

Mircea Eliade "From Primitives to Zen": GILGAMESH

IN SEARCH OF IMMORTALITY

Although originally written in Akkadian, the Gilgamesh Epic was translated into several Near Eastern languages and became the most famous literary creation of the ancient Babylonians. Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, is two-thirds god and one-third man, and 'like a wild ox.' As the story begins, the nobles of Uruk are complaining to the gods that the mighty Gilgamesh in his restlessness and arrogance is playing havoc with the city. His mother, the goddess Aruru, creates a companion for him-the wild man Enkidu, who runs with the animals on the steppe. Enkidu is first tamed and made human by a temple harlot. Then he is taken to Uruk, where he wrestles with Gilgamesh. The match is a draw and the two become inseparable companions.

One day, Gilgamesh, always looking for adventure, proposes that he and Enkidu travel to the distant cedar forest to kill Huwawa, its evil guardian. Enkidu protests that the journey is very dangerous and Huwawa very fierce, but Gilgamesh is determined and finally they set out. The undertaking is successful and the two are covered with glory.

But Enkidu has already had premonitions of disaster. On their return to Uruk, the goddess Ishtar sees the beauty of Gilgamesh and proposes to him. He rejects her, reminding her of the fates of her previous lovers. She is furious and has Anu send the sacred bull of heaven to attack him. When Gilgamesh and Enkidu slay the bull, the gods become very angry-this is too presumptuous. As punishment, Enkidu must die.

Enkidu's death is the occasion for the section which we have included here, the climax and culmination of the Epic. For the first time Gilgamesh has had to face the fact of death, and it bewilders and terrifies him. Hoping to learn the secret of immortality, he makes a long and difficult journey in search of Utnapishtim, the one human being who has acquired it. Utnapishtim tells his story-the famous story of the flood. But Gilgamesh is, after all, human and very tired. He falls asleep. Utnapishtim is about to send him away when his wife intervenes in pity. Gilgamesh is told about a wonderful plant of immortality that grows at the bottom of the sea. He obtains it; but as he stops to cool himself in a quiet pool a snake carries off the plant. Gilgamesh, completely unsuccessful, returns to Uruk, and the text concludes as he proudly shows his city to his ferryman.

*For Enkidu, his friend, Gilgamesh
Weeps bitterly, as he ranges over the steppe:
'When I die, shall I not be like Enkidu?
Woe has entered my belly.
Facing death, I roam over the steppe.
To Utnapishtim,¹ Ubar-Tutu's son,*

*I have taken the road to proceed in all haste.
When arriving by night at mountain passes,
I saw lions and grew afraid.
I lifted my head to Sin ² to pray.*

[The remainder of the column is fragmentary or broken away. When Gilgamesh next appears, he has arrived before a mountain.]

*The name of the mountain is Mashu.
When he arrived at the mountain range of Mashu,
Which daily keeps watch over sunrise and sunset-
Whose peaks reach to the vault of heaven
(And) whose breasts reach to the nether world below-
Scorpion-men guard its gate,
Whose terror is awesome and whose glance was death.
Their shimmering halo sweeps the mountains
That at sunrise and sunset keep watch over the sun.
When Gilgamesh beheld them, with fear
And terror was darkened his face.
He took hold of his senses and bowed before them.
A scorpion-man calls to his wife:
'He who has come to us-his body is the flesh of the gods!'
His wife answers the scorpion-man:
'Two-thirds of him is god, one-third of him is human.'
The scorpion-man calls to the fellow,
Addressing (these) words to the offspring of the gods:
'Why hast thou come on this far journey?
Why hast thou arrived before me,
Traversing seas whose crossings are difficult?
The purpose of thy coming I would learn.'*

[The remainder of the column is broken away. In the next part that we have, Gilgamesh replies:]

*'On account of Utnapishtim, my father, have I come,
Who joined the Assembly of the gods, in search of life.
About death and life I wish to ask him.'
The scorpion-man opened his mouth to speak,
Saying to Gilgamesh:
'Never was there, Gilgamesh, a mortal who could achieve that.
The mountain's trail no one has travelled.
For twelve leagues extends its inside.
Dense is the darkness and light there is none.*

[The remainder is fragmentary or broken. Gilgamesh persists, and eventually the scorpion-man opens the mountain to him.]

