Atrahasis, the Exceedingly Wise

The Babylonians · Mesopotamia (today's Iraq)

Where It Comes From

Atrahasis is a Babylonian poem in the Akkadian language, written on three clay tablets. The oldest copy we have was made in the reign of King Ammi-saduqa, about 1646 to 1626 BC. The name Atrahasis means "exceedingly wise". The flood part of the tablets is broken in places.

What Happens

In the beginning, the lesser gods have to do all the hard work of digging rivers and canals. They go on strike. So the wise god Enki and the birth goddess make human beings out of clay, mixed with the blood of a god, to do the work instead.

People multiply. There are so many of them, and they make so much noise, that the chief god Enlil cannot sleep. He tries to thin them out with a plague, and then with drought and famine. Each time, Enki quietly tells the wise man Atrahasis how to get through it.

At last Enlil makes the gods swear an oath to send a flood. Enki has sworn too, so he cannot tell any human. Instead he speaks to the reed wall of Atrahasis's house, knowing Atrahasis is listening: pull down your house, build a boat with a roof, seal it with pitch, and take your family and the animals aboard.

The flood comes and lasts seven days. Without people to make offerings, the gods themselves go hungry and weep. When Atrahasis comes out and makes an offering, they crowd around it.

Afterward the gods make new rules to keep humans from growing too many again: some babies will die, some women will not bear children, and childbirth will be hard.

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. Too many people, too much noise, and a short-tempered god.

Who was saved, and how. Atrahasis, his family and the animals, because one god found a loophole in his own oath.

The boat or the refuge. A boat with a roof, sealed with pitch.

What came after. An offering, hungry gods, and new limits on human life.

In this story the gods need people more than they realised. Without anyone to feed them, they are hungry and sorry. It is a very different picture of heaven from the one in Genesis.

THINK IT THROUGH

The gods in this story are bothered by human noise. What does that tell you about how the Babylonians pictured their gods?

Sources

"The Epic of Atrahasis", translation after Benjamin R. Foster, livius.org.

W. G. Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atra-hasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford, 1969); and "Atra-Hasis", Wikipedia, for the plague and famine episodes and the dating.

Everything here is a summary in our own words. Where a story has many tellings, we follow the source named above and say so.