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# THE DEVELOPMENT AND MEANING OF THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH: AN INTERPRETIVE ESSAY

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This essay traces the history of the several major versions (Old Babylonian, eleven-tablet, and twelve-tablet) of the Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh* and examines the development of meaning from one version to the next. The focus is on the underlying conflict or conflicts that define and impart power to the work, that is, the conflict between the extraordinary and the normal. We will notice that in the *Epic* there is a constant conflict between the heroic values that the warrior-hero Gilgamesh represents and those other existential values that defined Mesopotamian culture and that appear in the *Epic* in the form of Gilgamesh's several non-heroic identities: in the Old Babylonian version, the conflict is that of hero versus man; in the eleven-tablet version that of hero versus king; and in the twelve-tablet version that of hero versus god.

## INTRODUCTION

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH<sup>1</sup> combines the power and tragedy of the *Iliad* with the wanderings and marvels of

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Versions of this essay were read to the California Museum of Ancient Art, November, 1998, and to the annual meeting of the American Oriental Society, March, 2000. A popular version has appeared as "Gilgamesh: Hero, King, God and Striving Man," in *Archaeology Odyssey* 3.4 (July/August 2000): 32–42, 58–59. A discussion of the relationship of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Homeric epics, especially the *Odyssey*, will appear in *Melammu Symposia II* (Helsinki, 2001). I should like to thank Kathryn Kravitz for reading and commenting on versions of this paper.

<sup>1</sup> An excellent and up-to-date translation of the *Epic* in its various Akkadian versions as well as of the Sumerian tales of Gilgamesh is presented by Andrew George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: A New Translation* (New York, 1999). I have drawn all translations from this work. Needless to say, I have learned much from such general studies of the *Epic* as Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness* (New Haven, 1976), 193–219; idem, "The Gilgamesh Epic: Romantic and Tragic Vision," in *Lingering Over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran*, ed. T. Abusch, J. Huehnergard, and P. Steinkeller (Atlanta, 1990), 231–49; G. S. Kirk, *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures* (Berkeley/Los Angeles, 1973), 132–52; W. L. Moran, "The Gilgamesh Epic: A Masterpiece from Ancient Mesopotamia," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. J. M. Sasson et al. (New York, 1995), 4: 2327–36; J. H. Tigay, *The Evolution*

the *Odyssey*. It is a work of adventure, but it is no less a meditation on some fundamental issues of human existence. The *Epic* explores many issues; it surely provides a Mesopotamian formulation of human predicaments and options. Most of all, the work grapples with issues of an existential nature. It talks about the powerful human drive to achieve, the value of friendship, the experience of loss, the inevitability of death.

The story draws together the many strands that make up the identity of Gilgamesh: man, hero, king, god. Gilgamesh must learn to live. He must find ways to express his tremendous personal energy but still act in a manner that accords with the limits and responsibilities imposed upon him by his society and universe. But the work emphasizes the theme of death and explores the realization that in spite of even the greatest achievements and powers, a human is nonetheless powerless against death. Thus in the final analysis, Gilgamesh must also come to terms with his own nature and learn to die, for he is both a man and a god, and as both he will experience loss and will die.

In the present essay, I shall discuss the changing emphases of three major versions of the Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. About 1700 B.C.E., a Babylonian author created a unified *Epic* about the hero Gilgamesh. The new epic "bear[s] witness to a wholesale revision of Gilgamesh material to form a connected story composed

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of the *Gilgamesh Epic* (Philadelphia, 1982); and Andrew George's introductions to the Gilgamesh literature in general and to the individual literary works.

around the principal themes of kingship, fame, and the fear of death.”<sup>2</sup> This Old Babylonian (OB) account of Gilgamesh is the earliest, perhaps also the most immediately felt and compelling, version of the Akkadian *Epic*. Subsequent to the Old Babylonian period, the *Epic* circulated throughout the ancient Near East. Not surprisingly, the work underwent many changes and developments, and a number of new versions took form in Akkadian as well as in other languages. The Babylonian version(s) changed and developed during the course of the second and early first millennium. While a number of new recensions and versions took form, the Standard Babylonian (SB) eleven- and twelve-tablet versions represent without doubt the two most important post-Old Babylonian Akkadian versions that we possess. Accordingly, in this essay we will examine the Old Babylonian, the eleven-tablet, and the twelve-tablet versions.<sup>3</sup>

#### THE EPIC: DEVELOPMENT AND MEANING

To understand the *Epic*, we should now turn to its inner development and meaning. But first we must say a few words about the nature of epic itself, and then we

shall assess the evolving meaning of the work by identifying and explicating the particular conflict that is central to it at each major stage of its development.