*When Gilgamesh heard this,
To the word of the scorpion-man he gave heed.
Along the road of the sun he went ³
When one league he had attained,
Dense is the darkness and light there is none;
He can see nothing ahead or behind.*

[Gilgamesh travels for eight leagues in total blackness. Beginning the ninth league, he feels the north wind fanning his face. He gradually emerges from the cave.]

*'When eleven leagues he had attained, the dawn breaks.
And when he had attained twelve leagues, it had grown bright.
On seeing the grove of stories, he heads for.....
The carnelian bears its fruit;
It is hung with vines good to look at.
The lapis bears foliage;
It, too, bears fruit lush to behold.*

[The remainder of the tablet is mutilated or lost. There are two fairly complete versions of the episodes in the following tablet-the Old Babylonian and Assyrian recensions-as well as two, more fragmentary, versions. We shall begin with the Old Babylonian version. The top of the tablet is broken.]

*Shamash was distraught, as he betook himself to him;
He says to Gilgamesh:
'Gilgamesh, whither rovest thou?
The life thou pursuest thou shalt not find.'
Gilgamesh says to him, to valiant Shamash:
'After marching (and) roving over the steppe,
Must I lay my head in the heart of the earth
That I may sleep through all the years?
Let mine eyes behold the sun
That I may have my fill of the light!
Darkness withdraws when there is enough light.
May he who has died a death behold the radiance of the sun!'*

[Again there is a break in the text. Gilgamesh is addressing Siduri,⁴ the ale-wife, who, according to the Assyrian text, 'dwells by the deep sea.']

*'He who with me underwent all hardships Enkidu, whom I loved dearly,
Who with me underwent all hardships has now gone to the fate of mankind!
Day and night I have wept over him.
I would not give him up for burial-
In case my friend should rise at my plaint
Seven days and seven nights,
Until a worm fell out of his nose.*

*Since his passing I have not found life,
I have roamed like a hunter in the midst of the steppe.
O ale-wife, now that I have seen thy face,
Let me not see the death which I ever dread.'*
*The ale-wife said to him, to Gilgamesh:
'Gilgamesh, whither rovest thou?
The life thou pursuest thou shalt not find.
When the gods created mankind,
Death for mankind they set aside,
Life in their own hands retaining.
Thou, Gilgamesh, let full be thy belly,
Make thou merry by day and by night.
Of each day make thou a feast of rejoicing,
Day and night dance thou and play!
Let thy garments be sparkling fresh,
Thy head be washed; bathe thou in water.
Pay heed to the little one that holds on to thy hand,
Let thy spouse delight in thy bosom!
For this is the task of mankind!'*

[The remainder of the conversation is lost. The Assyrian text gives a different version of Sidura's response.]

*Gilgamesh also says to her, to the ale-wife:
'Now ale-wife, which is the way to Utnapishtim?
What are its markers? Give me, O give me, its markers!
If it be possible, the sea I will cross,
If it not be possible, over the steppe I will range!'*
*The ale-wife said to him, to Gilgamesh:
'Never, O Gilgamesh, has there been a crossing,
And none who came since the beginning of days could cross the sea.
Only valiant Shamash crosses the sea;
Other than Shamash who can cross (it)?
Toilsome is the place of crossing
Very toilsome the way thereto,
And deep are the Waters of Death that bar its approaches!
Where then, O Gilgamesh, wouldst thou cross the sea?
On reaching the Waters of Death, what wouldst thou do?
Gilgamesh, there is Urshanabi, boatman to Utnapishtim.
With him are the Stone Things.⁵ In the woods he picks 'urnu'-snakes.⁶
Him let thy face behold.
If it be suitable, cross thou with him.
If it be not suitable, draw thou back.'*
*When Gilgamesh heard this,
He raised the axe in his hand,
Drew the dirk from his belt, slipped into (the forest),*

