

Epic of Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh was an historical king of Uruk in Babylonia, on the River Euphrates in modern Iraq; he lived about 2700 B.C. Although historians (and your textbook) tend to emphasize **Hammurabi** and his code of law, the civilizations of the Tigris-Euphrates area, among the first civilizations, focus rather on Gilgamesh and the legends accruing around him to explain, as it were, themselves. Many stories and myths were written about Gilgamesh, some of which were written down about 2000 B.C. in the Sumerian language on clay tablets which still survive; the Sumerian language, as far as we know, bears no relation to any other human language we know about. These Sumerian Gilgamesh stories were integrated into a longer poem, versions of which survive not only in Akkadian (the Semitic language, related to Hebrew, spoken by the Babylonians) but also on tablets written in Hurrian and Hittite (an Indo-European language, a family of languages which includes Greek and English, spoken in Asia Minor). All the above languages were written in the script known as cuneiform, which means "wedge-shaped." The fullest surviving version, from which the summary here is taken, is derived from twelve stone tablets, in the Akkadian language, found in the ruins of the library of Ashurbanipal, king of Assyria 669-633 B.C., at Nineveh. The library was destroyed by the Persians in 612 B.C., and all the tablets are damaged. The tablets actually name an author, which is extremely rare in the ancient world, for this particular version of the story: Shin-eqi-unninni. You are being introduced here to the oldest known human author we can name by name!

This summary is derived from several sources: translations, commentaries, and academic scholarship on the Shin-eqi-unninni tablets. Verses are derived from several English and French translations in consultation with the English and German language commentaries and with the Babylonian text. For the entire text, you should turn to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, trans. by Maureen Gallery Kovacs (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1990), or *Gilgamesh*, translated by John Maier and John Gardner (New York: Vintage, 1981)

As you read this short summary, ask yourself the following questions:

1. **Themes.** The first things you want to sort out are the ideas which seem to animate the work. One of the problems with literature, art, mythology, etc., is that you can never be quite sure that you've correctly identified the central ideas or philosophy of the work, but you should take a stab at it anyway. Keep in mind that there is no such thing as one and only one idea in a work of literature, and that in most art and literature, like life, there is no one correct answer concerning any single issue. To identify an idea, question, or theme that the work seems to treat, look for specific places where that idea seems to be a concern; mark these passages and combine and contrast them when you begin to try to resolve what the work seems to be about. The questions I provide in these reading notes are meant to organize the families of questions you can bring to these texts.

2. **Structure.** Try to define for yourself the overall structure of the story. This narrative has two distinct parts; what are these parts and how are they separated? How do events in the second part of the narrative repeat or develop ideas in the first part of the narrative? Do these events contrast with or develop themes and values articulated in the first part of the narrative?

3. **The Nature of the Heroic.** When you read the myth, notice how Gilgamesh is presented as superhuman, so powerful that the gods create a counterpart to moderate his desires and actions. Do you get the sense that Gilgamesh and Enkidu should have spared the demon of the cedar forest? Despite all of Gilgamesh's power, he is unable to prevent Enkidu's death, and the narrative changes direction. How can one describe Gilgamesh as a hero in the last half of the work? What has he achieved at the end of the poem? Why is this important?

4. **The Gods.** The gods in Gilgamesh are a bit problematic. How do the gods behave? What is their relation to humans? How much freedom do humans have, or are they merely subject to the will of these gods?



6. **The Flood.** The story of the Flood is a familiar one, as we shall see in *Genesis* and *Popol Vuh* (Plato also gives an account of the Flood and the city of Atlantis in the dialogue, *Critias* ; the Nez Perce of the Palouse also have a flood story in which the only humans that survived did so by climbing the mountain, Yamustus, that is, Steptoe Butte). The earliest surviving reference to the Flood goes back to 1900 B.C. Why is it brought in here? Why do the gods bring on the Flood? Is any reason given? (Later compare the reasons for the floods in *Genesis* and *Popol Vuh*.) What does it tell us about the nature of history and the relation of the gods to humanity?

GILGAMESH

Tablet 1

The one who saw all [*Sha nagba imuru*] I will declare to the world,
The one who knew all I will tell about
[line missing]

He saw the great Mystery, he knew the Hidden:
He recovered the knowledge of all the times before the Flood.
He journeyed beyond the distant, he journeyed beyond exhaustion,
And then carved his story on stone. [*naru* : stone tablets]

This great hero who had all knowledge [*nemequ*], Gilgamesh, built the great city of Uruk; the tablet invites us to look around and view the greatness of this city, its high walls, its masonwork, and here at the base of its gates, as the foundation of the city walls, a stone of lapis lazuli on which is carved Gilgamesh's account of his exploits, the story you are about to hear.

