

# UNEARTHING THE BIBLE

TITUS KENNEDY



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## Unearthing the Bible

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# CONTENTS

Foreword by Stephen C. Meyer . . . . .	7
Introduction . . . . .	9

## CHAPTER 1

### STORIES OF CREATION, FLOOD, BABEL, AND THE PATRIARCHS (Genesis and Job)

1. Alternate Creation Tablets (Girsu and Ebla) . . . . .	12
2. The Double Creation of Humans (Enuma Elish, Enki and Ninhursag, Adapa) . . . . .	14
3. The Mesopotamian Version of the Flood (Atra-Hasis) . . . . .	18
4. The Preflood World (Sumerian King List) . . . . .	20
5. The Tower of Babel (Enmerkar and the Lord of Aratta) . . . . .	22
6. Abraham and Ur (Lament for Ur) . . . . .	24
7. Desecration of Names (Execration Texts) . . . . .	26
8. Laws, Customs, Economy, and Hammurabi (Stele of Hammurabi) . . . . .	28
9. Names, Covenants, and Social Customs (Mari and Nuzi Tablets) . . . . .	30
10. Camels and the Patriarchs (Camel Riders Cylinder Seal) . . . . .	34
11. Migrating to Egypt (Tomb of Khnumhotep II) . . . . .	36
12. Jacob and Joseph in Egypt (Jacob-El and Sheshi Scarabs) . . . . .	38
13. The Early Philistines (Phaistos Disk) . . . . .	40
14. The Golden Necklace (Gold of Valor) . . . . .	42
15. Job and the Conversation with God (Dialogue Between a Man and His God) . . . . .	44

## CHAPTER 2

### THE ISRAELITES IN EGYPT, EXODUS, AND THE WILDERNESS (Exodus–Deuteronomy)

16. Hebrew Servants in Egypt (Papyrus Brooklyn) . . . . .	48
17. Brickmaking Slaves in Egypt (Tomb of Rekmire) . . . . .	50
18. Pharaoh and the Hardening Heart (The Negative Confession) . . . . .	52
19. The Poetic Plagues (Admonitions of an Egyptian Sage) . . . . .	54
20. Pharaoh of the Exodus (Elephantine Stele of Amenhotep II) . . . . .	56
21. The Sphinx and the Death of the Firstborn (Dream Stele) . . . . .	58
22. Wandering in the Wilderness with Yahweh (Nomads of YHWH) . . . . .	60

23. The Ark of the Covenant and Anubis (Shrine of Anubis) . . . . .	62
24. Balaam the Seer (Deir Alla Inscription) . . . . .	64

### CHAPTER 3 CONQUEST, SETTLEMENT, AND THE JUDGES (Joshua–Ruth)

25. Jericho and Pharaoh Amenhotep III (Scarab of Amenhotep III) . . . . .	68
26. The Curious Case of Shechem (Amarna Letters of Labayu) . . . . .	70
27. Child Sacrifice in Canaan (Pozo Moro Relief) . . . . .	72
28. Israel in Canaan (The Merneptah Stele) . . . . .	74
29. Ashtarte and the Asherah (Astarte Plaque) . . . . .	76
30. Ba'al Hadad, God of Canaan (Ba'al Statue and Altar) . . . . .	80
31. Destruction and Settlement of Dan (Collared-Rim Jars) . . . . .	82
32. The Ark and the Philistines (Izbet Sartah Ostrakon) . . . . .	84

### CHAPTER 4 THE UNITED MONARCHY OF SAUL, DAVID, AND SOLOMON (Samuel–Kings)

33. Eshbaal and Saul (Ishbaal Son of Beda Jar) . . . . .	88
34. The Mysterious Piym (Inscribed PYM Weight) . . . . .	90
35. Letter about a King (Qeiyafa Ostrakon) . . . . .	92
36. Goliath of Gath (The Goliath Ostrakon) . . . . .	94
37. Agriculture and the Calendar (Gezer Calendar) . . . . .	96
38. The Royal House of David (Tel Dan Stele) . . . . .	98
39. Kings and Crowns (Ammonite King Statue) . . . . .	100
40. Casting Lots (Israelite Astragali) . . . . .	102
41. The Gold of Ophir (Tell Qasile Ophir Inscription) . . . . .	104

