

The Flood Story and Atrahasis

Science and the Sacred: [The Second Creation Story and "Atrahasis"](#) Peter Enns

Last week we looked at Genesis 1 and *Enuma Elish*. Another very important discovery in Ashurbanipal's library is the story commonly referred to as the *Atrahasis Epic*. Though in the nineteenth century only fragments of the story were found, a more complete version was found in 1965, dated to the seventeenth century B.C.

Atrahasis is the name of the Noah-like figure in this story and it means "exceedingly wise." The *Atrahasis Epic* and another ancient story called the *Gilgamesh Epic* overlap a lot with the biblical flood story. We will get to that issue in a future post. *Atrahasis*, however, is more than just a flood story. It is a story of the origins of the gods (theogony) and of the cosmos (cosmogony).

Atrahasis is important to biblical scholars because of its similarity to Genesis 2-9. Both stories share a similar storyline: creation, population growth and rebellion, flood. They also share some important details within that storyline.

The degree of overlap between the stories suggests to some scholars that Genesis 2-9 may be an Israelite version of *Atrahasis*, although it is best not to be dogmatic about that. It is very clear, however, that there is a lot of conceptual overlap between them. On the next page you will find a chart outlining this.

It goes without saying that there are clear differences between the stories But, just as we saw ... with Genesis 1 and *Enuma Elish*, (1) the differences only stand out because of the similarities, (2) the differences do not justify minimizing the *similarities*.

Atrahasis	Genesis 2-9
Agriculture by irrigation	Eden watered by irrigation
Lesser gods (Igigi) are original laborers	Yahweh is original laborer (plants garden)
High gods (Anunaki) enjoy privileges of divine rank	Yahweh has a private garden with special trees of life and wisdom
Primeval humans (<i>Lullû</i>) created as laborers for gods --modeled from clay + rebel god's blood --implicitly immortal (no natural death)	Primeval human (<i>ha-'ādām</i>) created to care for Yahweh's garden --modeled from clay + divine breath --potentially immortal (tree of life)
Institution of marriage	Institution of marriage
<i>Lullû</i> rebel against the divine sovereign	<i>Ha-'ādām</i> rebels against Yahweh
<i>Lullû</i> punished: life diminished by plague, drought, and famine	<i>Ha-'ādām</i> punished: life diminished by exile from garden, hard labor, and denial of access to tree of life
The god Enlil sends a flood to drown out humanity's noise and control over-population	Yahweh sends a flood to punish humanity's wickedness and re-create the cosmos
The god Enki tells Atrahasis to build an ark to escape the flood	Yahweh tells Noah to build an ark to escape the flood
Atrahasis survives the flood and offers a sacrifice	Noah survives the flood and offers a sacrifice
The gods smell the sacrifice and bless the survivors	Yahweh smells the sacrifice and blesses creation
Enlil is reconciled to humanity	Yahweh is reconciled to flawed humanity
Limitations imposed on humans: <i>Lullû</i> become normal humans	Limitation imposed on humans: <i>ha-'ādām</i> has a 120-year lifespan
Sign of divine goodwill: the goddess Nintu's fly necklace	Sign of divine goodwill: duration of seasons (and Yahweh's bow [9:12-17])