The account begins: Gilgamesh, two-thirds god and one-third human, is the greatest king on earth and the strongest super-human that ever existed; however, he is young and oppresses his people harshly. The people call out to the sky-god Anu, the chief god of the city, to help them. In response, Anu creates a wild man, Enkidu, out in the harsh and wild forests surrounding Gilgamesh's lands. This brute, Enkidu, has the strength of dozens of wild animals; he is to serve as the subhuman rival to the superhuman Gilgamesh.

A trapper's son, while checking on traps in the forest, discovers Enkidu running naked with the wild animals; he rushes to his father with the news. The father advises him to go into the city and take one of the temple harlots, Shamhat, with him to the forest; 1 when she sees Enkidu, she is to offer herself sexually to the wild man. If he submits to her, the trapper says, he will lose his strength and his wildness.

Shamhat meets Enkidu at the watering-hole where all the wild animals gather; she offers herself to him and he submits, instantly losing his strength and wildness, but he gains understanding and knowledge. He laments for his lost state, but the harlot offers to take him into the city where all the joys of civilization shine in their resplendence; she offers to show him Gilgamesh, the only man worthy of Enkidu's friendship.

Gilgamesh meanwhile has two dreams; in the first a meteorite falls to earth which is so great that Gilgamesh can neither lift it nor turn it. The people gather and celebrate around the meteorite, and Gilgamesh embraces it as he would a wife, but his mother, the goddess Rimat-Ninsun, forces him to compete with the meteorite. In the second, Gilgamesh dreams that an axe appears at his door, so great that he can neither lift it nor turn it. The people gather and celebrate around the axe, and Gilgamesh embraces it as he would a wife, but his mother, again, forces him to compete with the axe. Gilgamesh asks his mother what these dreams might mean; she tells him a man of great force and strength will come into Uruk. Gilgamesh will embrace this man as he would a wife, and this man will help Gilgamesh perform great deeds.

Tablet 2

Enkidu is gradually introduced to civilization by living for a time with a group of shepherds, who teach him how to tend flocks, how to eat, how to speak properly, and how to wear clothes. Enkidu then enters the city of Uruk during a great celebration. Gilgamesh, as the king, claims the right to have sexual intercourse first with every new bride on the day of her wedding; as Enkidu enters the city, Gilgamesh is about to claim that right. Infuriated at this abuse, Enkidu stands in front of the door of the marital chamber and blocks Gilgamesh's way. They fight furiously until Gilgamesh wins the upper hand; Enkidu concedes Gilgamesh's superiority and the two embrace and become devoted friends.

Both Enkidu and Gilgamesh gradually weaken and grow lazy living in the city, so Gilgamesh proposes a great adventure: they are to journey to the great Cedar Forest in southern Iran and cut down all the cedar trees. To do this, they will need to kill the Guardian of the Cedar Forest, the great demon, Humbaba the Terrible. Enkidu knows about Humbaba from his days running wild in the forest; he tries in vain to convince Gilgamesh not to undertake this folly.

Tablet 3

[Most of tablet three doesn't exist]

The elders of the city protest Gilgamesh's endeavor, but agree reluctantly. They place the life of the king in the hands of Enkidu, whom they insist shall take the forward position in the battle with Humbaba. Gilgamesh's mother laments her son's fate in a prayer to the sun-god, Shamash, asking that god why he put a restless heart in the breast of her son. Shamash promises her that he will watch out for Gilgamesh's life. Ramat-Ninsun, too, commands Enkidu to guard the life of the king and to take the forward position in the battle with Humbaba. In panic, Enkidu again tries to convince Gilgamesh not to undertake this journey, but Gilgamesh is confident of success.

Tablet 4

Tablet four tells the story of the journey to the cedar forest. On each day of the six day journey, Gilgamesh prays to Shamash; in response to these prayers, Shamash sends Gilgamesh oracular dreams during the night. These dreams are all

ominous: The first is not preserved. In the second, Gilgamesh dreams that he wrestles a great bull that splits the ground with his breath. Enkidu interprets the dream for Gilgamesh; the dream means that Shamash, the bull, will protect Gilgamesh. In the third, Gilgamesh dreams:

The skies roared with thunder and the earth heaved,
Then came darkness and a stillness like death.
Lightening smashed the ground and fires blazed out;
Death flooded from the skies.
When the heat died and the fires went out,
The plains had turned to ash.