### CHAPTER 5 SHATTERED KINGDOMS (Kings–Chronicles)

42. Pharaoh Shishak (Shoshenq I Megiddo Stele) . . . . .	106
43. King Jeroboam (Seal of Jeroboam) . . . . .	108
44. The God Milcom (Amman Citadel Inscription) . . . . .	110
45. Mesha of Moab (The Mesha Stele) . . . . .	112
46. Elisha on Pottery (Rehov Elisha Ostrakon) . . . . .	114
47. Ahab and His Army (Kurkh Stele of Shalmaneser III) . . . . .	116
48. Queen Jezebel (Seal of Jezebel) . . . . .	118
49. The Ivory House (Samaria Ivories) . . . . .	120
50. King Jehu and the Assyrians (Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III) . . . . .	122

51. Religion and the Masses (Khirbet el-Qom Inscription) . . . . .	124
52. The Latrine of Desecration (Iron Age Toilet Seat) . . . . .	126
53. The Reforms of Hezekiah (Beersheba Horned Altar) . . . . .	128
54. Isaiah the Prophet's Seal (Bulla of Isaiah) . . . . .	130
55. The Tomb Inscription of Shebna (Shebna Lintel) . . . . .	132
56. Hezekiah and the Water Tunnel (Siloam Inscription) . . . . .	134
57. The Siege of Lachish (Lachish Reliefs) . . . . .	136
58. Sennacherib Versus Hezekiah (Sennacherib Prisms) . . . . .	138
59. The Fall of Nineveh (Nineveh Chronicle) . . . . .	140
60. Arad and the Temple of Yahweh (Arad Yahweh Ostrakon) . . . . .	142

## CHAPTER 6

### EMPIRES OF BABYLON AND PERSIA

(Jeremiah–Malachi)

61. Baruch, Scribe of Jeremiah (Bulla of Baruch) . . . . .	146
62. Letters to Lachish (The Lachish Ostraca) . . . . .	148
63. Nebo-Sarsekim the Chief Eunuch (Nebo-Sarsekim Tablet) . . . . .	150
64. The Babylonian Conquest of Judah (The Jerusalem Chronicle) . . . . .	152
65. Nebuchadnezzar and the Image (Nabu Statue) . . . . .	154
66. Evil-Merodach in Prison (Prayer Tablet of Amel-Marduk) . . . . .	156
67. Jehoiachin's Daily Rations (The Ration Tablets) . . . . .	158
68. Belshazzar and Daniel (Cylinder of Nabonidus) . . . . .	160
69. The Persians Capture Babylon (Nabonidus Chronicle) . . . . .	162
70. Return from Exile (The Cyrus Cylinder) . . . . .	164
71. Darius, Ahasuerus, and Artaxerxes (Achaemenid Royal Inscribed Bowl) . . . . .	166
72. Friends and Enemies of Nehemiah (Elephantine Papyri) . . . . .	168
73. Geshem, King of Qedar (Bowl of Qaynu and Geshem) . . . . .	170
74. Dead Sea Scrolls (Great Isaiah Scroll) . . . . .	172

## CHAPTER 7

### JESUS AND HIS WORLD

(Matthew–John)

75. Herod the Great and the Temple (Herodian Temple Donation Inscription) . . . . .	176
76. The Census of Quirinius (Epitaph of Secundus) . . . . .	178
77. Coins of the Gospels (1st Century Coinage) . . . . .	180
78. The Cana Wedding Jars (Ritual Stone Vessels) . . . . .	184

79. Moses Seat (Magdala Stone Moses Seat) . . . . .	186
80. Caiaphas the High Priest (Caiaphas Ossuary) . . . . .	188
81. Pontius Pilate the Governor (The Pilate Stone) . . . . .	190
82. Crucifixion in Judea (Crucified Man Remains) . . . . .	194
83. Jesus Artwork in Rome (The Alexamenos Graffito) . . . . .	196
84. The Tomb of Jesus (Burial Bench in the Holy Sepulchre) . . . . .	198
85. Rumors of the Resurrection (The Nazareth Inscription) . . . . .	200

