

# A WORLD FULL OF GODS AND GODDESSES

## RELIGION IN MESOPOTAMIA

The bright, shining ball that appeared each morning in the east, then climbed into the sky to give light and warmth to the world awed the Mesopotamians. They marveled as it disappeared in the west at night, only to reappear the next morning in the east. Had it traveled underground through the night? They called this powerful force *Utu* in the Sumerian language of southern Mesopotamia and *Shamash* in Akkadian, a language spoken in central Mesopotamia. We translate these words as *sun*.

The Mesopotamians found the sun mysterious. Where, they wondered, did its power come from? It seemed to move on its own, as people do. So it must be like a person in some ways, they reasoned. Their pictures of mighty Shamash show him as a man with curly hair and a beard, with the sun's rays radiating from his shoulders. They worshiped him with songs of praise:

Of all the lands of different languages,  
You know their intentions, you see their footprints.  
All humankind kneels before you,  
O Shamash, everyone longs for your light.

The Mesopotamians realized that Shamash was more than a large human being, though. For one thing, the sun didn't die—people had been seeing the same sun rise and set for generations. Also, the sun seemed to see everything. Its rays touched every part of the earth and shone on every-

“ HYMNS TO THE GODS SHAMASH AND ENLIL, “INCANTATION AGAINST THUNDER,” AND “MYTH OF ATRAHASIS”



Like all Mesopotamian gods, Shamash wears a horned helmet. The sun's rays flowing from his shoulders proclaim him the god of the sun. The seal at the right was rolled on clay to make the picture at the left.

“The Shamash Hymn,” Iraq, about 1500 to 1000 BCE

### The Great Flood

The flood came forth,  
Its destructive power came  
upon the peoples like a  
battle.

One person did not see  
another,

They could not recognize  
each other in the catastro-  
phe.

The deluge bellowed like  
a bull,

The wind resounded like a  
screaming eagle.

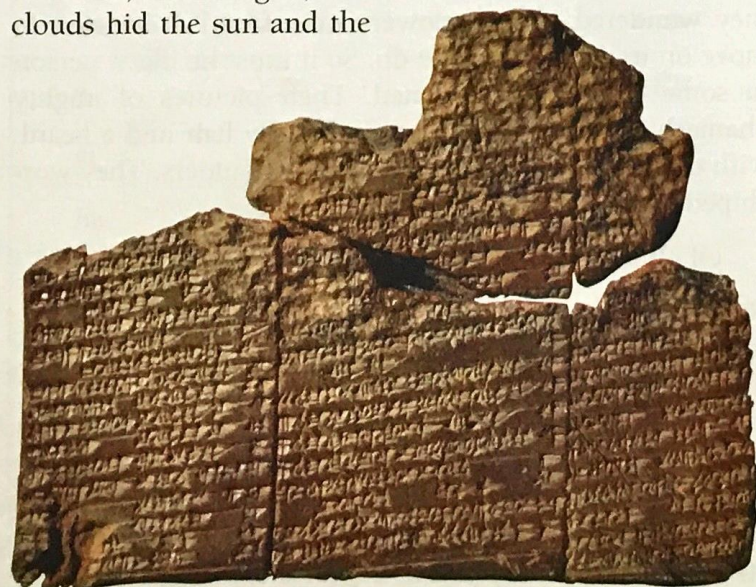
"Myth of Atrahasis,"  
17th century BCE

one, good and bad. The Mesopotamians came to think of Shamash as a wise and mighty judge who punished evildoers and rewarded those who lived good lives.

The Mesopotamians were polytheists, which means that they believed in many gods, not just Shamash. They reasoned that the gods must have different personalities, just as people have. They believed that each god controlled some part of the universe. Events on Earth occurred because the gods willed them. These beliefs helped the Mesopotamians to understand both the good and bad things that happened to them. When good things happened, they figured the gods must be happy. When bad things happened, it meant that one of the gods was upset.