Enkidu's interpretation is missing here, but like the other dreams, it is assumed he puts a positive spin on the dream. The fourth dream is missing, but Enkidu again tells Gilgamesh that the dream portends success in the upcoming battle. The fifth dream is also missing.

At the entrance to the Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh begins to quake with fear; he prays to Shamash, reminding him that he had promised Ninsun that he would be safe. Shamash calls down from heaven, ordering him to enter the forest because Humbaba is not wearing all his armor. The demon Humbaba wears seven coats of armor, but now he is only wearing one so he is particularly vulnerable. Enkidu loses his courage and turns back; Gilgamesh falls on him and they have a great fight. Hearing the crash of their fighting, Humbaba comes stalking out of the Cedar Forest to challenge the intruders. A large part of the tablet is missing here. On the one part of the tablet still remaining, Gilgamesh convinces Enkidu that they should stand together against the demon.

Tablet 5

Gilgamesh and Enkidu enter the gloriously beautiful Cedar Forest and begin to cut down the trees. Hearing the sound, Humbaba comes roaring up to them and warns them off. Enkidu shouts at Humbaba that the two of them are much stronger than the demon, but Humbaba, who knows Gilgamesh is a king, taunts the king for taking orders from a nobody like Enkidu. Turning his face into a hideous mask, Humbaba begins to threaten the pair, and Gilgamesh runs and hides. Enkidu shouts at Gilgamesh, inspiring him with courage, and Gilgamesh appears from hiding and the two begin their epic battle with Humbaba. Shamash intrudes on the battle, helping the pair, and Humbaba is defeated. On his knees, with Gilgamesh's sword at his throat, Humbaba begs for his life and offers Gilgamesh all the trees in the forest and his eternal servitude. While Gilgamesh is thinking this over, Enkidu intervenes, telling Gilgamesh to kill Humbaba before any of the gods arrive and stop him from doing so. Should he kill Humbaba, he will achieve widespread fame for all the times to come. Gilgamesh, with a great sweep of his sword, removes Humbaba's head. But before he dies, Humbaba screams out a curse on Enkidu: "Of you two, may Enkidu not live the longer, may Enkidu not find any peace in this world!"

Gilgamesh and Enkidu cut down the cedar forest and in particular the tallest of the cedar trees to make a great cedar gate for the city of Uruk. They build a raft out of the cedar and float down the Euphrates river to their city.

Tablet 6

After these events, Gilgamesh, his fame widespread and his frame resplendent in his wealthy clothes, attracts the sexual attention of the goddess Ishtar, who comes to Gilgamesh and offers to become his lover. Gilgamesh refuses with insults, listing all the mortal lovers that Ishtar has had and recounting the dire fates they all met with at her hands. Deeply insulted, Ishtar returns to heaven and begs her father, the sky-god Anu, to let her have the Bull of Heaven to wreak vengeance on Gilgamesh and his city:

Father, let me have the Bull of Heaven
To kill Gilgamesh and his city.
For if you do not grant me the Bull of Heaven,
I will pull down the Gates of Hell itself,
Crush the doorposts and flatten the door,
And I will let the dead leave
And let the dead roam the earth
And they shall eat the living.
The dead will overwhelm all the living!

Anu reluctantly gives in, and the Bull of Heaven is sent down into Uruk. Each time the bull breathes, its breath is so powerful that enormous abysses are opened up in the earth and hundreds of people fall through to their deaths. Working together again, Gilgamesh and Enkidu slay the mighty bull. Ishtar is enraged, but Enkidu begins to insult her, saying that she is next, that he and Gilgamesh will kill her next, and he rips one of the thighs off the bull and hurls it into her face.