**CHAPTER 8**

**THE FIRST CHRISTIANS AND THE EARLY CHURCH** (Acts–Revelation)

86. Aretas the King and Paul (Burial Inscription of Itaybel) . . . . .	204
87. Sergius Paulus on Cyprus (Paulus the Proconsul Inscription) . . . . .	206
88. Lystra and Derbe Discovered (Lystra and Derbe Inscriptions) . . . . .	208
89. The City Authorities of Thessalonica (Politarch Inscription) . . . . .	210
90. Altar to the Unknown God (Unknown Gods Altars) . . . . .	212
91. The Corinth Synagogue (Synagogue of the Hebrews Inscription) . . . . .	214
92. Gallio the Governor (Delphi Inscription) . . . . .	216
93. Erastus of Corinth (Erastus Pavement Inscription) . . . . .	218
94. Artemis and Ephesus (Statue of Artemis) . . . . .	220
95. Trouble at the Jerusalem Temple (Temple Warning Inscription) . . . . .	222
96. James, Brother of Jesus (James Ossuary) . . . . .	224
97. Fighting Wild Beasts (Bestiarius Oil Lamp) . . . . .	226
98. Paul on Malta (First Man of Malta Inscription) . . . . .	228
99. Titus and the Temple Destruction (Arch of Titus Relief) . . . . .	230
100. Domitian as a God (“Genius” of Emperor Domitian) . . . . .	232
101. Early New Testament Manuscripts (John Rylands Papyrus 52) . . . . .	234
Conclusion . . . . .	237
Key Terms . . . . .	241
Archaeological Periods . . . . .	243
Timeline . . . . .	245
Maps . . . . .	247
Scripture Index . . . . .	251

# INTRODUCTION

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Artifacts left behind from the vanished, ancient world of the Bible have been found and recovered through archaeology. What is an artifact? In simple terms, an artifact is an ancient object made or modified by humans, and many have been found, especially in recent years, at archaeological sites around the world. Artifacts include statues, altars, jewelry, weapons, tools, inscriptions, paintings, coins, scarabs, tablets, papyri, stelae, reliefs, and pottery, showcasing the artistic and technological prowess of the ancients. But more importantly, artifacts tell stories of the past. They serve as both visual and informational aids that provide insight into that ancient context and toward an accurate understanding and interpretation.

The Bible is a collection of books written millennia ago in places and cultures far removed from modern readers, but artifacts can give us essential knowledge of the ancient world and help us avoid the problem of unconsciously or inadvertently viewing a passage or book in the context of a modern society and time.

Because the Bible contains stories from the ancient world, written in a style different than the method of modern historians and paired with theology, many have assumed that the narratives in the Bible are myth, legend, and propaganda instead of accurate history. In fact, the majority of scholars, most media and educational sources, and many in the general public regard the Bible as a fairy tale and frequently portray it as unimportant or irrelevant beyond literary and religious studies. For years, the Bible has been routinely attacked and disregarded on the basis of history or archaeology.

And yet when people look into what archaeologists have unearthed, a different story comes to light, showing that instead of fiction and fairy tales, archaeology indicates that the Bible preserves an accurate recounting of the history addressed

in its pages. Specifically, hundreds of artifacts from the distant past have demonstrated the events, people, and places in the Bible to be historical.

The goal of this book is twofold—to provide a resource with quality photographs and information about archaeological artifacts that illuminate the story and context of the Bible for a more thorough and accurate understanding of the Scriptures, and to demonstrate how artifacts also confirm the historical reliability of passages in the Bible.

I have been interested in history and art as long as I can remember, and walking through museums and seeing archaeological artifacts always gives me a sense of mystery, admiration, and wonder. These remnants of a culture or person from so many centuries ago, often long forgotten, can preserve and communicate important information and ideas beyond the written word of a history book, and add dimension and depth to the ancient writings.

And that is why I have written this book. Over the years, I have done research and photography of archaeological artifacts in museums, private collections, and archaeological sites around the world. I am a professional field archaeologist who holds a doctorate and two master's degrees in biblical archaeology and Near Eastern archaeology, specializing in biblical archaeology of both the Old Testament and New Testament. My background in archaeology, ancient history, Bible, and artifacts has given me rather unique qualifications for writing a book on this topic.

My hope is that this book will fill a niche by providing high-quality photographs of over 100 of the most important artifacts connected to the Bible, along with thorough and accurate information and interpretation, presented in a logical and accessible format for the general reader, the student, and the scholar. To accomplish this task, the book includes high-resolution color photographs, has been organized chronologically by historical periods and books of the Bible, and contains descriptions and explanations for each artifact along with biblical references.