*Epic*. Epic deals with a hero,<sup>4</sup> that is, a powerful warrior who shows his mettle in battle. He is aggressive and courageous, even impetuous, and battles strong enemies. He shows little concern for his own safety and focuses all of his energy upon battle, obligation, honor, and victory. As a literary form, the epic draws upon and grows out of songs of lament and songs of praise.<sup>5</sup> In the Sumerian tales of Gilgamesh, we encounter such praises of the warrior as the following passage from “Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven”:

Hero in battle, hero in battle, let me sing his song!  
 Lord Bilgames, hero in battle, let me sing his song!  
 Lord with beard of black, hero in battle, let me sing his song!  
 Fair of limb, hero in battle, let me sing his song!<sup>6</sup>  
 Merry one, hero in battle, let me sing his song!  
 Rampaging against wrongdoers, hero in battle, let me sing his song! (1–8)

The glorious warrior exists at a time before the emergence of the developed state and of civilization. He usually represents the force needed to fight the enemy prior to the institutionalization of power in the form of the state. But the grand epics like *Gilgamesh* or the *Iliad*, whether oral or written, introduce a note of tragedy; they view heroism not from the perspective of the battle itself, as if the battle were now taking place, but from outside or after the battle, from a time after the war. For not only do they recall the inevitable death in battle of the courageous warrior but, even more, they reflect upon the poor fit between the values of power and war and those of the present moment, and they explore the inevitable

<sup>2</sup> George, *Gilgamesh*, xxi.

<sup>3</sup> My understanding of the development of the *Epic* and, especially, the interpretation of the *Epic* in terms of its underlying conflicts are basically my own. In the course of this essay, I have worked from the following assumptions: (1) The earliest form of the *Epic* did not contain the Utnapishtim episode, but the meeting with Siduri was the climax of Gilgamesh's wanderings. (2) The encounter with Ishtar in Tablet VI was a post-Old Babylonian insertion. (3) The addition of Tablet XII was meaningful. These conclusions derive from study of the dialogues between Gilgamesh and Ishtar, and Gilgamesh and Siduri. For conclusion one, see my “Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part 1: The Meaning of the Dialogue and Its Implications for the History of the Epic,” in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo*, ed. M. E. Cohen, D. C. Snell, and D. B. Weisberg (Bethesda, 1993), 1–14, and “Mourning the Death of a Friend: Some Assyriological Notes,” in *The Frank Talmage Memorial Volume: Part 1*, ed. B. Walfish (Hanover, N.H., 1993), 53–62 (rpt. in *Gilgamesh: A Reader*, ed. J. Maier [Wauconda, Ill., 1997], 109–21. “Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial, Part 2: An Analysis and Interpretation of an Old Babylonian Fragment about Mourning and Celebration,” was published in *The Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 22 [1993]: 3–17). For conclusions two and three, see my “Ishtar's Proposal and Gilgamesh's Refusal: An Interpretation of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, Tablet 6, Lines 1–79,” *History of Religions* 26 (1986): 143–87.

<sup>4</sup> While there may be some objections to the use of the term “hero” for Gilgamesh, I must use it all the same because I know no better term for what I want to express.

<sup>5</sup> It grows out of the earlier praise of the living hero, praises that were recited in his presence and were meant to glorify him and to enhance his power, as well as out of laments for heroes who died in battle. See C. M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry* (rpt. London, 1964), 8–10. My understanding of “epic” draws from and builds upon some ideas set out by Bowra, chapter 1 (“The Heroic Poem”) and chapter 3 (“The Hero”).

<sup>6</sup> A longer version here adds:

Young lord, mightiest of the mighty, hero in battle, let me sing his song!  
 [Expert] in wrestling and trials of strength, [hero in battle, let me sing his song!]

conflict that the new circumstances call forth. These circumstances may be the requirement that one return to a peaceful occupation and pursue a normal life or that one submit to the discipline of the state and become a warrior or king and leader in its service. Thus, for the individual who chooses to remain a traditional hero, the epic is often a meditation upon and an exploration of the inevitable conflict between, on the one hand, the forces represented by the absolute commitment of the powerful and heroic male to energy and battle and, on the other, the forces that represent some newly emerging situations and value systems.

