Ziusudra, the King Who Was Warned

The Sumerians · southern Mesopotamia (today's Iraq)

Where It Comes From

The Sumerians built some of the world's first cities between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Their flood story survives on a broken clay tablet from the city of Nippur, written around 1600 BC and dug up by an American expedition in 1893. Pieces of other copies have turned up since, including one from the library of the Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, about a thousand years later.

Scholars call it the *Eridu Genesis*, after the first city it names. Large parts of the tablet are missing, so we have the story only in pieces.

What Happens

After the gods teach people to build cities and temples, the council of the gods, led by An and Enlil, decides to send a flood and wipe out the human race. Once made, the decision cannot be taken back.

One god, Enki, does not agree. He goes to the wall of a pious king named Ziusudra and speaks through it, warning him what is coming.

Ziusudra builds a huge boat. The storm comes, and for seven days and seven nights the winds and the waves toss the boat over the flooded land.

Then the sun god, Utu, comes out. Ziusudra opens a window in the boat, bows down, and offers oxen and sheep.

Afterward An and Enlil give Ziusudra life like a god's, and settle him in Dilmun, a land far away "where the sun rises".

What Stands Out

Why the flood came. The gods decided on it in council. The tablet is broken where their reason would be, so we do not know what it was.

Who was saved, and how. The king Ziusudra, warned in secret by the one god who disagreed. He took animals with him, and what the tablet calls the “seed” of humankind.

The boat or the refuge. A great boat (the lines describing how it was built are lost).

What came after. An offering to the sun, and the gift of everlasting life in a faraway land.

Notice that the gods do not all agree. One of them goes behind the others’ backs to save a human being. That idea comes back in the next two Mesopotamian stories.

THINK IT THROUGH

What do you think it would be like to read a story with whole pieces missing? How would you decide what to fill in?

Sources

"The Flood story", in the Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature (University of Oxford), composition 1.7.4, etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk.

Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Eridu Genesis", *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100 (1981): 513–529; and "Eridu Genesis", Wikipedia, on the tablets and their dates.

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