# STORIES OF CREATION, FLOOD, BABEL, AND THE PATRIARCHS

(Genesis and Job)

Prior to the many discoveries and analyses now available to modern archaeologists and historians, skeptical scholars claimed that Genesis and the Pentateuch were composed from four basic sources written during the Israelite Monarchy period from the 10th to 6th century BC, that Genesis had merely copied the Mesopotamian stories of creation and the flood with minor monotheistic variation, and that the lives of the patriarchs were myths that did not accurately reflect their alleged historical period. Subsequent discoveries and research, however, threw this documentary hypothesis into disarray and forced alternative explanations. Further, it has become apparent that the Genesis creation narrative was not merely a copy of another polytheistic creation story, and that the patriarchs accurately reflect the historical period in which they are set.

The narratives in the book of Genesis cover the major events of creation of the world and humans, the Great Flood, the Tower of Babel, establishment of the earliest nations, and then a shift to the lives of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and their families. Beginning with the life story of Abraham, these biographical sections of Genesis focus on one family over the course of nearly 400 years in the regions of Mesopotamia, Canaan, and Egypt during an archaeological period known as the Middle Bronze Age (ca. 2000–1500 BC).

The setting for the book of Job is likewise in the Middle Bronze Age and probably around the time of Abraham or Isaac, indicated by the lack of reference to Israel or the Law of Moses, Job functioning as the priest of his family (Job 1:5), the lifetime of Job recorded as over 140 years (Job 42:16), and certain social customs and names best fitting this time period.

The artifacts presented in this section originate primarily from Mesopotamia and Egypt, span nearly 1,500 years, and include written records about events, places, people, laws, and customs, in addition to important artistic depictions from the period.

# (1) ALTERNATE CREATION TABLETS

## (Girsu and Ebla)



**Date:** 3rd millennium BC

**Discovered:** Girsu (Tell Telloh, Iraq) and Ebla (Tell Mardikh, Syria)

**Period:** Genesis 1–11

**Keywords:** creation; Mesopotamia; tablet; Girsu; Ebla

**Bible Passages:** Genesis 1:1–2:1; Job 38:4-7; Psalm 148:1-5; Colossians 1:15-16

The Sumerians, who composed the oldest written records of any civilization yet discovered, wrote about the origins of the heavens and earth through a story of creation. A Sumerian cuneiform<sup>1</sup> clay tablet<sup>2</sup> discovered at Girsu in southern Mesopotamia and composed during the Early Dynastic period in the 3rd millennium BC, perhaps as early as 2900 BC, recounts a time at the beginning of creation in which the daylight and moonlight did not shine because the sun and moon did not yet exist, the “lesser gods” had not yet been created, the fields and vegetation were still merely dust, and the earth was filled with water as part of the creation process.

This text also mentions heaven, earth, and water, which were often personified as the original divine trio in ancient Mesopotamian creation stories, although Lord

<sup>1</sup> *Cuneiform*: A wedge-shaped form of writing invented by the Sumerians that was simplified from the pictographic writing system that preceded it. It was used to write numerous languages, including Sumerian, Akkadian, Hittite, and Eblaite.

<sup>2</sup> *Tablet*: The clay tablets commonly used during the Bronze Age in the Ancient Near East were typically rectangular in shape and the written text was impressed into the wet clay with a reed stylus. Some tablets were baked, others were dried, but many of the preserved tablets discovered by archaeologists underwent an unintentional hardening process when a building that housed tablets was destroyed by fire.

Heaven is specifically referred to in the narrative—perhaps as the creator. This tablet, which might be the oldest preserved creation story, has obvious parallels to the Genesis account as it refers to a beginning, then the creation of the sun, moon, water on the earth, and vegetation. The “lesser gods” in ancient Near Eastern literature appear to be angelic beings, which according to the Bible seem to have been created before the earth, and the concept of the Trinity even appears to be implied in the Genesis creation narrative.

Another one of the most ancient creation accounts was discovered in a cache of about 20,000 clay tablets during excavations at Ebla, Syria (Tell<sup>3</sup> Mardikh) in northern Mesopotamia. More than 8,000 of these tablets at Ebla were from a city archive dated to about 2400–2000 BC, prior to a destruction of the city. Texts were written in the scripts of both Sumerian and Akkadian<sup>4</sup>, but a local Eblaite dialect was discovered in the documents. Out of these thousands of tablets, three that contain a short creation poem have been recovered and translated. The texts are in the Eblaite language and contain one of the oldest known creation accounts.