Growing out of traditions of praise for the heroic warrior, the Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh* tells of courageous deeds, but it does this only to highlight the pain caused by these deeds and the new problems that must be faced. Gilgamesh, as we shall see, struggles against the world and is as deeply committed to his own personal absolutes as is Achilles, but there is moral growth: he learns, he changes. As with Odysseus, the growth is symbolized by wanderings, wanderings which both reflect and elicit changes in the hero. His wanderings are the mechanism and backdrop for change, but the death of Enkidu is the catalyst for change. By making Enkidu Gilgamesh's friend, the composer has turned the *Epic* into a tale of growth—of discovery of human suffering, limitation, death, and, finally, human meaning. Without Enkidu's death, there is no development. But without the wandering, there would be no possibility for development, and Enkidu's death would have left Gilgamesh, literally, at a dead end.

In our epic, then, there is moral growth, and Gilgamesh is able to resolve the conflict, even if this is accomplished in pain, and find a life that does not depend solely on violence, impulsiveness, and battle. Conflicts and their resolutions turn the work into an epic about growth.

*Conflict.* Basic to the *Gilgamesh Epic* is the issue of death. In the course of the *Epic*, we witness the transformation of Gilgamesh's heroic indifference to death into an all-consuming knowledge of his mortality and dread of death. But death is not treated in a vacuum, for there are several layers of meaning and stages of development in the work; each resolves the problem of death in its own terms. To understand these levels of meaning and stages of development, we must try to understand the nature of the underlying conflict or conflicts that define and impart power to the work. Gilgamesh is an epic hero, and in his epic we find a constant conflict between the heroic values that the hero Gilgamesh represented and those other existential values that define Mesopota-

mian culture. These values are of a social, political, and religious nature and appear in the *Epic* in the form of Gilgamesh's various identities. For in addition to being a hero, Gilgamesh is also a man, a king, and a god, and he must come to terms with these several identities.

The basic conflict is that between the extraordinary and the normal. In the Old Babylonian version, the conflict is that of hero versus man; in the eleven-tablet version, it is that of hero versus king; and in the twelve-tablet version, it is that of hero versus god. If I am not mistaken, each version is organized around and presents in sequence its view of (a) the original situation of Gilgamesh, that is, the status quo of that version, (b) an event or experience that causes the original status to break down or to fail as a basic identity or approach to life, and (c) the new solution or resolution. In this way, each version resolves a form of the basic conflict. And it is the various conflicts themselves and their resolutions that turn the work into an epic about growth.

There is, to be sure, a core of common narrative elements shared by all the versions: Gilgamesh, the warrior-king of Uruk, his friendship with Enkidu and their adventure in search of fame, the death of Enkidu, Gilgamesh's flight and encounters, his eventual return to Uruk. From version to version, the core story is modified in various ways, but mainly through major additions at the beginning (Tablet I, 1–25), middle (Tablet VI), and end (the development of the flood account and the addition of Tablet XII). Narrative logic is present in each version, but the emphasis in each is on a different thematic strand. This is especially true of the twelve-tablet version, which follows a logic of theme more than of linear plot. I should also emphasize that from version to version earlier elements are often retained and given a new meaning as part of a new structure. Although Gilgamesh's form of heroism is that of a warrior-king throughout, the understanding of kingship seems to change—king as warrior, king as builder, king as ruler who deposits inscriptions telling of his experiences and achievements, king as god—along with the development of Gilgamesh's character from one version to another, for the work explores the different aspects of his identity in the different versions.

We turn now to the interpretations of each of the three versions.

#### THE OLD BABYLONIAN VERSION: MAN

In the Old Babylonian version, the following tale is told: Gilgamesh is the warrior-king of Uruk whose extraordinary energy oppresses his people. Enkidu is created by the gods so that Gilgamesh may have a

companion who is his equal and can channel his energy. Enkidu is seduced and humanized by a prostitute who then leads him to Uruk where he encounters Gilgamesh. They forge a deep friendship. In search of fame, they undertake an expedition to the Cedar Forest where they defeat and kill Huwawa. Enkidu is sentenced to death by the gods as a punishment for that killing. Gilgamesh is devastated by his loss and flees the city for the wild. In the course of his wanderings, he finally encounters Siduri, a divine tavern-keeper at the edge of the world. She tells him that he cannot attain immortality and advises him to resume normal life. In an early form, this Gilgamesh tale did not include the Utnapishtim episode. Rather, Siduri was his final stop prior to returning to Uruk. But already, the Old Babylonian tale hints at the presence of an embryonic form of the Utnapishtim episode.