Tablet 7

Enkidu falls ill after having a set of ominous dreams; he finds out from the priests that he has been singled out for vengeance by the gods. The Chief Gods have met and have decided that someone should be punished for the killing of Humbaba and the killing of the Bull of Heaven, so of the two heroes, they decide Enkidu should pay the penalty. Enraged at the injustice of the decision, Enkidu curses the great Cedar Gate built from the wood of the Cedar Forest, and he curses the temple harlot, Shamhat, and the trapper, for introducing him to civilization. Shamhash reminds him that, even though his life has been short, he has enjoyed the fruits of civilization and known great happiness. Enkidu then blesses the harlot and the trapper. In a dream, a great demon comes to take Enkidu and drags him to Hell, a House of Dust where all the dead end up; as he is dying, he describes Hell:

The house where the dead dwell in total darkness,
Where they drink dirt and eat stone,
Where they wear feathers like birds,
Where no light ever invades their everlasting darkness,
Where the door and the lock of Hell is coated with thick dust.
When I entered the House of Dust,
On every side the crowns of kings were heaped,
On every side the voices of the kings who wore those crowns,
Who now only served food to the gods Anu and Enlil,
Candy, meat, and water poured from skins.
I saw sitting in this House of Dust a priest and a servant,

I also saw a priest of purification and a priest of ecstasy,
I saw all the priests of the great gods.
There sat Etana and Sumukan,
There sat Ereshkigal, the queen of Hell,
Beletseri, the scribe of Hell, sitting before her.
Beletseri held a tablet and read it to Ereshkigal.
She slowly raised her head when she noticed me
She pointed at me:
"Who has sent this man?"

Enkidu commends himself to Gilgamesh, and after suffering terribly for twelve days, he finally dies.

Tablet 8

Gilgamesh is torn apart by the death of his friend, and utters a long lament, ordering all of creation to never fall silent in mourning his dead friend. Most of this tablet is missing, but the second half seems to be a description of the monument he builds for Enkidu.

Tablet 9

Gilgamesh allows his life to fall apart; he does not bathe, does not shave, does not take care of himself, not so much out of grief for his friend, but because he now realizes that he too must die and the thought sends him into a panic. He decides that he can't live unless granted eternal life; he decides to undertake the most perilous journey of all: the journey to Utnapishtim and his wife, the only mortals on whom the gods had granted eternal life. Utnapishtim is the Far-Away, living at the mouth of all rivers, at the ends of the world. Utnapishtim was the great king of the world before the Flood and, with his wife, was the only mortal preserved by the gods during the Flood. After an ominous dream, Gilgamesh sets out. He arrives at Mount Mashu, which guards the rising and the setting of the sun, and encounters two large scorpions who guard the way past Mount Mashu. They try to convince him that his journey is futile and fraught with danger, but still they allow him to pass. Past Mount Mashu is the land of Night, where no light ever appears. Gilgamesh journeys eleven leagues before the light begins to glimmer, after twelve leagues he has emerged into day. He enters into a brilliant garden of gems, where every tree bears precious stones.

Tablet 10

Gilgamesh comes to a tavern by the ocean shore; the tavern is kept by Siduri. Frightened by Gilgamesh's ragged appearance, Siduri locks the tavern door and refuses to let Gilgamesh in. Gilgamesh proves his identity and asks Siduri how to find Utnapishtim. Like the giant scorpions, she tells him that his journey is futile and fraught with dangers. However, she directs him to Urshanabi, the ferryman, who works for Utnapishtim. Gilgamesh approaches Urshanabi with great arrogance and violence and in the process destroys the "stone things" that are somehow critical for the journey to Utnapishtim. When Gilgamesh demands to be taken to Utnapishtim, the ferryman tells him that it is now impossible, since the "stone things" have been destroyed. Nevertheless, he advises Gilgamesh to

cut several trees down to serve as punting poles; the waters they are to cross are the Waters of Death, should any mortal touch the waters, that man will instantly die. With the punting poles, Gilgamesh can push the boat and never touch the dangerous waters.

After a long and dangerous journey, Gilgamesh arrives at a shore and encounters another man. He tells this man that he is looking for Utnapishtim and the secret of eternal life; the old man advises Gilgamesh that death is a necessary fact because of the will of the gods; all human effort is only temporary, not permanent.