The poem states, “Lord of heaven and earth, you had not made the earth exist, you created. You had not established the sun, you created. You had not made the morning light exist.” It also notes that this Lord is divine, saves, and has words that produce effects. The recovered fragments of the poem are concerned primarily with the initial creation of earth, light, and the sun, while sections such as the creation of plants, animals, and humans were either not addressed or may have been in lost sections of the poem.

The Girsu creation tablet and the Eblaite creation hymn, which share more similarities to the beginning of Genesis than any other known ancient creation texts, are also the oldest copies of creation accounts yet discovered. While these Mesopotamian creation texts are not exactly the same as Genesis or other related creation passages in the Bible, especially regarding clear monotheism, order, and comprehensiveness, they do demonstrate remembrance and knowledge of a very similar creation idea throughout the ancient Near East very early in the history of civilization.

*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters. Then God said, “Let there be light” and there was light (Genesis 1:1-3).*

<sup>3</sup> *Tell or Tel*: A mound consisting of debris and ruins from ancient cities or towns built on top of one another at the same archaeological site. In certain situations, the mound was formed purposefully in order to create an artificial hill.

<sup>4</sup> *Akkadian*: Refers to the Akkadian language of Mesopotamia, the oldest known Semitic language, or to the empire or people from the Akkadian Empire, founded by Sargon of Akkad in the 24th century BC.

## (2) THE DOUBLE CREATION OF HUMANS

(Enuma Elish, Enki and Ninhursag, Adapa)



**Date:** 2nd millennium BC

**Discovered:** Nineveh, Iraq

**Period:** Genesis 1–11

**Keywords:** creation; Adam; Eve; humans; Eden; angels

**Bible Passage:** Genesis 1:26–3:24

The first words of the Babylonian creation epic *Enuma Elish* mean “when on high” and refer to the abode of the original gods before the earth had been created and named. Currently, the earliest known copies date to about 1000 BC from Babylon, but the poem was possibly composed in the Old Babylonian period around 1700 BC based on con-

text and linguistics. *Enuma Elish* was first rediscovered in the library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, but subsequent copies have been recovered since.

The story emphasizes how Marduk<sup>5</sup> was elevated to the chief god of the pantheon in the context of creation and a struggle between the gods, and that Babylon should be regarded as supreme. Three primeval gods exist at the beginning: Abzu (fresh water), Tiamat (salt water), and Mummu (the mist), and the text is divided into seven sections, with the creation of man in section 6 and the recitation of the names and titles of Marduk in section 7. The sevenfold division with the creation

<sup>5</sup> *Marduk*: Patron god of Babylon and chief god of the pantheon by the 18th century BC. Marduk was also referred to by the title Bel. He was associated with the dragon.

of man in the sixth and honoring the god Marduk in the seventh has been compared to Genesis and the days of creation, with Adam on the sixth day, followed by the seventh day of rest.

Enuma Elish narrates the separation of heavens and earth as Tiamat is slain and split in two, the “lesser gods” are created (perhaps equivalent to angelic beings), man is created, and after this Babylon is constructed and a ziggurat<sup>6</sup> temple is built for Marduk. Parallels with the Genesis narrative can be seen, such as the “original creator gods” existing before creation, the separation of the heavens and earth, creation of angelic beings, creation of man, resting of the gods, and building of cities.

Mankind, whose purpose according to the story was to work so that the gods may rest, was created utilizing divine blood from a sacrificed god named Kingu. In the Atra-Hasis creation of man section, it is specified that man was created by shaping him from clay and combining that with the divine blood, similar to what is recorded in Genesis when God shaped Adam from the dust of the earth and breathed the divine breath of life into him.

The Sumerian epic Enki and Ninhursag also addresses the creation of man. In this account, clay is fashioned into the first man who is brought into existence, followed by five additional humans, and each are appointed a job to do.



An ancient Sumerian text addressing the life of a man after creation, a story called Adapa after the name of the protagonist, is set in the early days of antediluvian<sup>7</sup> (preflood) Mesopotamia, recounts events in the life of the model man or human archetype. The earliest known text of this story was discovered at Amarna and dates to about the 14th century BC, but the story was obviously

<sup>6</sup> *Ziggurat*: A monumental structure of successively terraced platforms constructed with clay bricks. A ziggurat was associated with religion, usually had a shrine or temple at the top, and may have been seen as a connection between earth and the heavens. The Etemenanki ziggurat in Babylon, now in ruins, was approximately 300 feet tall (91 meters), but larger ziggurats may have existed previously.

