

The Quest for Immortality

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Humbaba opened his mouth to speak, saying to Enkidu:

"Now, Enkidu, my [fate] lies with you; tell Gilgamesh to spare me my life"

Enkidu opened his mouth to speak, saying to Gilgamesh:

"My friend, Humbaba, who guards the forest of cedar, finish him, slay him,
do away with his power before Enlil.... hears what we do!"

The great gods will [strike] against us in anger,

Enlil in Nippur, Shamash in Larsa.

[But] establish forever a fame that endures,
how Gilgamesh slew ferocious Humbaba."

Gilgamesh heard the words of his friend, he drew forth the dirk at his side,

[and] smote [Humbaba] in the neck

[while] his friend Enkidu gave encouragement.

[Humbaba] fell [and] the ravines did run with his blood."

[Gilgamesh] slew the ogre, the forest's guardian,

at whose yell were Sundered the peaks of Sirion and Lebanon,

the mountains did quake and hillsides did tremble.

By now you probably think that I have lost my mind. But those words were written over four thousand years ago, on clay tablets, in cuneiform script, in Akkadian, a language spoken in ancient Mesopotamia. The long epic poem from which those words were taken is believed to be the oldest piece of literature in the world — predating anything in Greece, Egypt or China. There was earlier writing, but only in the form of ledgers accounting for the movement of goods — not anything resembling literature.

Written language appears to have originated in the ancient region of Sumer, in today's southern Iraq, and the earliest version of the epic was in the Sumerian language. But the epic was expanded, revised, and added to over a number of centuries. It was widely known throughout the ancient Near East, and clay tablets with fragments of it have been found in many places — including Megiddo in ancient Israel — a point to which we will return later.

We do not have a complete set of tablets containing the whole, uninterrupted story. Instead, archeologists and linguists in the past century and a half have taken the fragments and painstakingly pieced them together to form an almost complete text. It forms a fascinating story — one that reveals a deep understanding of human nature and the struggles of the maturation process as one moves from an unruly youth to a wiser adulthood. Most importantly it comes to grip with the fact of one's mortality — that we are not destined to live forever. But more also on that later.

The central character is Gilgamesh, an actual king of the Sumerian city of Uruk who ruled in approximately 2800 BCE. But tales of his exploits were greatly expanded and magnified many times as they were passed down over later centuries. In the beginning of the epic he is wild and unruly, a tyrant paying little attention to the welfare of his people. He is described as:

.....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.

Though powerful, preeminent, expert and might[y],
Gilgamesh lets no girl go free to her bridegroom.
The warrior's daughter, the young man's bride,
to [her] complaint the goddesses paid heed.
The gods of heaven, the lords of initiative,
to the god Ann they spoke,

"A savage bull you have bred in Uruk-the Sheepfold."

A little difficult to follow, but it is clear that Gilgamesh exercised the ancient custom of a

ruler having the right to sleep with the bride before her husband could take her to bed. This is a point which plays a significant part in a later episode in the story.

The other major figure in the story is Enkidu, a strange, wild man in the early part of the narrative. He comes on the scene as totally untamed; his body covered with hair, roaming free in the wilderness, eating grass — hardly a human at all. In mythic terms, he probably represents man before the rise of civilization. But he is tamed and brought into civilized life in an interesting episode. It begins when the god Anu, heeding the pleas of the young bride and the people of Uruk, seeks the advice of a senior god, who advises her to seek out the god

.....Aruru, the great one, [who] created mankind so numerous;
Let her create the equal of Gilgamesh, one mighty in strength,
and let him vie with Gilgamesh, so Uruk may be rested.

They summoned Aruru, the great one [and said]
"You Aruru, [who] created mankind, now fashion what Anu has thought of.
Let him be a match for the storm of his heart, let them vie with each other,
so Uruk may be rested."

At this point a word of explanation is in order regarding the gods of the ancient Near East. There were many of them, and the region was about as far from monotheism as one could get. There were separate gods for each city, complete with temples and elaborate worship practices required to ensure that the gods would protect the city from harm. There were also a multitude of gods to deal with all aspects of life on earth. And there was a hierarchy of gods to ensure order in the heavens. A bit complex. But to continue with our story:

The goddess Aruru, she washed her hands,
took a pinch of clay, threw it down in the wild.
In the wild she created Enkidu, the hero....
Coated with hair like the god of the animals,
with the gazelles he grazes on grasses,
joining the throng with the game at the water hole,
his heart delighting with the beasts in the water.

