

Extra Credit: The Epic of Gilgamesh

Instructions: Ancient Mesopotamia created its classic mythic answer to the question of life and death in the form of its greatest work of literature, The Epic of Gilgamesh. The most complete extant version of The Epic of Gilgamesh exists in Akkadian, a Semitic language that gradually supplanted Sumerian as the dominant language of Mesopotamia after about 2300 B.C.E. The text was discovered on fragments of about seventy clay tablets in the ruins of an Assyrian library that dated to the late seventh century B.C.E. Other, earlier versions of the epic show, however, that the story, at least in its basic outline, is Sumerian in origin and goes back to the third millennium B.C.E. (2000s). The Akkadian version of the epic that survives is about 80 percent complete. The hero, Gilgamesh, was a historical figure. Originally known by his Sumerian name, Bilgames, he ruled the city-state of Uruk sometime around 2800-2700 B.C.E. and was remembered as a great warrior, as well as the builder of Uruk's massive walls. His exploits were so impressive that he became the focal point of a series of sagas that recounted his legendary heroic deeds. Around 1700 B.C.E. an unknown Babylonian poet reworked some of these Sumerian tales, along with other stories—such as the adventure of Utnapishtim that appears in our selection—into an epic masterpiece that became widely popular and influential throughout South-west Asia and beyond. The epic contains a profound theme, the conflict between humanity's talents and aspirations and its mortal limitations. Gilgamesh, "two-thirds a god and one-third human," as the poem describes him, is a man of heroic proportions and appetites who still must face the inevitability of death. As the epic opens, an arrogant Gilgamesh, not yet aware of his human limitations and his duties as king, is exhausting the people of Uruk with his manic energy. The people cry to Heaven for

relief from his abuse of power, and the gods respond by creating Enkidu, a wild man who lives among the animals. Enkidu enters Uruk, where he challenges Gilgamesh to a contest of strength and fighting skill. When Gilgamesh triumphs, Enkidu embraces him as a brother, and the two heroes set out on a series of spectacular exploits. In the course of their heroic adventures, they insult Ishtar (Inanna in Sumerian), goddess of sexual love and fertility, and for this a life is owed. The one chosen by the gods to die is Enkidu. As our selection opens, Enkidu, after having cursed his heroic past which has brought him to this fate, tells Gilgamesh of a vision he has had of the place Mesopotamians knew as "the land of no return."

The Epic of Gilgamesh

As Enkidu slept alone in his sickness, in bitterness of spirit he poured out his heart to his friend. "It was I who cut down the cedar, I who leveled the forest, I who slew Humbaba[1] and now see what has become of me. Listen, my friend, this is the dream I dreamed last night. The heavens roared, and earth rumbled back an answer; between them stood I before an awful being, the sombre-faced manbird; he had directed on me his purpose. His was a vampire face, his foot was a lion's foot, his hand was an eagle's talon. He fell on me and his claws were in my hair, he held me fast and I smothered; then he transformed me so that my arms became wings covered with feathers. He turned his stare towards me, and he led me away to the palace of Irkalla, the Queen of Darkness[2], to the house from which none who enters ever returns, down the road from which there is no coming back.

"There is the house whose people sit in darkness; dust is their food and clay their meat. They are clothed like birds with wings for covering, they see no light, they sit in darkness. I entered the house of dust and I saw the kings of the earth, their crowns put away forever; rulers and princes, all those who once wore kingly

crowns and ruled the world in the days of old. They who had stood in the place of the gods like Anu and Enlil,[3] stood now like servants to fetch baked meats in the house of dust, to carry cooked meat and cold water from the waterskin. In the house of dust which I entered were high priests and acolytes, priests of the incantation and of ecstasy; there were servers of the temple, and there was Etana, that king of Kish whom the eagle carried to Heaven in the days of old.[4] There was Ereshkigal[5] the Queen of the Underworld; and Belit-Sheri squatted in front of her, she who is recorder of the gods and keeps the book of death. She held a tablet from which she read. She raised her head, she saw me and spoke: 'Who has brought this one here?' Then I awoke like a man drained of blood who wanders alone in a waste of rushes; like one whom the bailiff has seized and his heart pounds with terror."

Enkidu dies, and Gilgamesh now realizes that heroic fame is no substitute for life. Facing the reality of his own death, he begins a desperate search for immortality. He travels to the end of the Earth, where he encounters Siduri, a female tavern keeper, who advises him:

"Gilgamesh, where are you hurrying to? You will never find that life for which you are looking. When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping. As for you, Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this too is the lot of man."

Gilgamesh, however, refuses to be deflected from his quest. After a series of harrowing experiences, he finally reaches Utnapishtim, a former mortal whom the gods had placed in an eternal paradise, and addresses him.

"Oh, father Utnapishtim, you who have entered the assembly of the gods, I wish to question you concerning the living and the dead, how shall I find the life for which I am searching?"

