

The Atrahasis Epic:

The Flood Story, 18th century BCE¹

The Atrahasis Epic begins with a description of the world as it existed before man was created: “When the gods worked like man ... ” At this time, the universe was divided among the great gods, with An in possession of the heavens, Enlil the earth and Enki the great deep. Seven other gods established themselves as the ruling class, while the rest of the gods provided the work force. These working gods, whose “work was heavy, (whose) distress was much,” dug the Tigris and Euphrates rivers and then rebelled, refusing to continue to work. On the advice of the wise god, Enki, the gods decided to create another creature to do the work, and Enki and the mother goddess created the human race from a mixture of clay and the flesh and blood of a slain god. The slain god was “We-ilu, a god who has sense,”; from this characteristic of We-ilu, humanity was to possess rationality.

This epic, ancient though it is, is already the product of considerable development. The author has utilized old motifs and has united them into a coherent account of Man’s beginnings. The purpose of humanity’s creation is to do the work of the gods, thus relieving the gods of the need to labor. In the Atrahasis Epic, the creation of man causes new problems. In the words of the Epic (I 352f. restored from II 1-8):

Twelve hundred years [had not yet passed]
[when the land extended] and the peoples multiplied.
The [land] was bellowing [like a bull].
The gods were disturbed with [their uproar].
[Emil heard] their noise
[and addressed] the great gods.
The noise of mankind [has become too intense for me]
[with their uproar] I am deprived of sleep.

To stop the noise created by too many people, the gods decide to bring a plague. Enki advised human being to bring offerings to Namtar, god of the plague, and this induces him to lift the plague. Twelve hundred years later, the same problem again arises (Tablet II 1-8): The noise from so many people disturbs the gods. This time the gods bring a drought, which ends when humanity (upon Enki’s advice) bribe Adad to bring rain.

Despite the fragmentary state of Tablet II, it seems clear that the same problem recurs. This time the gods bring famine (and saline soil).

¹ “Atrahasis Epic: The Flood Story 18th Cent. BCE,” *The Centre for Online Jewish Studies*.
http://cojs.org/cojswiki/Atrahasis_Epic:_The_Flood_Story%2C_18th_century_BCE (accessed 27 Jan. 2013).

However, this does not end the difficulties either. Each time the earth becomes overpopulated. At last Enlil persuades the gods to adopt a “final solution” (II viii 34) to the human problem, and they resolve to bring a flood to destroy mankind. Their plan is thwarted by Enki, who has Atrahasis build an ark and so escape the flood. After the rest of mankind has been destroyed, and after the gods have had occasion to regret their actions and to realize (by their thirst and hunger) that they need man, Atrahasis offers a sacrifice, and the gods come to eat. Enki then presents a permanent solution to the overpopulation problem. The new world after the flood is to be different from the old; Enki summons Nintu, the birth goddess, and has her create new creatures who will ensure that the old problem does not arise again. In the words of the Epic (III vii 1):

In addition, let there be a third category among the peoples,
Among the peoples women who bear and women who do not bear.
Let there be among the peoples the Pasittu–demon to snatch the baby
from the lap of her who bore it.
Establish Ugbabtu–women, Entu–women and Igistu–women
And let them be taboo and so stop childbirth.

Other post–flood provisions may have followed, but the text now becomes too fragmentary to read.

Despite the lacunae, the structure presented by the Atrahasis Epic is clear. Humanity is created; there is a problem; remedies are attempted but the problem remains; the decision is made to destroy man; this attempt is thwarted by the god Enki; a new remedy is instituted to ensure that the problem does not arise again. The problem that arose and that necessitated these various remedies was overpopulation.⁵ Mankind increased uncontrollably, and the methods of population control that were first attempted (drought, pestilence, famine) only solved the problem temporarily. This overpopulation led to an attempt at complete destruction (the flood). When this failed, permanent countermeasures were introduced by Enki to keep the size of the population down.

The myth tells us that such social phenomena as non–marrying women, and such personal tragedies as barrenness and stillbirth (and perhaps miscarriage and infant mortality) are in fact essential to the very continuation of man’s existence, for humanity was almost destroyed once when the population got out of control.