*Interpretation.* In the Old Babylonian version, the original situation is that of heroic battle and the search for fame. This comes to expression first in the original introduction to the work (now preserved in SB I, 29ff.):

Surpassing all other kings, heroic in nature,  
brave scion of Uruk, wild bull on the rampage!  
Going at the fore he was the vanguard,  
going at the rear, the trust of his brothers!

A mighty bank, protecting his warriors,  
a violent flood-wave, smashing a stone wall!  
Wild bull of Lugalbanda, Gilgamesh, the perfect in  
strength,  
suckling of the august Wild-Cow, the goddess Ninsun!

In this version, Gilgamesh and Enkidu mount an armed expedition against the monster Huwawa because of Gilgamesh's belief that he would thereby maintain his role as a warrior, experience the excitement of adventure, and win fame. For it is the accomplishment of great acts of valor that is the highest achievement of life and one that serves as the basis of lasting fame, fame in the form of stories of one's great deeds that are told and retold by future generations:

Gilgamesh opened his mouth,  
saying to Enkidu:

"Who is there, my friend, can climb to the sky?  
Only the gods [dwell] forever in sunlight.  
As for man, his days are numbered,  
whatever he may do, it is but wind.

"Here are you, afraid of death!  
What has become of your mighty valour?

Let me walk in front of you,  
and you can call to me, 'Go on without fear!'

"If I should fall, let me make my name:  
'Gilgamesh joined battle with ferocious Huwawa!'"

(OB Yale Tablet, 138–50)

But this situation—the quest for adventure and fame—proves untenable; it breaks down when Enkidu is struck down by the gods because of the hubris, the arrogance, of the two friends. With this, Gilgamesh is thrown into despair, for he has lost his dearest companion and experiences a real fear of death for the first time. After failing to bring his friend back to life, he rejects all human identities and obligations, flees to the wild, where he assumes the identity of his dead friend, and finally goes in search of actual, physical immortality. Here, the barmaid Siduri tries to teach him that he cannot have immortality, but can only find meaning in normal human activities.

Said the tavern-keeper to him, to Gilgamesh:  
"O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?

"The life that you seek you never will find:  
when the gods created mankind,  
death they dispensed to mankind,  
life they kept for themselves.

"But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,  
Enjoy yourself always by day and by night!  
Make merry each day,  
dance and play day and night!

"Let your clothes be clean,  
Let your head be washed, may you bathe in water!  
Gaze on the child who holds your hand,  
Let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace!"

(OB Sippar Tablet, ii 14'–iii 13)

This passage has been virtually eliminated from the later versions, but may represent the very message of our Old Babylonian version. Here, emphasis is placed on normal life as the form of existence that provides meaning. Thus, Gilgamesh the hero must learn to be satisfied with the normal pleasures of everyday human life if he is not to destroy himself. It is significant that just as a prostitute, a woman, humanized and acculturated Enkidu at the beginning of this version, so a tavern-keeper, another woman, humanizes and acculturates Gilgamesh at the end. Women here represent the values of life and its affirmation in the face of the heroic and the absolute, which can only lead to death.

As noted above, in an early form of the Old Babylonian version, Gilgamesh's quest was directed to Siduri and not to Utnapishtim. Thus, subsequent to his

meeting with Siduri, Gilgamesh returns to Uruk and there assumes his identity as a man. He concludes the work by directing the attention of the boatman (and therefore ours) to the grandeur and significance of the human city in which he lives and rules and to its walls which he built:<sup>7</sup>

"O Ur-shanabi, climb Uruk's wall and walk back and forth!

Survey its foundations, examine the brickwork!

Were its bricks not fired in an oven?

Did the Seven Sages not lay its foundations?

"A square mile is city, a square mile date-grove, a square mile is clay-pit, half a square mile the temple of Ishtar:

three square miles and a half is Uruk's expanse."

(SB XI, 322–27)

He has given up the role of hero and accepted his identity as a normal man of the royal class, who can hope for no more than achievements and descendants.

