

Utanapashti and the Flood

(Time – 5.15)

[A myth from ancient Iraq]

Once, the gods were so angry with humanity they decided to destroy us. One of the gods, Ea was his name, went to the city of Shuruppak, to the home of a man named Utanapashti.

‘Good man, a flood is coming. Destroy your house. Build a boat. Seek survival. Take on board the seed of all living things.’

Utanapashti: ‘Master, I understand. I will obey but what should I say when the people question what I’m doing?’

‘Tell them you can live no longer in their city; that you are going to dwell on the ocean with your master, the god Ea. Tell them that a rain of plenty is coming. The birds and fishes will fall from the sky. Tell them in the morning the gods will send a rainfall of wheat and in the evening a shower of bread cakes.’

The next morning Utanapashti set to work. He made a boat an acre wide, an acre long. Six decks it had, each divided into nine compartments. He fashioned long punting poles from the trunks of tall trees. He painted it with tar and pitch. Everything Utanapashti owned he loaded aboard: all his silver and gold, all his family, all his livestock. Then he loaded the creatures of the wild, and then makers – members of every skill and craft – and then the seed of all living things.

The people of the city gathered to watch. Utanapashti shouted ‘A rain of plenty is coming. Birds and fishes will fall from the sky. In the morning the gods will send a rainfall of wheat, in the evening a shower of bread cakes.’

There rose then, on the horizon, a dark cloud of black, and bellowing within it was the storm god Adad. Utanapashti sealed the hatches. Then the deluge came. Like a battle it passed over the people, the rain falling so hard that one man could not recognise another. For six days and seven nights the terrible rains fell. Then on the seventh morning the ocean became calm. The people of Shuruppak filled the sea like fishes, every one of them drowned. The flood plain was flat as the roof of a house. Utanapashti dropped to his knees and cried.

His boat ran aground on the mountain of Nimush. For six days he waited. On the seventh he brought out a dove and let it loose. Soon, the dove returned; there was no place for it to land. On the eighth day he let loose a swallow. It also came back. On the ninth day he let loose a raven. The raven did not return to him. It was then he made sacrifices to the gods.

When the gods saw the smoke of sacrifices drifting into the sky they were angry. One of them, Enlil, shouted, ‘How did this living thing escape? No man was meant to survive the destruction.’

Ea said: ‘Enlil, if a man has done wrong, he must be punished. But why punish the innocent? You could have sent a lion or a wolf to kill these wrongdoers. But no – you sent a flood that would have destroyed everything. Here is a good man. He has survived by the skill of his hands and all life has survived with him. You must decide what to do with him.’

At the words of Ea, Enlil’s heart softened. He came on board the boat. He took hold of Utanapashti’s hand and told him to kneel. He told Utanapashti’s wife to kneel beside her husband. Then he touched their foreheads and blessed them. ‘In the past, Utanapashti was a mortal man. But now he and his wife shall become like us gods. They will live far away where the rivers flow forth, in a place of plenty.’ And so it was that Utanapashti and his wife became immortal.