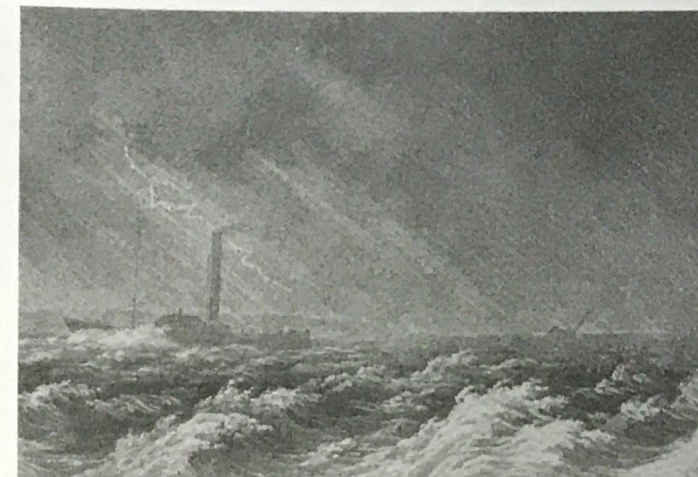
In Mesopotamia, rainstorms were (and are) rare, but dramatic. A gathering storm can be seen far in the distance. The undersides of the clouds droop in big, angry-looking rolls. The wind builds up and sweeps huge gray-green clouds across the sky. Long before the thunder cracks, lightning shoots like arrows toward the ground. And then sheets of rain pull a thick curtain of water across the land.

The Mesopotamians believed that fierce Adad created these storms. You could actually see him fighting against Shamash, the sun god, as the clouds hid the sun and the



This broken tablet, written in Sumerian around 1740 BCE, describes the terrible winds and rains of a Great Flood that the Mesopotamians believed swept the whole Earth far back in their history. Only one man and his family survived.

In this 19th-century engraving, a hurricane on the Tigris River wrecks a steamboat. This was the kind of storm that convinced the Mesopotamians of Adad's power.



thunder crashed. When a Mesopotamian stood in the doorway of his home, trying to stay dry as the rain pelted his courtyard, and covered his ears to drown out the storm, it was obvious to him that two great forces—two gods—were at war. A nameless poet described Adad as the warrior-god

Who overturns raging enemies, . . .  
The one who makes the lightning flash . . .  
Who forms clouds in the midst of heaven . . .  
The one whose shout makes the people speechless  
with fear . . .

Ishtar, the goddess of love, was the most important Mesopotamian goddess. Her Sumerian name, Inanna, means "Lady of Heaven," which makes her sound gentle. She wasn't. She had a hot temper, craved power, and loved to watch soldiers in battle.

All these gods and goddesses belonged to a complicated family tree and were related to one another as fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, husbands, and wives. They argued, fell in love, got jealous, and consulted with one another, just as humans do.

For many centuries, the people believed that Enlil was the greatest of the gods, even more powerful than Shamash. A speech written sometime between 1500 and 1000 BCE describes him as a god who is a

Noble sovereign, . . .  
Whose words cannot be altered . . .  
The command of whose lips no god can ignore, . . .  
You are the leader of heaven, . . . lord of the lands.

“Incantation Against Thunder,” Iraq, about 1500 to 1000 BCE

“To Enlil,” Iraq, about 1500 to 1000 BCE

**GODS OF THE  
NEAR EASTERN WORLD**

REALM	AKKADIAN NAME	SUMERIAN NAME
Leader of the gods	Ellil	Enlil
Sun, justice	Shamash	Utu
Moon	Sin	Nanna
Sky	Anu	An
Wind, storm, war	Adad	Ishkur
Love, war	Ishtar	Inanna
Water	Ea	Enki
Midwife of the gods	Mami	—
City of Ashur	Ashur	—
City of Babylon	Marduk	—

The kindest of all the Mesopotamian gods was Ea, the god of fresh, sweet water. In Mesopotamian legends, he was the one who watched out for humans. And it's easy to see how he got his reputation. Without the fresh water of rivers and springs, people couldn't water their fields and grow their crops—and they would die.

Despite their world crowded with gods, the Mesopotamians believed that there was once a time when there were no gods, no Earth, and no sky. Their legends don't actually explain how the earliest gods came to be, but Anu was one of the first. His name means "heaven," and he was the elderly father of all the gods. The first item on the gods' to-do list was to separate the Earth from the sky. Next, they built homes for themselves: the ancient temples. And then a mighty god (probably Enlil) placed the stars and the moon in their proper places in the sky. This god made the clouds and set loose the Euphrates and Tigris, allowing them to flow through the river valley.

