

Sumerian Creation Myth

The origins of human beings according to ancient Sumerian texts

Sumer, or the 'land of civilized kings', flourished in Mesopotamia, now modern-day Iraq, around 4500 BC. Sumerians created an advanced civilization with its own system of elaborate language and writing, architecture and arts, astronomy and mathematics. Their religious system was a complex one comprised of hundreds of gods. According to the ancient texts, each Sumerian city was guarded by its own god; and while humans and gods used to live together, the humans were servants to the gods.

The Sumerian creation myth can be found on a tablet in Nippur, an ancient Mesopotamian city founded in approximately 5000 BC.

The creation of Earth (**E_nnuma E_lish**) according to the Sumerian tablets begins like this:

*When in the height heaven was not named,
And the earth beneath did not yet bear a name,
And the primeval Apsu, who begat them,
And chaos, Tiamut, the mother of them both
Their waters were mingled together,
And no field was formed, no marsh was to be seen;
When of the gods none had been called into being,
And none bore a name, and no destinies were ordained;
Then were created the gods in the midst of heaven,
Lahmu and Lahamu were called into being...*

Sumerian mythology claims that, in the beginning, human-like gods ruled over Earth. When they came to the Earth, there was much work to be done and these gods toiled the soil, digging to make it habitable and mining its minerals.

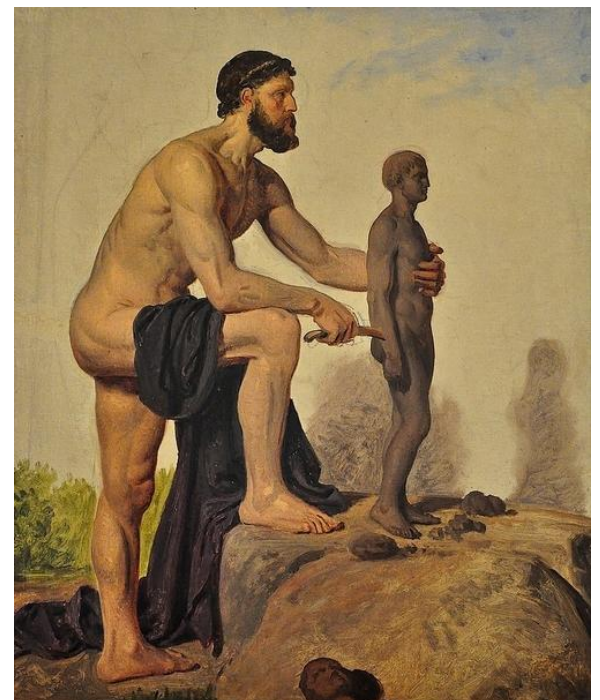
The texts mention that at some point the gods mutinied against their labour.

*When the gods like men
Bore the work and suffered the toll
The toil of the gods was great,
The work was heavy, the distress was much.*

Anu, the god of gods, agreed that their labour was too great. His son **Enki**, or **Ea**, proposed to create man to bear the labour, and so, with the help of his half-sister **Ninkī**, he did. A god was put to death, and his body and blood was mixed with clay. From that material the first human being was created, in likeness to the gods.

*You have slaughtered a god together
With his personality
I have removed your heavy work
I have imposed your toil on man.*

...



*In the clay, god and man
Shall be bound,
To a unity brought together;
So that to the end of days
The Flesh and the Soul
Which in a god have ripened –
That soul in a blood-kinship be bound.*

This first man was created in E_{den}, a Sumerian word which means 'flat terrain'. In the [Epic of Gilgamesh](#), E_{den} is mentioned as the garden of the gods and is located somewhere in Mesopotamia between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers.



Sumerian tablet depicting Enki in the creation myth. (world-myth.com)

Initially human beings were unable to reproduce on their own, but were later modified with the help of Enki and Ninki.

Thus, Adapa was created as a fully functional and independent human being. This 'modification' was done without the approval of Enki's brother, [Enlil](#), and a conflict between the gods began. Enlil became the adversary of man, and the Sumerian tablet mentions that men served gods and went through much hardship and suffering.

Adapa, with the help of Enki, ascended to Anu where he failed to answer a question about 'the bread and water of life'. Opinions vary on the similarities between this creation story and the biblical story of Adam and Eve in E_{den}.

Featured image: Sumerian chaos monster and sun god. (Wikipedia)

*Note: Ancient Sumerian translations were taken from William Bramley's book, *The Gods of E_{den}*.*

Read more: <http://www.ancient-origins.net/human-origins-folklore/origins-human-beings-according-ancient-sumerian-texts-0065#ixzz3kPckximN>

Source: Black, John. "The origins of human beings according to ancient Sumerian texts." *Ancient-origins.net*. Stella Novus, 30 January 2013. Web. 31 August 2015.