A young hunter spotted Enkidu at the water hole and complained to his father that the wild man was destroying the traps that he had set and freeing the animals caught in them. His father suggests that the young hunter go to Gilgamesh, the king, and ask his permission to take the prostitute Shambat with him to the water hole to seduce the wild man. This, his father suggests, will tame him. The young hunter did as he was told, obtained permission from Gilgamesh, and returned to the water hole with the prostitute. After laying in wait for two days, Enkidu came to the water hole with the gazelles, and Shambat did as she was told.

At this point the tale becomes rather explicit, and I trust that it will not offend anyone in this hallowed hall. But remember that this was a tale written in Akkadian over 4000 years ago. It suggests that a certain kind of human behavior goes back a long way.

Shamhat unfastened the cloth of her loins,
she bared her sex and he took in her charms.
She did not recoil, she took in his scent:
she spread her clothing and he lay upon her.
She did for the man the work of a woman,
his passion caressed and embraced her.
For six days and seven nights
Enkidu was erect as he coupled with Shamhat.
When with her delights he was full sated,
he turned his gaze to his herd [but they started to run].
Enkidu was weakened, and could not run as before,
but now he had reason, and wide understanding.

In other words, his encounter with Shambat had begun to civilize the wild man. Shambat now takes him to a shepherd's encampment where he observes and learns the ways of civilization. In the meantime, the narrative reveals that Gilgamesh had dreamed that he would meet a man who was his equal, with whom he could become close friends. Some of the shepherds tell Enkidu that they are going to Uruk to a wedding, and Enkidu decides to accompany them. And there he encounters Gilgamesh.

The encounter does not start well. The king is about to exercise his right of first encounter with the bride, and the wedding house was set for his arrival. But Enkidu has a sudden burst of morality and strongly objects. He blocks Gilgamesh's entry into the wedding house and

the two launch into a fierce battle. Finally, they both fall back in exhaustion and realize that they are an equal match for one another. They immediately form a fast friendship and vow to tackle the world together.

Almost immediately Gilgamesh suggests that they go to the Forest of Cedar to slay Humbaba, the beast appointed by the gods to guard the forest. He is eager for adventure and the terrible tales of Humbaba are a challenge not to be ignored. But Enkidu, in his new role as a civilized man, is more cautious. He entreaties Gilgamesh not to go.

"I knew him, my friend, in the uplands,
when I roamed here and there with the herd.
For sixty leagues the forest is a wilderness,
who is there to venture inside it?
Humbaba, whose voice is the Deluge,
his speech is fire, and his breath is death!
Why do you desire to do such a thing?
An unwinnable battle is "Humbaba's ambush!"

Gilgamesh opened his mouth to speak,
saying to Enkidu:
"Why, my friend, do you speak like a weakling?
With your spineless words you make me despondent."
You were born and grew up in the wild:
even lions were afraid of you, you experienced [it] all.
Grown men fled from your presence,
your heart is tried and tested in combat.
Come, my friend, let us [go] to the forge!

So Enkidu succumbs, and they agree to go. But first they take to the forge, and have great hatchets and daggers made out of iron to take with them. Gilgamesh then convenes an assembly of the people of Uruk and boasts of his plan.

At Enkidu's urging, the elders of the city try to persuade Gilgamesh not to go. They tell him that he is young and "borne along by emotion." But he is unswayed. He goes to see his mother, the goddess Ninsun, who first attempts to dissuade him, but then, seeing his resolve,

she prays to the gods for his safety. Despite the warnings of his friend, the city elders, and his mother, he is fixed in his resolve. He sets out to slay Humbaba and thereby achieve lasting fame. Enkidu, despite his trepidations, is true to his new-found friend and accompanies him on the journey.

After a long and adventure filled trek, the friends finally reach the Forest of Cedar. Gilgamesh seeks out and slays Humbaba in the encounter described at the start of this paper. When it is all over, Enkidu says to Gilgamesh "My friend, we have felled a lofty cedar, whose top thrust up to the sky." It was a mighty deed. But that was not the end of the story. As we shall see in a moment, there was a price to be paid for slaying the beast. And there were more adventures to come.