It would seem that the gods had all they needed to live

comfortably. But, unfortunately, they still had to plant seeds, harvest crops, and bake bread. Worst of all, they had the constant work of feeding and serving Enlil, their leader. Because the Mesopotamians believed that the gods had the same feelings as human beings do, it was logical to believe that the gods would become angry when they were overworked. A story known as the Myth of Atrahasis, written down around the 17th century BCE, tells why the gods decided to create humankind.

Great indeed was the drudgery of the gods, . . .  
They were complaining, denouncing,  
Muttering down in the ditch.

66 "Myth of Atrahasis," Iraq,  
17th century BCE

The lesser gods ganged up on their lazy leader, Enlil. They would have killed him, but his doorkeeper warned him: "Enlil, your house is surrounded. Battle has run right up to your gate." When Enlil asked the other gods what was wrong, they complained that they had *had it* with work! Fortunately for Enlil, the kind god Ea saved the day. He came up with a compromise that satisfied all the gods. He suggested that they create a new creature to do all the work.

Ea asked Mami, the midwife of the gods, to create human beings. Mami agreed and suggested that Ea get her some clay so that she could create this new being. She took the clay, mixed it with the blood of a god, and made the first humans. Because the ancient Mesopotamians believed that the gods had created human beings to keep the gods happy, they accepted this as their main purpose in life: to feed, clothe, and shelter the gods. If they served well, they believed that their gods would let them live and prosper. But if they neglected the gods, the gods would grow angry, and the people would pay the price—suffering disease, bad luck, or even death.

The Mesopotamians believed that their gods were always close by. In fact, their view of the universe was pretty cozy. They imagined the earth as a big, flat circle with the Tigris and Euphrates rivers running through the middle. Their own land made up most of the world. A great salty sea circled the land on all sides. They believed that the Upper

**A DAGGER DIVIDES  
THE WORLD**

In one Mesopotamian myth, Marduk, god of the city of Babylon, created the world after defeating an evil goddess named Tiamat. Marduk killed the goddess, split her body in two, and turned the pieces into the earth and the sky. He created humans from the blood of an evil god who had sided with Tiamat.

The circle at the bottom of this cuneiform tablet shows a world map. It includes Babylon (the rectangle at the center), the Euphrates River (the two lines running through Babylon), and a circular sea, surrounding what the Mesopotamians thought was the whole world.

### TWO BIRTHDAYS A YEAR?

The moon and stars helped Mesopotamian astronomers to create their calendar. They divided the year into days and months, just as we do, and measured their months by the phases of the moon. Each month began with the first glimpse of the new moon.

Although the Mesopotamian calendar had 12 months in the year, their year ended up being 11 days shorter than the solar year, which, as their astronomers knew, was 365 days long. So every few years, the king would just repeat a month so that the beginning of spring would show up in the right month—Nisannu. (The Mesopotamians didn't celebrate birthdays as we do today. If they had, a person occasionally would get to celebrate his birthday twice in one year.)



Sea (the Mediterranean) in the north was connected to the Lower Sea (the Persian Gulf) in the south by distant seas on the east and west.

We can guess that they thought the world was about five hundred miles across. Because they could travel only by walking, riding a donkey, or taking a boat, it would take weeks, or even months, to cover this distance. So to them, this world was enormous.

When kings began to rule in Mesopotamia, they often called themselves kings “of the four rims of the universe” because they thought that Mesopotamia made up most of the universe.

Were the Mesopotamians foolish to envision such a small universe? Not at all. People living in 3000 BCE would never have seen a telescope, a globe, or even an atlas. And they certainly couldn't look down on the world's terrain from an airplane. All they knew were their own towns, the nearby villages, the river and canals that ran through the countryside, and maybe even a distant town that took several days to reach. For them, the universe was the world they could see, covered by an arching dome of sky.

Today we know that the earth moves around the sun. But the ancient Mesopotamians had no modern maps and science. All they had to go on was the evidence of their own eyes. And their eyes told them that the sun moves around the earth—as do the moon, planets, and all the stars. The sun, rising and setting, gave them proof each day. They “knew” that the gods who had created the world showed their great power in the brightness of the sun, in the fierceness of storms, and in the life-giving water of the rivers. No wonder they believed that Earth was the center of creation and their own land, the hub of the universe.