eternal life you seek?  
 Come, come, try not to sleep for six days and seven nights.

### Gilgamesh Fails to Gain Eternal Life and Eternal Youth

As he sat there on his haunches,  
 Sleep was swirling over him like a mist.  
 Utanapishtim said to her, to his wife: 215  
 'Behold this fellow who seeks eternal life!  
 Sleep swirls over him like a mist.  
 His wife said to him, to Utanapishtim the Distant One:  
 'Do touch him that the man may wake up,  
 That he may return safe on the way whence he came, 220  
 That through the gate he came forth he may return to his land.'  
 Utanapishtim said to her, to his wife:  
 'Since the human race is duplicitous, he'll endeavor to dupe you.  
 Come, come, bake his daily loaves, put them one after another by his head.  
 Then mark the wall for each day he has slept.' 225  
 She baked his daily loaves for him, put them one after another by his head,  
 Then dated the wall for each day he slept.  
 The first loaf was dried hard,  
 The second was leathery, the third soggy,  
 The crust of the fourth turned white, 230  
 The fifth was gray with mold, the sixth was fresh,  
 The seventh was still on the coals when he touched him, the man woke up.  
 Gilgamesh said to him, to Utanapishtim the Distant One:  
 'Scarcely had sleep stolen over me,  
 When straightaway you touched me and roused me.' 235

Utanapishtim said to him, to Gilgamesh:  
 '<Up with you>, Gilgamesh, count your daily loaves,  
 <That the days you have slept> may be known to you.  
 The first loaf is dried hard,  
 The second is leathery, the third soggy,  
 The crust of the fourth has turned white, 240  
 The fifth is gray with mold,  
 The sixth is fresh,  
 The seventh was still in the coals when I touched you and you woke up.'  
 Gilgamesh said to him, to Utanapishtim the Distant One: 245  
 'What then should I do, Utanapishtim, whither should I go,  
 Now that the Bereaver<sup>6</sup> has seized my <flesh>?  
 Death lurks in my bedchamber,  
 And wherever I turn, there is death.'  
 Utanapishtim said to him, to Ur-Shanabi the boatman: 250  
 'Ur-Shanabi, may the harbor <offer> you no <haven>,  
 May the crossing point reject you,  
 Be banished from the shore you shuttled to.  
 The man you brought here,  
 His body is matted with filthy hair, 255  
 Hides have marred the beauty of his flesh.  
 Take him away, Ur-Shanabi, bring him to the washing place.  
 Have him wash out his filthy hair with water, clean as snow,  
 Have him throw away his hides, let the sea carry them off,  
 Let his body be rinsed clean. 260  
 Let his headband be new,  
 Have him put on raiment worthy of him.  
 Until he reaches his city,  
 Until he completes his journey, 265  
 Let his garments stay spotless, fresh and new.'  
 Ur-Shanabi took him away and brought him to the washing place.  
 He washed out his filthy hair with water, clean as snow,  
 He threw away his hides, the sea carried them off,  
 His body was rinsed clean. 270  
 He renewed his headband,  
 He put on raiment worthy of him.  
 Until he reaches his city,  
 Until he completes his journey, 275  
 His garments would stay spotless, fresh and new.  
 Gilgamesh and Ur-Shanabi embarked on the boat,  
 They launched the boat, they embarked upon it.  
 His wife said to him, to Utanapishtim the Distant One:  
 'Gilgamesh has come here, spent with exertion,

<sup>6</sup> An epithet for death.