When Gilgamesh returned to Uruk he cleaned himself up and his good looks attracted Ishtar, the goddess of both sex and war, with an insatiable appetite for both.

He washed his matted hair, he cleaned his equipment,
he shook his hair down over his back.
Casting aside his dirty gear he clad himself in clean,
wrapped cloaks around him, tied with a sash.
Then did Gilgamesh put on his crown.
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.
Let me harness you a chariot of lapis lazuli and gold,
its wheels will be gold and its horns shall be amber.
Driving lions in a team and mules of great size,
enter our house amid the sweet smell of cedar.

Gilgamesh, however, is totally unimpressed and proceeds to remind Ishtar of the fate of all of those, both human and animal, that had succumbed to her charms before. He describes what happened to the lion, the horse, the shepherd, the herdsman and her father's gardener that she had seduced and then cursed by dooming them live out their lives in terrible circumstances. He says, "Must you love me also and deal with me likewise?"

The goddess Ishtar heard these words,
she went up to heaven in a furious rage.
Weeping she went to Anu, her father,
before Antu, her mother, her tears did flow;
"O father, again and again does Gilgamesh scorn me,
telling tales of foulest slander.

Father, give me, please the Bull of Heaven,
so in his dwelling I may slay Gilgamesh!
If you do not give me the Bull of Heaven,
I shall smash the gates of the Nether world [and]
I shall bring the dead up to consume the living,
I shall make the dead outnumber the living."

Ishtar's father succumbed to this argument and granted her the Bull of Heaven, which Ishtar proceeded to lead down to Uruk, where it began to wreck everything in sight. It "dried up the woods and the marshes" and "lowered level of the river by seven full cubits." It gave a snort which opened up a pit into which one hundred men fell, and a second that opened a pit into which two hundred men fell. A third time it snorted, and this time Enkidu fell into the pit.

Enkidu rose to the challenge and proceeded to grasp the Bull of Heaven by its tail, holding it so that Gilgamesh "like a butcher, brave and skillful, between the yoke of the horns and the slaughter-spot [could] thrust in his knife." The Bull succumbed and lay dead.

Ishtar went up on the wall of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,
hopping and stamping, she wailed in woe:
"Alas! Gilgamesh, who mocked me, has killed the Bull of Heaven."
Enkidu heard these words of Ishtar,
and tearing a haunch off the Bull he hurled it towards her.
"Had I caught you too, I'd treated you likewise,
I'd have draped your arms in its guts!"

That statement was perhaps a bit unwise, since Ishtar was a goddess with a strong

tendency toward revenge and considerable persuasive powers among the gods. As a consequence, Ishtar sought his death. Enkidu was forewarned in a dream, where he saw "the gods in assembly decree his death." He then dreamed of "the trapper and the prostitute, the instruments of his introduction to civilization," whom he [now] blamed for his plight. But in his dream he relented and decided to bless the prostitute. In a second dream he was dragged down to the Nether world by the Angel of Death and granted a vision of hell. All very disturbing.

When he awoke he told Gilgamesh his dreams and lamented his fate. If he was to die, he said, he wished to die in battle, like a warrior in full glory — not of a sickness the cause of which he knew not. But — as forecast in his dreams — he sickened and slowly passed away. Gilgamesh was distraught at the loss of his friend. He arranged a great funeral and called upon all the people of Uruk to honor his deceased companion. He cried out:

"May the elders of teeming Uruk-the-Sheepfold mourn you!
May the crowd who gave us their blessing mourn you!
May the high peaks of hills and mountains mourn you.
May the pastures lament you like your mother!
May the boxwood, cypress and cedar mourn you,
through whose midst we crept in our fury!
May the young men of Uruk-the-Sheepfold mourn you,
who witnessed our battle when we slew the Bull of Heaven!
Hear me, O young men, hear me!
Hear me, O elders of teeming Uruk, hear me!
I shall weep for Enkidu, my friend,
like a hired mourner-woman shall I bitterly wail.