Utnapishtim said, "There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand forever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time? Do brothers divide an inheritance to keep forever, does the flood-time of rivers endure? It is only the nymph of the dragon-fly who sheds her larva and sees the sun in his glory. From the days of old there is no permanence. The sleeping and the dead, how alike they are, they are like a painted death. What is there between the master and the servant when both have fulfilled their doom? When the Anunnaki[6], the judges, come together, and Mammetun [7] the mother of destinies, together they decree the fates of men. Life and death they allot but the day of death they do not disclose."

Then Gilgamesh said to Utnapishtim the Faraway, "I look at you now, Utnapishtim, and your appearance is no different from mine; there is nothing strange in your features. I thought I should find you like a hero prepared for battle, but you lie here taking your ease on your back. Tell me truly, how was it that you came to enter the company of the gods and to possess everlasting life?" Utnapishtim said to Gilgamesh, "I will reveal to you a mystery, I will tell you a secret of the gods."

"You know the city Shurrupak,[8] it stands on the banks of Euphrates? That city grew old and the gods that were in it were old. There was Anu, lord of the firmament, their father, and warrior Enlil their counselor, Ninurta[9] the helper, and Ennugi[10] watcher over canals; and with them also was Ea. [11] In those days the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world bellowed like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamor. Enlil heard the clamor and he said to the gods in council, 'The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babel.' So the gods agreed to

exterminate mankind. Enlil did this, but Ea because of his oath[12] warned me in a dream. He whispered their words to my house of reeds, 'Reed-house, reed-house! Wall, O wall, hearken reed-house,[13] wall reflect; O man of Shurruk, son of Ubara-Tutu; tear down your house and build a boat, abandon possessions and look for life, despise worldly goods and save your soul alive. Tear down your house, I say, and build a boat.... Then take up into the boat the seed of all living creatures.'

"When I had understood I said to my lord, 'Behold, what you have commanded I will honor and perform, but how shall I answer the people, the city, the elders?' Then Ea opened his mouth and said to me, his servant, 'Tell them this: I have learnt that Enlil is wrathful against me, I dare no longer walk in his land nor live in his city; I will go down to the Gulf to dwell with Ea my lord. But on you he will rain down abundance, rare fish and shy wildfowl, a rich harvest-tide. In the evening the rider of the storm will bring you wheat in torrents.'...

"On the seventh day the boat was complete....

"I loaded into her all that I had of gold and of living things, my family, my kin, the beast of the field both wild and tame, and all the craftsmen. I sent them on board.... The time was fulfilled, the evening came, the rider of the storm sent down the rain. I looked out at the weather and it was terrible, so I too boarded the boat and battened her down....

"For six days and six nights the winds blew, torrent and tempest and flood overwhelmed the world, tempest and flood raged together like warring hosts. When the seventh day dawned the storm from the south subsided, the sea grew calm, the flood was stilled; I looked at the face of the world and there was silence, all mankind was turned to clay. The surface of the sea stretched as flat as a roof-top; I opened a hatch and the light fell on my face. Then I bowed low, I sat down and I wept, the tears streamed down my face, for on every side was the waste of water. I looked

for land in vain, but fourteen leagues distant there appeared a mountain, and there the boat grounded; on the mountain of Nisir the boat held fast, she held fast and did not budge.... When the seventh day dawned I loosed a dove and let her go. She flew away, but finding no resting-place she returned. Then I loosed a swallow, and she flew away but finding no resting-place she returned. I loosed a raven, she saw that the waters had retreated, she ate, she flew around, she cawed, and she did not come back. Then I threw everything open to the four winds, I made a sacrifice and poured out a libation[14] on the mountain top. Seven and again seven cauldrons I set up on their stands, I heaped up wood and cane and cedar and myrtle. When the gods smelled the sweet savor, they gathered like flies over the sacrifice.[15] Then, at last, Ishtar also came, she lifted her necklace with the jewels of Heaven that once Anu had made to please her. 'O you gods here present, by the lapis lazuli round my neck I shall remember these days as I remember the jewels of my throat; these last days I shall not forget.[16] Let all the gods gather round the sacrifice, except Enlil. He shall not approach this offering, for without reflection he brought the flood; he consigned my people to destruction.'

"When Enlil had come, when he saw the boat, he was wrath and swelled with anger at the gods, the host of Heaven, 'Has any of these mortals escaped? Not one was to have survived the destruction.' Then the god of the wells and canals Ninurta opened his mouth and said to the warrior Enlil, 'Who is there of the gods that can devise without Ea? It is Ea alone who knows all things.' Then Ea opened his mouth and spoke to warrior Enlil, 'Wisest of gods, hero Enlil, how could you so senselessly bring down the flood?'... It was not that I revealed the secret of the gods; the wise man learned it in a dream. Now take your counsel what shall be done with him.

"Then Enlil went up into the boat, he took me by the hand and my wife and made us enter the boat and kneel down on either

side, he standing between us. He touched our foreheads to bless us saying, 'In time past Utnapishtim was a mortal man; henceforth he and his wife shall live in the distance at the mouth of the rivers.' Thus it was that the gods took me and placed me here to live in the distance, at the mouth of the rivers."