What will you give him for his homeward journey?  
 At that he, Gilgamesh, lifted the pole,  
 Bringing the boat back by the shore.  
 Utanapishtim said to him, to Gilgamesh:  
 'Gilgamesh, you have come here, spent with exertion,  
 What shall I give you for your homeward journey?  
 I will reveal to you, O Gilgamesh, a secret matter,  
 And a mystery of the gods I will tell you.  
 There is a certain plant, its stem is like a thornbush,  
 Its thorns, like the wild rose, will prick <your hand>.  
 If you can secure this plant, < . . . >  
 < . . . >  
 No sooner had Gilgamesh heard this,  
 He opened a shaft, <flung away his tools>.  
 He tied heavy stones <to his feet>,  
 They pulled him down into the watery depths < . . . >.  
 He took the plant though it pricked <his hand>.  
 He cut the heavy stones <from his feet>,  
 The sea cast him up on his home shore.  
 Gilgamesh said to him, to Ur-Shanabi the boatman:  
 'Ur-Shanabi, this plant is cure for heartache,  
 Whereby a man will regain his stamina.  
 I will take it to ramparted Uruk,  
 I will have an old man eat some and so test the plant.  
 His name shall be "Old Man Has Become Young-Again-Man."  
 I myself will eat it and so return to my carefree youth.'  
 At twenty double leagues they took a bite to eat,  
 At thirty double leagues they made their camp.  
 Gilgamesh saw a pond whose water was cool,  
 He went down into it to bathe in the water.  
 A snake caught the scent of the plant,  
 <Stealthily> it came up and carried the plant away,  
 On its way back it shed its skin.  
 Thereupon Gilgamesh sat down weeping,  
 His tears flowed down his face,  
 He said to Ur-Shanabi the boatman:  
 'For whom, Ur-Shanabi, have my hands been toiling?  
 For whom has my heart's blood been poured out?  
 For myself I have obtained no benefit,  
 I have done a good deed for a reptile!  
 Now, floodwaters rise against me for twenty double leagues,  
 When I opened the shaft, I flung away the tools.  
 How shall I find my bearings?  
 I have come much too far to go back, and I abandoned the

boat on the shore.'  
 At twenty double leagues they took a bite to eat,  
 At thirty double leagues they made their camp.  
 When they arrived in ramparted Uruk,  
 Gilgamesh said to him, to Ur-Shanabi the boatman:  
 'Go up, Ur-Shanabi, pace out the walls of Uruk.  
 Study the foundation terrace and examine the brickwork.  
 Is not its masonry of kiln-fired brick?  
 And did not seven masters lay its foundations?  
 One square mile of city, one square mile of gardens,  
 One square mile of clay pits, a half square mile of Ishtar's dwelling,  
 Three and a half square miles is the measure of Uruk!'

### *Atrahasis* Introduction

*Atrahasis*, named after the central character Atrahasis ("Exceedingly Wise") who saves humanity from destruction, is the longest surviving narrative poem on humanity from Mesopotamia. It narrates, in a tightly knit plot, the creation of humans, their dynamic increase in numbers, the gods' hostile reaction to their rise in numbers and loudness and their attempts to destroy humanity in a variety of ways, culminating in a catastrophic flood, and finally the origins of human birth, marriage, procreation, and death. Like Gilgamesh, Atrahasis was a legendary figure, found on a list of Sumerian kings (under his Sumerian name Ziusudra) and said to have ruled the city of Shuruppak in southern Mesopotamia around the same time as a great flood is recorded to have taken place. He is known as Utanapishtim in the Gilgamesh epic, and the story of the flood myth found in that epic is derived from a fuller flood-myth narrative, such as the one here in *Atrahasis*, which offers the reasons and motivations for attempting to destroy the human race.

The story begins in the middle of the action. Exhausted from hard labor, the lesser gods rebel: Why should any god have to toil? The greater gods are threatened by the rebellion, and in an attempt to solve the problem, they create humanity to act as servants for the lesser gods and to relieve them of work. Birth is instituted to allow humans to reproduce. But without natural death, reproduction gets out of hand, and the human race grows too numerous and noisy, which brings great annoyance to Enlil, the chief god on earth. He tries in a number of ways to destroy the human race, unsuccessfully, leading to the decision to flood the earth—a severe attempt at population control. When the flood proves too drastic a measure, population control is achieved by forbidding marriage and procreation to certain groups of people and ordaining mortality for all.

There are several versions of the epic. Below we offer selections from the earliest text, the Old Babylonian version. The primary text for this version comprises three tablets, originally containing 1245 lines of poetry, which can be dated to the 17th century BC. Each tablet is divided into eight columns, four on the front, and four on the back. At