This is the turning point in the tale. Gilgamesh has come face to face with the reality of death. He becomes distraught. He leaves the city of Uruk and wanders the earth seeking solace. At one point he encounters a tavern keeper who asks why his dour countenance. He replies:

Why should my cheeks not be hollow, my face not sunken,
my mood not wretched, my visage not wasted?
Should not sorrow reside in my heart?
Having joined forces we climbed the mountains,

seized and slew the Bull of Heaven,
destroyed Humbaba, who dwelt in the Forest of Cedar,
killed lions in the mountain passes.
my friend whom I loved so dear,
who went with me through every danger,
the doom of mortals overtook him.
Six days I wept for him and seven nights:
Then I was afraid the I too would die,
so on a far road I wander the wild.
My friend Enkidu, who I loved, has turned to clay.
Shall I not be like him, and also lie down,
never to rise again, through all eternity?

But there is a ray of hope. He and the inn keeper discuss the possibility of his reaching a far distant land where resides one Uta-napishti, who is said to have found the secret of eternal life. Gilgamesh is energized by the possibility of finding this man, and sets out on a long and dangerous journey with a boatman across the Waters of Death. He finally reaches the home of Uta-napishti and seeks to learn from him how he came to acquire the secret of eternal life. Uta-napishti agrees to tell him how it came about.

"Let me disclose, O Gilgamesh, a matter most secret,
to you I will tell the mystery of the gods.
The town of Shuruppak, a city well known to you,
which stands on the banks of the river Euphrates:
this city was old — the gods once were in it —
when the great gods decided to send down the Deluge.

Their plan was supposed to be secret, but one of the gods — Princely Ea — disagreed with the planned destruction of all mankind, and he came to Uta-napishti and said to him:

"O man of Shuruppak, son of Ubar-Tutu,
demolish the house, and build a boat!
Abandon wealth, and seek survival!

Take on board the boat all living things' seed!
The boat that you build,
her dimensions all shall be equal:
her length and her breadth shall be the same."
I understood and spoke to Ea, my master:
"I obey, O master, and what thus you told me.
I understood, and I shall do it."

There follows another long passage, describing the building of the boat, with six decks, each divided into nine compartments. The narrative continues:

Everything I owned I loaded aboard.
I sent on board all my kith and kin,
the beasts of the field, the creatures of the wild;
and members of every skill and craft.
The time had now come:
the weather to look at was full of foreboding,
I went into the boat and sealed my hatch.
At the first glimmer of brightening dawn,
there rose on the horizon a dark cloud of black;
and bellowing within it was Adad the Storm God.
For a day the gale winds flattened the country,
quickly they blew, and then came the Deluge.
For six days and seven nights,
there blew the wind, the downpour,
the gale, the Deluge, it flattened the land.
But the seventh day when it came,
the gale relented, the Deluge ended.
On the mountain of Nimush the boat ran aground,
[For six days the boat sat motionless on the mountain]
The seventh day when it came,
I brought out a dove, I let it loose:
off went the dove but then it returned,

there was no place to land, so back it came to me.

I brought out a swallow, I let it loose:

off went the swallow but then it returned,

there was no place to land, so back it came to me.

I brought out an offering, I let it loose:

off went the raven, it saw the waters receding,

finding food, bowing and bobbing, it did not come back to me.

I brought out an offering, to the four winds made sacrifice.

When the gods smelted the offering which (Jta-napishti made in his joy over having been saved,

The gods did smell the savour,

the gods did smell the savor sweet,

the gods gathered like flies around the man making sacrifice.

Then at once Enlil arrived,

he saw the boat, he was seized with anger, filled with rage.

"From where escaped this living being?

No man was meant to survive the destruction!"

[One of the gods] opened his mouth to speak, saying...

"Who, if not Ea, could cause such a thing?

Ea alone knows how all things are done."

Ea opened his mouth to speak,

saying to the hero Enlil:

"You, the sage of the gods, the hero,

how could you lack counsel and bring on the deluge?

It was not [that] I disclosed the great gods secret:

[I let Uta-napishti] see a vision, and thus he learned our secret.

And now decide what to do with him!"

The great god Enlil apparently now sees the problem with attempting to destroy all mankind, because — according to an ancient tradition — mankind was required to grow grain and raise animals to serve the needs of the gods. Otherwise the lesser gods would have to do all

the work themselves. So he realizes that Ea had done the gods a service by seeing that Uta-napishti survived.