#### THE ELEVEN-TABLET VERSION: KING

The eleven-tablet version may be said to have assumed its present form during the latter part of the second millennium. In gross terms, this form of the text is identical with the text of the first eleven tablets of the Standard Babylonian version. This new text is longer than the Old Babylonian *Epic*; it appears to have taken a narrative sequence similar to that of the older version as its basis and to have developed it by means of various modifications, expansions, and inclusions of new sections. We find the developed form of Gilgamesh's encounter with Utnapishtim and the latter's recital of the story of the flood. (The flood account was taken over from the Akkadian myth *Atrahasis*.) Moreover, the work is now framed, at the beginning of Tablet I and the end of Tablet XI, by passages describing the walls of Uruk

<sup>7</sup> The end of Tablet XI (322–27) does not mention that Gilgamesh built the walls; but this act is ascribed to him in the prologue (I, 11; note that line 12 ascribes to him also the building of Eanna). It is often assumed that XI, 322–27 originate at the end of Tablet XI and were only later added to the beginning of the *Epic* where they were then expanded. Thus, it remains possible that XI, 322–27 did not assume or, at least, did not wish to convey the message that Gilgamesh was the builder of the walls. But this seems unlikely, especially since an Old Babylonian royal inscription from Uruk—D. Frayne, *Old Babylonian Period (2003–1595 BC)*, RIME 4 (Toronto, 1990), Anam no. 4: 5–8 (pp. 474–75)—already mentions Gilgamesh as the builder of the walls of Uruk.

(SB I, 9–22; XI, 322–27). The description originally appeared only once and served as the conclusion of the Old Babylonian version; it highlighted the kind of achievement of which one could be proud and a form of immortality available to a mortal man. In the eleven-tablet version, the description was repeated at the beginning of the work, and thus the theme of the walls of Uruk served as a frame for the whole. In contrast to the Old Babylonian version, which seems to have had the form or at least the self-representation and image of a work of oral literature, this new version sees and represents itself as a work of written literature. For, in the new expanded prologue, it contains two stanzas that direct our attention to a written text that Gilgamesh had written and that then served as the basis of the *Epic* (SB I, 5–8, 23–27).

One other important development is the insertion of the famous Gilgamesh-Ishtar episode in Tablet VI. This episode was not part of the Old Babylonian version. It tells of Ishtar's proposal that Gilgamesh marry her and his rejection of that proposal on the grounds that marriage to Ishtar would result in his death.

*Interpretation.* Gilgamesh was the king of Uruk and had probably attained that position because of his extraordinary energy, courage, and power. He had been the perfect hero, but the work must now explore the question of whether he is able to be a successful king. The eleven-tablet version explores this question and resolves the issue. Gilgamesh's initial situation is represented by the prologue that originally opened the work and described his strength and heroism as a king who led his troops in battle (see SB I, 29–34, quoted above). When the narrative opens, we find Gilgamesh ruling over his people. Because of his extraordinary energy, his rule is oppressive and he stands in isolation from other human beings. His subjects cry out to the gods for relief from his rule.

In Uruk-the-Sheepfold he walks [back and forth],

like a wild bull lording it, head held aloft.

He has no equal when his weapons are brandished,

his companions are kept on their feet by his contests.

The young men of Uruk he harries without warrant,

Gilgamesh lets no son go free to his father.

By day and by night his tyranny grows harsher,

Gilgamesh, [the guide of the teeming people]!

It is he who is shepherd of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,

[but Gilgamesh] lets no [daughter go free to her]

mother.

[The women voiced] their [troubles to the goddesses],

[they brought their] complaints before [them].

(SB I, 63–74)

The author thereby tells us that Gilgamesh is unable to rule successfully because of the very energy that made him a successful hero. His heroism defined his being and perhaps even allowed him to assume the role of king. But it is this very heroic energy that brings about his failure as a ruler of a normal people in normal times. The qualities that were virtues for a warrior, and even allowed him to become a king, have now become faults. To be a just and effective ruler requires more than just energy and heroism; and Gilgamesh must learn that a just kingship, a caring shepherdship of his people, is a greater good in peacetime than the heroism of the warlord.