Sumerian Mythology

The Creation of Humans

This poem begins with a description of how the gods had to work for their bread by digging out irrigation canals:

The gods were dredging the rivers,
were piling up their silt
on projecting bends—
and the gods lugging the clay
began complaining (Jacobsen, *Harps* 154)

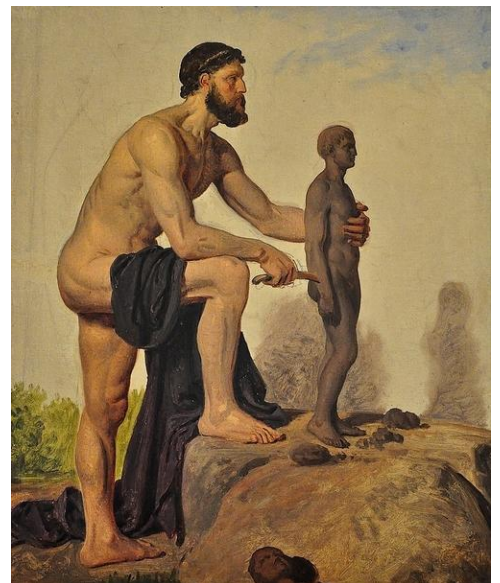
Nammu, who is either the sea or the goddess of the riverbed, goes to her son Enki, who is asleep in the deep (the Apsu) and entreats him to rise from his bed and "fashion servants of the gods" (Kramer, *History Begins* 109). Enki, who after all is the god of wisdom, thinks of the germinating powers of the clay and water of the abyss, and he tells Nammu to have some womb-goddesses pinch off this clay and have some "princely fashioners" thicken it, so she can mold it or give birth to it:

Mix the heart of the clay that is over the abyss,
The good and princely fashioners will thicken the clay,
You, [Nammu] do you bring the limbs into existence;
Ninmah [earth-mother or birth goddess] will work above you,
The goddesses [of birth] . . . will stand by you at your fashioning;
O my mother, decree its [the newborn's] fate,
Ninmah will bind upon it the image (?) of the gods,
It is man (Kramer, *History Begins* 109)

Jacobsen translates these apparently difficult to decipher lines somewhat differently, seeing a "birth chair" where Kramer sees the "image" of the gods. Jacobsen's translation also stresses that the fashioning of the newborn imitates in some way the growth of a fetus in the womb. Jacobsen translates the moment of birth like this (words and letters in brackets represent gaps in the original text):

[Without] the sperm
of a ma[le]
she gave [birth]
to offspr[ing,]
to the [em]bryo
of mankind. (*Harps* 157)

Thus man was created to relieve the gods of their work. The gods then decide to have a feast to celebrate their new creation, and Enki and Ninmah begin to drink beer and start "to feel good inside." Ninmah boasts that she, as the goddess of birth and gestation, is the one who determines whether "the build of men" (*Harps* 158) turns out well or misshapen. Enki



responds that he, the clever god, can find places in society for even the most handicapped people. Ninmah molds from the clay a man with shaking hands, but Enki places him as an attendant of the king. Ninmah next makes a blind man, but Enki makes him a singer of tales. Ninmah makes a person named "Hobbled-by-twisting-ankles," but Enki finds work for him with the metal workers (c.f. Hephaistos). Ninmah continues to make handicapped people: "a person unable to control his urine, a barren woman, a being with neither male nor female organs, and so forth, but in each case Enki was able to find a place in society for the [creature] and to ensure it a living" (Jacobsen, *Treasures* 114). The woman who could not give birth, for example, was found a place overseeing the weavers in "the queen's household" (*Harps* 161), while the sexless being was to "stand before the king" (Kramer, *History Begins* 109-110).



Knowing that she cannot outsmart the clever Enki, Ninmah throws down the clay in defeat. Now Enki decides to make his own misshapen being, and he challenges Ninmah to "determine / the mode of being / of that newborn one!" (*Harps* 162). Enki, in a manner which is not all that clear causes a creature to be born whose name is "the-day-was-far-off." In other words, the creature is born prematurely, before its fated birthdate. This creature is also extremely deformed: "its hands, having the shakes, / could not put food / to its mouth, / the spine was crushed, / the anus closed up, / the hips were brittle, / the feet (with their) skin breaking / unable to walk the fields" (*Harps* 162). Ninmah tries to feed the creature some bread, but it is so weak and feeble that it cannot reach out for the loaves she offers it. It cannot sit or stand or even bend its knees. Ninmah is horrified at what Enki has made and curses him for it. The remainder of the tablet is broken, but apparently Ninmah realizes that if such unformed and deformed beings are born with any sort of regularity, people will stop worshipping her. Enki tries to appease her wrath by admitting that the deformed being "is lacking, in truth, / your work, Ninmah; [he] was born to me / incomplete" (*Harps* 165). The poem ends with a song of praise for Enki's male generative powers and for his cleverness, but the story itself seems to indicate that Enki cannot make a functional being without the help of the birth goddess Ninmah.

Notice how the story starts with the gods needing to work for bread and ends with a creature unable to accept bread.

Source: "The Creation of Humans." Sumerian Myth. *Gvsu.edu*. N.P., n.d.. Web. 31 August 2015.