**Background**

In the early sections of *Gilgamesh,* the goddess Aruru creates Enkidu to temper Gilgamesh’s arrogance and his dynamic energies. Enkidu quickly becomes the king’s valued companion. After many glorious battles, Enkidu dies, and Gilgamesh, greatly saddened by his death, goes on a quest for immortality. He seeks Utnapishtim and his family, the only humans who have defeated death. Will Utnapishtim explain how a human might achieve immortality? Will the king return to his people with the knowledge of everlasting life? Find the answers to these questions in “The Story of the Flood” and “The Return” from *Gilgamesh.*

**The Story of the Flood**

“You know the city Shurrupak, it stands on the banks of Euphrates? That city grew old and the gods that were in it were old. There was Anu, lord of the firmament, their father, and warrior Enlil their counselor, Ninurta the helper, and Ennugi watcher over canals; and with them also was Ea. In those days the world **teemed** , the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamor. Enlil heard the clamor and he said to the gods in council, ‘The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the **babel** .’ So the gods agreed to exterminate mankind. Enlil did this, but Ea because of his oath warned me in a dream. He whispered their words to my house of reeds, ‘Reed-house, reed-house! Wall, O wall, harken reed-house, wall reflect: O man of Shurrupak, son of Ubara-Tutu; tear down your house and build a boat, abandon possessions and look for life, despise worldly goods and save your soul alive. Tear down your house, I say, and build a boat. These are the measurements of the barque as you shall build her: let her beam equal her length, let her deck be roofed like the vault that covers the abyss;**1**then take up into the boat the seed of all living creatures.’

“When I had understood I said to my lord, ‘Behold, what you have commanded I will honor and perform, but how shall I answer the people, the city, the elders?’ Then Ea opened his mouth and said to me, his servant, ‘Tell them this: I have learnt that Enlil is wrathful against me, I dare no longer walk in his land nor live in his city; I will go down to the Gulf**2**to dwell with Ea my lord. But on you he will rain down abundance, rare fish and shy wild-fowl, a rich harvest-tide. In the evening the rider of the storm will bring you wheat in torrents.’

“In the first light of dawn all my household gathered round me, the children brought pitch and the men whatever was necessary. On the fifth day I laid the keel and the ribs, then I made fast the planking. The ground-space was one acre, each side of the deck measured one hundred and twenty cubits**3**making a square. I built six decks below, seven in all, I divided them into nine sections with bulkheads between. I drove in wedges where needed, I saw to the punt-poles**4**and laid in supplies. The carriers brought oil in baskets, I poured pitch into the furnace and asphalt and oil; more oil was consumed in caulking**5**and more again the master of the boat took into his stores. I slaughtered bullocks for the people and every day I killed sheep. I gave the shipwrights wine to drink as though it were river water, raw wine and red wine and oil and white wine. There was feasting then as there is at the time of the New Year’s festival; I myself anointed my head. On the seventh day the boat was complete.

“Then was the launching full of difficulty; there was shifting of ballast above and below till two thirds was submerged. I loaded into her all that I had of gold and of living things, my family, my kin, the beasts of the field both wild and tame, and all the craftsmen. I sent them on board, for the time that Shamash had ordained was already fulfilled when he said, ‘In the evening, when the rider of the storm sends down the destroying rain, enter the boat and batten her down.’ The time was fulfilled, the evening came, the rider of the storm sent down the rain. I looked out at the weather and it was terrible, so I too boarded the boat and battened her down. All was now complete, the battening and the caulking; so I handed the tiller to Puzur-Amurri the steersman, with the navigation and the care of the whole boat.