The work presents Gilgamesh as an extraordinary being, one greater than his fellows. The narrative opens with a description of Gilgamesh's failure as a king. Gilgamesh withdraws from his people and from his role as ruler and now loses himself again in mock-heroics against monsters and in his new and exclusive friendship with Enkidu. But with Enkidu's death, this form of supranormal existence and human connection also fails. Gilgamesh now goes in search of Utnapishtim, thinking that Utnapishtim is an extraordinary being from whom he can wrest the boon of immortality. The resolution of the conflict between the virtues of individualistic heroism and public responsibility and leadership will come when Gilgamesh recognizes that he must give up the illusion of living on an extraordinary plane, learn to value normality, and assume the role of a normal and, therefore, effective ruler. This is achieved upon Gilgamesh's recognition that Utnapishtim is no more than a normal man, who received immortality not because of his heroic acts, but because he was obedient to the command of his god.

Said Gilgamesh to him, to Uta-napishti the Distant:

"I look at you, Uta-napishti:

your form is no different, you are just like me,  
you are not any different, you are just like me.

"I was fully intent on making you fight,

but now in your presence my hand is stayed.

How was it you stood with the gods in assembly?

How did you find the life eternal?" (SB XI, 1-7)

Here Gilgamesh rejects fighting and begins to realize that he must learn from one who is not a *qarrādu*, a warrior. Utnapishtim exemplifies normal kingship.<sup>8</sup> But in

addition to his example, he imparts wisdom both by reciting his history and the history of the flood, and by explaining that never again would the gods assemble to grant immortality to a human being. Just as Siduri had told Gilgamesh that when the gods created mankind, they assigned death to humanity and reserved life for themselves, so now Utnapishtim informs Gilgamesh that the gods had granted immortality only once, on that one and never repeatable occasion when they assembled after the flood. Siduri's message was meant to teach Gilgamesh the man to accept his humanity; Utnapishtim's message was meant to teach Gilgamesh the king that even the unique warrior cannot remain extraordinary and must throw in his lot with the rest of humanity and accept his role. And the story of the flood sets Gilgamesh's age, and all ages, into the context of universal history and under the rule of divine law.

Gilgamesh now returns to Uruk, where he himself emphasizes the greatness of the city and resumes his role as king, brings back the wisdom and the lessons that he learned in the course of his exhausting wanderings, and sets down in writing his tale and his new-found knowledge. All this we are told in the new prologue to the work. We recall that the transformation of the Old Babylonian version into the later eleven-tablet version involved, among other changes, not only the development of the story of the flood hero Utnapishtim and the recounting of the story of the flood, but also the addition of a new prologue. This new prologue reads:

He who saw the Deep, the country's foundation.

[who] knew . . . , was wise in all matters!

[Gilgamesh, who] saw the Deep, the country's foundation,

[who] knew . . . , was wise in all matters!

[He] . . . everywhere . . .

and [learnt] of everything the sum of wisdom.

He saw what was secret, discovered what was hidden,  
he brought back a tale of before the Deluge.

He came a far road, was weary, found peace,

and set all his labours on a tablet of stone.

He built the rampart of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,  
of holy Eanna, the sacred storehouse.

See its wall like a strand of wool,  
view its parapet that none could copy!

Take the stairway of a bygone era.

draw near to Eanna, the seat of Ishtar the goddess,  
that no later king could ever copy!

Climb Uruk's wall and walk back and forth!

Survey its foundations, examine the brickwork!

Were its bricks not fired in an oven?

Did the Seven Sages not lay its foundations?

<sup>8</sup> For a recent discussion of the royal status of the flood hero in Mesopotamian tradition, see J. R. Davila, "The Flood Hero as King and Priest," *JNES* 54 (1995): 199-214. As regards the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Davila notes that "the Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh epic followed the tradition of the royal Flood hero" (p. 206).

[A square mile is] city, [a square mile] date-grove, a  
square mile is clay-pit, half a square mile the temple  
of Ishtar:

[three square miles] and a half is Uruk's expanse.

[See] the tablet-box of cedar.

[release] its clasps of bronze!

[Lift] the lid of its secret,

[pick] up the tablet of lapis lazuli and read out  
the travails of Gilgamesh, all that he went through.

(SB I, 1–28)

In the eleven-tablet version, there is an emphasis on wisdom, on Gilgamesh's travels, suffering, and toils in search of wisdom, and on his acquisition of this wisdom as a result of his travels and meeting with Utnapishtim. This is the message that he brought back to Uruk and that forms the basis of the text that he wrote and that the epic poet has written for us. Hence, Gilgamesh, the king, now deposits an inscription based on his experience: like a *narû* (a royal inscription intended for the instruction of posterity), this inscription is intended to instruct future generations, generally, and later kings, specifically.