Enlil came up inside the boat,
he took hold of my hand and brought me on board.
He brought on board my wife and made her kneel at my side,
he touched our foreheads, standing between us to bless us:
"In the past Uta-napishti was a mortal man,
but now he and his wife shall become like us gods!
Uta-napishti will dwell far away, where the rivers flow forth!"
So far away they took me, and settled me where the rivers flow forth.

Thus Gilgamesh had now learned how Uta-napishti had acquired eternal life, but now he wanted the same thing for himself. Uta-napishti could not give him that, but he offered him something else with which to console himself.

"You came here, O Gilgamesh, by toil and travail,
what do I give for your homeward journey?
Let me disclose, O Gilgamesh, a matter most secret,
to you I will tell a mystery of [the] gods.
There is a plant that looks like a box-thorn,
[which lies at the bottom of the sea.]
But if you can possess this plant,
you'll be again as you were in your youth.
Just as soon as he heard what he said,
Heavy stones he tied to his feet,
and they pulled him down to the Ocean below.
He took the plant, and pulled it up,
the heavy stones he cut loose from his feet.
I will eat it myself, and be again as I was in my youth.

If he could not have eternal life, at least he saw that he could regain the vigor of his youth. But even this was to be denied to him.

Gilgamesh found a pool whose water was cool,
down he went into it, to bathe in the water.
Of the plant's fragrance a snake caught scent,
came up in silence and bore the plant *off*.
Then Gilgamesh sat down and wept,
down his cheeks the tears were coursing.

Not only had Gilgamesh been denied eternal life, but he had lost the opportunity to regain his youth. He was now forced to come to terms with reality. Like all men, he would eventually pass away, and he would never be young again. It was almost more than he could bear. But he finally reconciled himself to this, and turned to another way to achieve a type of immortality. He decided that he would leave behind earthly achievements by which he could be remembered. After all, he had built the magnificent walls around the city, of which he was king. So he turned to the boatman who had brought him to the distant land and asked to be returned home.

When they arrived at Uruk-the-sheepfold,
said Gilgamesh to him, to Ur-shanabi the boatman;
"O Ur-shanabi, climb Uruk's walls and walk the length 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."

And therein lies the end of the poem, much condensed to fit the limits of a Literary Club paper. But it is quite a tale, all the more so in that it was written over 4,000 years ago. Many of the fragments found scattered all over the Near East were actually the work of young scribes in training, who copied sections of the epic over and over again while learning how to write. It is all the more interesting because the story was based on the life of someone who was probably an

actual king of the city of Uruk, who ruled in approximately 2800 BCE. And the king is reputed to have actually built the walls of Uruk. The walls presumably lasted a very long time — although not forever. What has lasted a long time is the epic poem itself. That, in itself, is a kind of immortality.

But there is a postscript to this story. The flood portion of the narrative obviously bears a striking resemblance to the Biblical story of Noah, and when it was first read to a meeting in London in 1879 it caused quite a stir. There was an attempt to argue that the tale had been borrowed from the Bible. But when archeologists discovered a fragment of the Gilgamesh epic buried near Megiddo, in Israel, and dated it earlier than the presumed date when the story of Noah was written, it became clear that the borrowing was the other way around. As a matter of fact, this story was one of the discoveries in the late 19th century that led a host of scholars to question the historical accuracy of many Biblical stories. There was also a story of King Sargon of Akkad, who was reported to have been placed in a basket of rushes and floated down a river until found by a lowly "drawer of water" (whatever that was) and then risen to greatness. The similarity to the story of Moses is striking.

Ancient stories such as these contributed to the rise of schools of Biblical scholarship in the 19th century which cast serious doubt on the inerrancy of the Bible. Then there was a strong reaction to this development which contributed to the rise of Christian fundamentalism as we know it today. Many liberal theologians concluded that the Bible contained profound moral truth, but also stories such as these borrowed from the Near Eastern milieu from which Israel emerged. One theologian has said that "the Bible is true, and some of it actually happened."

Suffice it to say that the story of Gilgamesh, and the flood narrative which it contained, has cast a long shadow. That, in itself, may be a further form of the immortality which Gilgamesh so ardently sought.

This paper is based on *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian*, Translated with an introduction by Andrew George (London: Penguin Books, 2003). Some small liberties have been taken with the original text to make it clearer to a contemporary audience.