<sup>7</sup> *Antediluvian*: Before the great flood.

composed much earlier, and ritual incantations found at Nippur from as early as 1800 BC invoke the name Adapa, who was known from Sumerian sources as the first of the antediluvian sages.

Some linguists have suggested Adapa could be rendered Adamu or may at least share the same original word root with Adam. In the story, this model man talked with the gods, underwent a test from the gods involving the food of life and water of life in the realm of the gods, was judged by another god for his refusal to eat what was offered, and finally was sent back to earth without eternal life and with the penalty of disease on humanity.<sup>8</sup> The connection of Adapa to Adam due to linguistics, events, and themes has been debated, but the similarities are noteworthy.

That multiple ancient Mesopotamia stories record the creation of man by shaping him from clay and infusing him with divine blood, extremely similar to the Genesis account of shaping man from dust and infusing him with divine breath, indicates that knowledge of the creation of man story had been passed down from centuries before, perhaps in both oral and written form, and adapted to suit the various gods and theologies.

*Then Yahweh God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being (Genesis 2:7).*

---

<sup>8</sup> This test or temptation of Adam and Eve may also be illustrated on a seal from 2200 BC found in Mesopotamia. The stone seal depicts a male and a female sitting on either side of a sacred tree, with a serpent behind the female. When the seal was discovered, scholars immediately noticed the possible parallel, although in modern times ideas about the seal have been distanced from Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

### (3) THE MESOPOTAMIAN VERSION OF THE FLOOD (Atra-Hasis)



**Date:** 1900 BC

**Discovered:** Unknown, Iraq

**Period:** Genesis 1–11

**Keywords:** Atra-Hasis; flood; Noah; Gilgamesh; Utnapishtum; Ziusudra

**Bible Passages:** Genesis 6:5–8:22; 2 Peter 2:5

Atra-Hasis, meaning “exceedingly wise,” is the title of an ancient Akkadian epic derived from the name of the protagonist. The epic, which contains narratives about creation and the flood, has been of particular interest due to its detailed ancient flood story and its similarity to the Noah narrative.

Recently, a tablet written about 1900 BC and sourced from a private collection was rediscovered and translated, containing the flood story of Atra-Hasis, who interacts with the god Enki. Measuring 11.5 cm by 6 cm, it contains 60 lines of cuneiform. In this particular text, many specifics were noticed that match the flood story of Noah found in Genesis: gods want to destroy all humans by a flood; one god warns a man about the flood and instructs him to build a boat; dimensions are given for a massive boat to be built with bitumen, multiple decks, and a roof; animals were taken on board two by two; a storm rages and the world floods;

the boat lands on a mountain; and the survivor offers a sacrifice to the god who saved him.

While many similarities are obvious, notable differences also exist, such as multiple gods rather than one God; the flood was sent as a result of overpopulation and noise annoying the gods instead of sin corrupting the earth; craftsmen of the city help Atra-Hasis construct the boat; it rains for 7 days instead of 40; the sacrifice is eaten by the gods; and the dimensions of the boat—rounded with an approximate 70 meter diameter and 6 meter high walls—are slightly different.

Tablet 11 of the Epic of Gilgamesh contains the flood story as told by Utnapishtim, who appears to be the same person as Atra-Hasis. The Gilgamesh version of the story about a man building a boat to survive a divinely sent flood that wipes out mankind goes back to ca. 2100 BC in Sumerian texts, and all of the earliest flood accounts, including Atra-Hasis, Gilgamesh, and Ziusudra, appear to descend from a common source.

Although the Genesis account is unique in its monotheistic perspective and discussion of sin, the Mesopotamian texts, along with several others from the ancient world, such as the Deucalion version in Greek, undoubtedly recount the same basic story.

*Behold, I, even I am bringing the flood of water upon the earth, to destroy all flesh in which is the breath of life, from under heaven; everything that is on the earth shall perish... you shall enter the ark... And of every living thing of all flesh, you shall bring two of every kind into the ark, to keep them alive with you (Genesis 6:17-19).*