In the new prologue, we learn that the *Epic* has now become a work of written literature, for the author tells us that Gilgamesh's inscriptions serve as the basis for the literary epic (SB I, 24–28). The difference between the Old Babylonian version as an oral tale and the eleven-tablet version as a written work of literature parallels and perhaps gives expression to the difference between the respective lessons of the two versions. Their messages are directed towards—and find fulfillment in—different contexts. The oral epic focuses on family and the present, the written epic on community and the future. The former speaks to one's contemporaries and immediate descendants; the latter to the community in both its present and future existence. The past and future of community are longer and have greater depth than those of family. Its memory and ability to remember the past is proportionally longer, especially when the past is preserved in writing, for writing lasts for many generations, whereas memorialization through one's child(ren) lasts no more than several generations. The eleven-tablet version thus tells the story not only of Gilgamesh but also the story of the distant and constitutive past, the flood; and as a written work, it can be read in the distant future.

In the eleven-tablet version, there is thus greater emphasis on the community, on universal history, and on continuity than on the individual, his private story, and immediate future. This is to be expected of a recension that focuses on Gilgamesh's acceptance of communal responsibility rather than on his growth as an individual.

#### THE TWELVE-TABLET VERSION: GOD

Following the development of the eleven-tablet version, a further version was created by the addition of what is now the last, or twelfth, tablet of the work. This last tablet is a translation of the second half of the Sumerian tale "Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld." It tells how Enkidu descends to the netherworld in search of Gilgamesh's *pukku* and *mekkû* but is seized by the netherworld and loses his life. He then returns to Gilgamesh in the form of a shade and describes the fate of the various classes of inhabitants of the netherworld. It is true that this tablet was added in a mechanical fashion and contradicts earlier parts of the work. This form of redaction, namely simple addition rather than some form of actual revision, is understandable if—and this is a reasonable assumption—at this point in its development, the text of the *Epic* had already assumed a stabilized frozen form.<sup>9</sup> Be that as it may, the addition is meaningful and intentionally changes the nature of the work.

*Interpretation.* In Gilgamesh, the cultic vision seems to define the third and last stage of development of the *Epic* itself.

Gilgamesh is part god and part man.

Who is there can rival his kingly standing,  
and say like Gilgamesh, "It is I am the king?"

Gilgamesh was his name from the day he was born,  
two-thirds of him god and one-third human.

It was the Lady of the Gods drew the form of his  
figure,

while his build was perfected by divine Nudimmud.

(SB I, 45–50)

There is a conflict between these two identities. Gilgamesh must choose one or the other, or seek a way out of the dilemma.

As the king of Uruk, he participated in some form of the sacred marriage and had intercourse with the goddess Išhara in the guise of a human female, whether a priestess or a new bride.

For the goddess of weddings the bed was laid out,  
Gilgamesh met with the maiden by night.

(OB Pennsylvania Tablet, 196–99)

In this way, the text seeks a way out of the dilemma. But this solution, which represents the original status or customary mode of behavior, is destroyed by Enkidu.

<sup>9</sup> My thanks to Bruce Zuckerman for reminding me to include this point.



Forward came (Enkidu), he stood in the street,  
blocking the path of Gilgamesh.

(OB Pennsylvania Tablet, 200–203)

Gilgamesh and Enkidu fight and then become inseparable friends. With this new development, Gilgamesh abandons the practice of intercourse with the goddess and gives up the attempt to bridge his divine and human sides. But Gilgamesh must choose one or the other side, and ultimately he must choose his divine side.

In Tablet VI, he is given one more chance. Ishtar invites him to become her husband.

On the beauty of Gilgamesh Lady Ishtar looked with  
longing  
“Come, Gilgamesh, be you my bridegroom!  
Grant me your fruits, O grant me!  
Be you my husband and I your wife!”

(SB VI, 6–9)

True, the wedding would take the form of a *hieros gamos*. But Gilgamesh sees through Ishtar's proposition. He recognizes that were he to accept her proposal and marry her, he would not be entering into a normal or even sacred marriage. Rather, he would be accepting an offer to assume the role of a deity in the netherworld. He would be taking on the identity of Ishtar's prototypical consort Tammuz (Dumuzi) (cf. SB VI, 46–47). The offer thus constitutes immortality, but also a loss of actual human life. Gilgamesh is not yet prepared to give up the heroic quest of the live hero, and so he rejects Ishtar's offer.

