

# The epic of gilgamesh and the hebrew bible essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

The Depiction of Gods: Immature Children Versus the Noble Guide Prompt: In the Sumerian tradition, the gods lack unity, are spiteful toward humans, and don't follow logical reasoning in their actions. In the Hebraic tradition, the singular god displays favoritism amongst the humans, experiences self blame, and presents sound reasoning to defend his actions as the ultimate creator of the world. While the Sumerian and Hebraic traditions have direct contact with humankind, they have different motives in doing so.

How do the Sumerian gods communicate the flood to the people in The Epic of Gilgamesh? How does the Hebraic god communicate the flood to the people within The Book of Genesis in the Hebrew Bible? What does this difference in methodology in dealing with the people in light of the flood reveal about the nature of the gods and what does it suggest about the relationship between the divine and the mortal in each story? Both the Hebraic and Sumerian accounts of the flood share many of the same elements.

For example, the gods directly warn a select few of the impending flood, an ark is built upon the gods' requests, and both Noah and Utanapishtim are granted immortal qualities—Noah living for more than 600 years, and Utanapishtim living forever. However, the gods in the stories behave in entirely different ways. The Sumerian gods in the Epic of Gilgamesh are often at odds with each other, rendering themselves incapable of acting as a unit. The Hebraic God in The Book of Genesis in The Hebrew Bible possesses the necessary superiority to be an all-powerful leader to humankind.

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the flood is a tool for punishment. The Sumerian gods don't wish to reveal their plans to the humans at all. Furthermore, they wish to conceal their plan from the other gods, only including the most important in the secret meeting, such as Anu, Enlil, and their leader, Ea. Their goal to destroy humanity is based on the element of surprise. Other than these minute clues, readers are left to their own hypotheses as to why the gods choose to destroy the humans. Whether stemming from jealousy or from full-fledged hate, humanity's fate is at the mercy of the gods in The Epic of Gilgamesh.

In The Book of Genesis however, the Hebraic God uses the flood as a tool to improve humankind. From the beginning, God reveals his discontent with "the evil of the human creature" recognizing that "every scheme of [man's] heart's devising was only perpetually evil" (Norton 163). Here, God explicitly tells us his reasoning in bringing on the flood—to destroy the sin he has helped to create. In this account, we are presented with the logical basis for wiping out the majority of man. Among the many gods in The Epic of Gilgamesh, there seems to be only one reasonable god—Ea.

He is sworn to secrecy along with the other gods but chooses to dissent, telling Utanapishtim of their catastrophic plans. As the proclaimed leader of the Sumerian gods, Ea may easily have other ideas concerning the destruction of humanity. But again, we are not given reasons why he breaks the trust of his fellow gods. It is also unclear why Ea must be secretive toward Utanapishtim, telling "their plans to the reed fence" rather than telling him directly (Norton 143). Ea's kind behavior toward Utanapishtim is

in direct contrast to the other spiteful gods, proving to be as mysterious as their initial decision to destroy humanity.

The Sumerian gods in The Epic of Gilgamesh are merely more powerful forms of the humans they intend to destroy. They submit to flattery, they avoid taking responsibility for their actions, and they give in to temptation of the senses. For example, once the gods become aware of Utanapishtim's survival, Enlil is "filled with fury at the gods," demanding to know who has broken their trust (Norton 147). Targeted as the perpetrator, Ea lies about the true nature of his involvement. Ea protests that Utanapishtim had a prophetic dream.

This evasive behavior detracts blame from Ea and leads the gods to believe that Utanapishtim possesses unique human qualities. Thus, even Utanapishtim's granting of immortality by the gods is based on a lie. The Sumerian gods also show weakness when they give in to the smell of Utanapishtim's sacrifice and incense offering. If it weren't for the smell of the burning fire, the gods would not have "crowded round the sacrifice like flies," instead reveling in their own misfortunes (Norton 147). Unlike the Hebraic God, they do not return to Utanapishtim on their own terms.

The Hebraic God in The Book of Genesis possesses a superiority of intellect while refraining from acting prideful in this superiority over man. He recognizes himself as the ultimate creator of their evil, immediately knowing that he must destroy his initial creation, taking full responsibility for their faults. His power is so great that he can summon the force to delete his

original creation at his own will. But, instead of reveling in his absolute power, he chooses to share his intentions with Noah, a mere mortal.

Genuinely concerned for humanity's morality, God guides Noah into the proper action in preparation for the flood. Similarly, as the flood ends, God need not be summoned back to Earth like the Sumerian gods. God simply "remembered Noah and all the beasts and all the cattle that were with him in the ark" (Norton 164). He ultimately uses his grand power to end the flood, as it has done what it was ordained to do. After the flood ends, God promises Noah that he will "not again strike down all living things... as long as all the days of the earth" (Norton 165).

Not only does he save Noah and his family, he forms a mutual agreement with him in that if man continues on its righteous path, he will not intervene in this way again. God goes even further, giving Noah and his offspring advice, telling them to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth" (Norton 165). God acts out of pure love toward Noah, in hopes that his future generations will follow his goodness. The Sumerian gods are merciless toward humans, showing no regret in destroying humankind. In first seeing the full scope of their destruction, they act out of self-preservation, not out of mercy toward humanity.

They "cowered like dogs" fleeing into heaven (Norton 146). It is not until they are safely away from the flood that Belet-ili, the goddess of birth and creator of the humans, bemoans the demise of her creation, likening them to a vulnerable "school of fish" (Norton 146). Paired with their lack of morality is their lack of power to stop the flood they created in the first place. They

only “ sat where they were, weeping” watching the flood for “ six days and seven nights... the deluge and windstorm leveled the land” (Norton 146).

The Sumerian gods act selfishly with no concern of the safety of mankind.

While the Hebraic God acts a noble guide, explicitly telling Noah what he must do to ensure the survival of man, the Sumerian gods act as if they were irrational humans. In their disunity, they continually conflict with each other. Their rash behavior forces them to confront the consequences of the flood, but they prove through their cowardice that they cannot take responsibility for it. It is out of the fear of their own power that they promise not to bring upon a flood again whereas the Hebraic God promises not to bring on the flood again because he has faith in his creation.

In carefully calculating his mission to destroy the sinners, God ensures the goodness of man through Noah and his family. His entire motive in making the flood is to benefit humankind, rather than to destroy its whole existence as the Sumerian gods had wanted. In his promise not to bring about a flood again, he places his faith on Noah and the rest of humankind. In The Book of Genesis, God expresses trust and hope in the future of his creation, while the Sumerian gods in The Epic of Gilgamesh show no concern in improving humanity’s morality—and even less concern in improving their own.