Utnapishtim said, "As for you, Gilgamesh, who will assemble the gods for your sake, so that you may find that life for which you are searching?"

After telling his story, Utnapishtim challenges Gilgamesh to resist sleep for six days and seven nights. When Gilgamesh fails the test, Utnapishtim points out how preposterous it is to search for immortality when one cannot even resist sleep. Out of kindness, Utnapishtim does tell Gilgamesh where he can find a submarine plant that will at least rejuvenate him. Consequently, the hero dives to the bottom of the sea and plucks it. However, humanity is to be denied even the blessing of forestalling old age and decrepitude, because the plant is stolen from Gilgamesh by a serpent. His mission a failure, Gilgamesh returns to Uruk.

The destiny was fulfilled which the father of the gods, Enlil of the mountain, had decreed for Gilgamesh: "In nether-earth the darkness will show him a light: of mankind, all that are known, none will leave a monument for generations to come to compare with his. The heroes, the wise men, like the new moon have their waxing and waning. Men will say, 'Who has ever ruled with might and with power like him?' As in the dark month, the month of shadows, so without him there is no light. O Gilgamesh, this was the meaning of your dream. You were given the kingship, such was your destiny, everlasting life was not your destiny. Because of this do not be sad at heart, do not be grieved or oppressed; he has given you power to bind and to loose, to be the darkness and the light of mankind. He has given unexampled supremacy over the people, victory in battle from which no fugitive returns, in forays and assaults from which there is no

going back. But do not abuse this power, deal justly with your servants in the palace, deal justly before the face of the Sun."...

Gilgamesh, the son of Ninsun, lies in the tomb. At the place of offerings he weighed the bread-offering, at the place of libation he poured out the wine. In those days the lord Gilgamesh departed, the son of Ninsun, the king, peerless, without an equal among men, who did not neglect Enlil his master. O Gilgamesh, lord of Kullab,[17] great is thy praise.

[1] A monstrous giant who guarded the sacred cedar forest in the mountains of Lebanon and was slain by Gilgamesh.

[2] Goddess of the Underworld and sister of Ishtar/Inanna.

[3] Dead earthly kings. Anu, whose name meant "heaven," was the supreme but remote king of the gods and the ultimate source of all order and government. Enlil, second only to Anu in power and importance, was more involved in earthly affairs. He directed the forces of nature and bestowed royal authority on earthly leaders.

[4] A legendary king of the Sumerian city of Kish who flew to Heaven on the back of an eagle in order to obtain a magical plant that would give him the potency to father an heir.

[5] The more common name of the goddess of the Underworld (see note 2).

[6] An assemblage of lesser deities (numbering either 60 or 600) who had multiple functions.

[7] A mother goddess of fate.

[8] Located at modern Fara, about equidistant between Baghdad in the north and Basra in the south, the ruins of Shuruppak contain a two-foot-thick layer of mud, evidence of a local flood that took place around 2750 B.C.E. The flood did not cover all of Sumer, much less all of Mesopotamia, but it might have served as the basis for a flood epic. Evidence also shows

that the city survived the flood and life went on.

[9] Originally a god of irrigation and agriculture, Ninurta became a god of war with the rise of Mesopotamian imperialism.

[10] God of irrigation and of the dead.

[11] Also known as Enki, Ea was the god of water and the secret wisdom of sorcery and crafts. He was also the god of providence who protected those in crisis.

[12] Apparently an oath to protect humanity, because he was the god of life-giving water and good fortune.

[13] Reed houses probably go back to neolithic times. Because of their fragility, they served Mesopotamians as a metaphor for impermanence. The so-called Marsh Arabs of southern Iraq built reed houses well into the late twentieth century, until Saddam Hussein destroyed the marshes in order to root out their opposition to his rule.

[14] Poured out wine or some other beverage as an offering to the gods.

[15] Many myth-making people believe that the gods gain nourishment from the greasy smoke of burnt sacrifices.

[16] The necklace is a rainbow. Lapis lazuli is not indigenous to Mesopotamia and was imported from Afghanistan.

[17] Part of Uruk.

Credits: From *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, translated by N.K. Sandars (Penguin Classics 1960, Third edition 1972)
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Questions for Extra Credit (to be placed in the Drop Box)

1. What was the Mesopotamian view of the afterlife?
2. What was the message of Siduri's advice to Gilgamesh?
3. Consider Utnapishtim's initial response to Gilgamesh's request

for the secret to eternal life. How does his request complement what Siduri had said?

4. Consider the story of Utnapishtim. What do the various actions of the gods and goddesses allow us to infer about how the Mesopotamians viewed their deities?

5. According to the Epic, what are the respective roles of the humans and the gods? What do Mesopotamian deities require of the humans? What do the humans expect of their gods?

6. What wisdom has Gilgamesh gained from his epic? How has he changed as a result of his quest?