But with the subsequent death of Enkidu, a life of heroism loses its meaning, and for Gilgamesh now, only immortality as a human seems to remain as an acceptable option; but such is unattainable, for only gods are immortal while humans must die. Gilgamesh must, therefore, become either a normal man or a normal god.

In reality, Gilgamesh must become a god. For, in actual ritual practice, he is a god of the netherworld. To quote an incantation:

Gilgamesh, supreme king, judge of the Anunnaki,  
Deliberate prince, the . . . of the peoples,  
Who surveys the regions of the world, bailiff of the  
underworld, lord of the (peoples) beneath,  
You are a judge and have vision like a god,  
You stand in the underworld and give the final verdict,  
Your judgement is not altered, nor is your utterance  
neglected.  
You question, you inquire, you give judgement, you  
watch and you put things right.  
Shamash has entrusted to you verdicts and decisions.  
In your presence kings, regents and princes bow down,

You watch the omens about them and give the  
decision.<sup>10</sup>

Gilgamesh's place in the netherworld in Mesopotamian religion required that he become a divinity. The solution to the dilemma is provided by Tablet XII, and for this reason, Tablet XII was added to the eleven-tablet version.

Gilgamesh turned down the opportunity to assume his role as judge of the netherworld when he rejected Ishtar's offer. But all the same, he must die and be initiated into the role of netherworld judge. The passage into this new state requires that there be a change of being as well as the acquisition of new knowledge. The events precipitated by Enkidu's death and described in Tablets VII–XI result in a change in Gilgamesh's being. And Tablet XII provides the new knowledge necessary.

Tablet XII presents a vision of the netherworld and of the shades of the dead. Instruction is one of its main functions. For the essence of Enkidu's message is not a vision of glory or dread but, rather, a simple description of the norms and procedures that govern life in the netherworld. These are the rules that Gilgamesh will be obliged to administer.

With the addition of Tablet XII, the focus of the *Epic* changed, and the emphasis is now on Gilgamesh's relationship to the netherworld. Tablets VI and XII are now the focus of the work. They deal first with the relationship between the goddess Ishtar and Gilgamesh and then provide a solution to the problem left unresolved by that relationship. The description in Tablet XII serves to teach Gilgamesh how to be a normal god and to induct him into this new identity.<sup>11</sup> He is now ready to assume this final normal identity.

#### CONCLUSION

Gilgamesh is presented to us as an individual who lives on a heroic plane and exists in spiritual isolation. But such a life is unbearable. Gilgamesh seeks immortality as a human being, and in all three versions of the text, he learns that this is impossible. In the Old Babylonian version, Gilgamesh finds a meaningful context

<sup>10</sup> Translation: W. G. Lambert, “Gilgamesh in Religious, Historical and Omen Texts and the Historicity of Gilgamesh,” in *Gilgamesh et sa légende*, ed. Paul Garelli (Paris, 1960), 40. For a reconstruction of this incantation, see Abusch, “Ishtar's Proposal and Gilgamesh's Refusal,” 150–51 nn. 13–14.

<sup>11</sup> Even if “Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld” did not originally serve this purpose, the use of this scene in Tablet XII of the *Epic* does.

within the bosom of the family, creating children who will represent him in the future, and accepts the role of builder-king. In the eleven-tablet version, he becomes a responsible ruler who rules his community with wisdom and creates human cultural achievements that outlast his own reign and are passed down to future generations. In the twelve-tablet version, he readies himself to become a normal god who judges dead human beings for eternity.

In each version, primary instruction is given by a character who represents a different function or role in human life: in the Old Babylonian version, Siduri, the woman; in the eleven-tablet version, Utnapishtim, the elder; and in the twelve-tablet version, Enkidu, the slave turned peer and friend. Each one conveys to Gilgamesh the understanding that they possess by virtue of their

own identity and present situation: the woman who has experience of human pleasures and relationships teaches him to be a man; the king turned survivor teaches him to be a king; the dead friend teaches him about the state of death.<sup>12</sup> When examining the three versions in turn, we are almost reminded of the stages of growth of the individual. In his youth, he is socialized and becomes a functioning member of society; in middle age, he takes on positions of leadership; and finally, in old age, he accepts death.

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<sup>12</sup> These three instructors are located outside of this world: Siduri at the shore of the cosmic sea, Utnapishtim across the sea on an island, and Enkidu in the netherworld.