“With the first light of dawn a black cloud came from the horizon; it thundered within where Adad, lord of the storm, was riding. In front over hill and plain Shullat and Hanish, heralds of the storm, led on. Then the gods of the abyss rose up; Nergal pulled out the dams of the nether**6**waters, Ninurta the war-lord threw down the dykes, and the seven judges of hell, the Anunnaki, raised their torches, lighting the land with their livid flame. A stupor of despair went up to heaven when the god of the storm turned daylight to darkness, when he smashed the land like a cup. One whole day the tempest raged, gathering fury as it went, it poured over the people like the tides of battle; a man could not see his brother nor the people be seen from heaven. Even the gods were terrified at the flood, they fled to the highest heaven, the firmament of Anu; they crouched against the walls, cowering like curs. Then Ishtar the sweet-voiced Queen of Heaven cried out like a woman in travail: ‘Alas the days of old are turned to dust because I commanded evil; why did I command this evil in the council of all the gods? I commanded wars to destroy the people, but are they not my people, for I brought them forth? Now like the spawn of fish they float in the ocean.’ The great gods of heaven and of hell wept, they covered their mouths.

“For six days and six nights the winds blew, torrent and tempest and flood overwhelmed the world, tempest and flood raged together like warring hosts. When the seventh day dawned the storm from the south **subsided** , the sea grew calm, the flood was stilled; I looked at the face of the world and there was silence, all mankind was turned to clay. The surface of the sea stretched as flat as a roof-top; I opened a hatch and the light fell on my face. Then I bowed low, I sat down and I wept, the tears streamed down my face, for on every side was the waste of water. I looked for land in vain, but fourteen leagues**7**distant there appeared a mountain, and there the boat grounded; on the mountain of Nisir the boat held fast, she held fast and did not budge. One day she held, and a second day on the mountain of Nisir she held fast and did not budge. A third day, and a fourth day she held fast on the mountain and did not budge; a fifth day and a sixth day she held fast on the mountain. When the seventh day dawned I loosed a dove and let her go. She flew away, but finding no resting-place she returned. Then I loosed a swallow, and she flew away but finding no resting-place she returned. I loosed a raven, she saw that the waters had retreated, she ate, she flew around, she cawed, and she did not come back. Then I threw everything open to the four winds, I made a sacrifice and poured out a libation**8**on the mountain top. Seven and again seven cauldrons I set up on their stands, I heaped up wood and cane and cedar and myrtle. When the gods smelled the sweet savor, they gathered like flies over the sacrifice. Then, at last, Ishtar also came, she lifted her necklace with the jewels of heaven that once Anu had made to please her. ‘O you gods here present, by the lapis lazuli**9**round my neck I shall remember these days as I remember the jewels of my throat: these last days I shall not forget. Let all the gods gather round the sacrifice, except Enlil. He shall not approach this offering, for without reflection he brought the flood; he consigned my people to destruction.”

“When Enlil had come, when he saw the boat, he was wrath and swelled with anger at the gods, the host of heaven, ‘Has any of these mortals escaped? Not one was to have survived the destruction.’ Then the god of the wells and canals Ninurta opened his mouth and said to the warrior Enlil, ‘Who is there of the gods that can devise without Ea? It is Ea alone who knows all things.’ Then Ea opened his mouth and spoke to warrior Enlil, ‘Wisest of gods, hero Enlil, how could you so enselessly bring down the flood?

Lay upon the sinner his sin,

Lay upon the transgressor his transgression,

Punish him a little when he breaks loose,

Do not drive him too hard or he perishes;

Would that a lion had ravaged mankind

Rather than the flood,

Would that a wolf had ravaged mankind

Rather than the flood,

Would that famine had wasted the world

Rather than the flood,

Would that pestilence had wasted mankind

Rather than the flood.

It was not I that revealed the secret of the gods; the wise man learned it in a dream. Now take your counsel what shall be done with him.’

“Then Enlil went up into the boat, he took me by the hand and my wife and made us enter the boat and kneel down on either side, he standing between us. He touched our foreheads to bless us saying. ‘In time past Utnapishtim was a mortal man; henceforth he and his wife shall live in the distance at the mouth of the rivers.’ Thus it was that the gods took me and placed me here to live in the distance, at the mouth of the rivers.”