Tablet 11

At this point, Gilgamesh realizes that he is talking to Utnapishtim, the Far-Away; he hadn't expected an immortal human to be ordinary and aged. He asks Utnapishtim how he received immortality, and Utnapishtim tells him the great secret hidden from humans: In the time before the Flood, there was a city, Shuruppak, on the banks of the Euphrates. There, the counsel of the gods held a secret meeting; they all resolved to destroy the world in a great flood. All the gods were under oath not to reveal this secret to any living thing, but Ea (one of the gods that created humanity) came to Utnapishtim's house and told the secret to the walls of Utnapishtim's house, thus not technically violating his oath to the rest of the gods. He advised the walls of Utnapishtim's house to build a great boat, its length as great as its breadth, to cover the boat, and to bring all living things into the boat. Utnapishtim gets straight to work and finishes the great boat by the new year. Utnapishtim then loads the boat with gold, silver, and all the living things of the earth, and launches the boat. Ea orders him into the boat and commands him to close the door behind him. The black clouds arrive, with the thunder god Adad rumbling within them; the earth splits like an earthenware pot, and all the light turns to darkness. The Flood is so great that even the gods are frightened:

The gods shook like beaten dogs, hiding in the far corners of heaven,
Ishtar screamed and wailed:

"The days of old have turned to stone:

We have decided evil things in our Assembly!

Why did we decide those evil things in our Assembly?

Why did we decide to destroy our people?

We have only just now created our beloved humans;

We now destroy them in the sea!"

All the gods wept and wailed along with her,

All the gods sat trembling, and wept.

The Flood lasts for seven days and seven nights, and finally light returns to the earth. Utnapishtim opens a window and the entire earth has been turned into a flat ocean; all humans have been turned to stone. Utnapishtim then falls to his knees and weeps.

Utnapishtim's boat comes to rest on the top of Mount Nimush; the boat lodges firmly on the mountain peak just below the surface of the ocean and remains there for seven days. On the seventh day:

I [Utnapishtim] released a dove from the boat,
It flew off, but circled around and returned,
For it could find no perch.
I then released a swallow from the boat,
It flew off, but circled around and returned,
For it could find no perch.
I then released a raven from the boat,
It flew off, and the waters had receded:
It eats, it scratches the ground, but it does not circle around and return.
I then sent out all the living things in every direction and sacrificed a sheep on
that very spot.

The gods smell the odor of the sacrifice and begin to gather around
Utnapishtim. Enlil, who had originally proposed to destroy all humans, then
arrives, furious that one of the humans had survived, since they had agreed to
wipe out all humans. He accuses Ea of treachery, but Ea convinces Enlil to be
merciful. Enlil then seizes Utnapishtim and his wife and blesses them:

At one time Utnapishtim was mortal.
At this time let him be a god and immortal;
Let him live in the far away at the source of all the rivers.

At the end of his story, Utnapishtim offers Gilgamesh a chance at immortality.
If Gilgamesh can stay awake for six days and seven nights, he, too, will become
immortal. Gilgamesh accepts these conditions and sits down on the shore; the
instant he sits down he falls asleep. Utnapishtim tells his wife that all men are
liars, that Gilgamesh will deny having fallen asleep, so he asks his wife to bake a
loaf of bread every day and lay the loaf at Gilgamesh's feet. Gilgamesh sleeps
without ever waking up for six days and seven nights, at which point Utnapishtim
wakes him up. Startled, Gilgamesh says, "I only just dozed off for half a second
here." Utnapishtim points out the loaves of bread, showing their states of decay
from the most recent, fresh bread, to the oldest, moldy, stale bread that had been
laid at his feet on the very first day. Gilgamesh is distraught:

O woe! What do I do now, where do I go now?
Death has devoured my body,
Death dwells in my body,
Wherever I go, wherever I look, there stands Death!

Utnapishtim's wife convinces the old man to have mercy on him; he offers
Gilgamesh in place of immortality a secret plant that will make Gilgamesh young
again. The plant is at the bottom of the ocean surrounding the Far-Away;
Gilgamesh ties stones to his feet, sinks to the bottom, and plucks the magic plant.
But he doesn't use it because he doesn't trust it; rather he decides to take it back
to Uruk and test it out on an old man first, to make sure it works.

Urshanabi takes him across the Waters of Death. Several leagues inland,
Gilgamesh and Urshanabi stop to eat and sleep; while they're sleeping, a snake
slithers up and eats the magic plant (which is why snakes shed their skin) and
crawls away. Gilgamesh awakens to find the plant gone; he falls to his knees and
weeps:

For whom have I labored? For whom have I journeyed?
For whom have I suffered?
I have gained absolutely nothing for myself,

I have only profited the snake, the ground lion!

The tale ends with Gilgamesh, at the end of his journey standing before the gates of Uruk, inviting Urshanabi to look around and view the greatness of this city, its high walls, its masonwork, and here at the base of its gates, as the foundation of the city walls, a stone of lapis lazuli on which is carved Gilgamesh's account of his exploits.

Richard Hooker