*And went down to them.⁷
Like an arrow he descended among them.*

[The text is too fragmentary for translation. When it resumes, Gilgamesh is responding to Urshanabi's questions. He again tells of Enkidu's death and his own search and asks how he can find Utnapishtim. Urshanabi warns him that, by breaking the 'Stone Things,' he has hindered his own crossing. But he agrees to guide Gilgamesh, and sends him off to cut poles. They set sail and soon come to the waters of death, where Urshanabi instructs Gilgamesh: 'Press on, Gilgamesh, take a pole, (But) let thy hand not touch the Waters of Death . . . !' Finally they reach Utnapishtim's island. Utnapishtim questions Gilgamesh, who repeats his long story again, concluding it as follows.]

*Gilgamesh also said to him, to Utnapishtim:
'That -now I might come and behold Utnapishtim,
Whom they call the Faraway,
I ranged and wandered over all the lands,
I traversed difficult mountains,
I crossed all the seas!
My face was not sated with sweet sleep,
I fretted myself with wakefulness;
I filled my joints with aches.
I had not reached the ale-wife's house
When my clothing was used up.
I slew bear, hyena, lion, panther,
Tiger, stag, (and) ibex-
The wild beasts and the creeping things of the steppe.
[The remainder of the tablet is fragmentary and broken, except for the conclusion to Utnapishtim's response.]*

*'Do we build houses for ever?
Do we seal (contracts) for ever?
Do brothers divide shares for ever?
Does hatred persist for ever in the land?
Does the river for ever rise (and) bring on floods?
The dragon-fly leave (its) shell
That its face might (but) glance on the face of the sun?
Since the days of yore there has been no performance;
The resting and the dead, how alike they are!
Do they not compose a picture of death,
The commoner and the noble,
Once they are near to their fate?
The Anunnaki, the great gods, foregather,
Mammetum, maker of fate, with them the fate decrees,
Death and life they determine.
(But) of death its days are not revealed.'
Gilgamesh said to him, to Utnapishtim the Faraway:*

*'As I look upon thee, Utnapishtim,
Thy features are -not strange; even as I art thou.
My heart had regarded thee as resolved to do battle,
Yet thou liest indolent upon my back!
Tell me, how joinedst thou the Assembly of the gods.
In thy quest of life?'*
*Utnapishtim said to him, to Gilgamesh:
'I will reveal to thee, Gilgamesh, a hidden matter
And a secret of the gods will I tell thee: . . .'*

[Utnapishtim's revelation is the flood narrative .He was made immortal, he says, through the intervention of the gods after he managed to survive the great flood which destroyed Shurippak.]

*'But now, who will for thy sake call the gods to Assembly
That the life which thou seekest thou mayest find?
Up, lie down to sleep
For six days and seven nights.'*
*As he sits there on his haunches,
Sleep fans him like a mist.
Utnapishtim says to her, to his spouse:
'Behold this hero who seeks life!
Sleep fans him like a mist.'*
*His spouse says to him, to Utnapishtim the Faraway:
'Touch him that the man may awake,
That We may return safe on the way back whence he came,
That through the gate he left he may return to his land.'*
*Utnapishtim says to her, to his spouse:
'Since to deceive is human, he will seek to deceive thee.'⁸
Up, bake for him wafers, put (them) at his head,
And mark on the walls the days he sleeps.'*
*She baked for him wafers, put (them) at his head,
And marked on the wall the days he slept.
His first wafer is dried out,
The second is leathery, the third is soggy;
The crust of the fourth has turned white;
The fifth has a mouldy cast,
The sixth (still) is fresh coloured;*

*And just as he touched the seventh, the man awoke.
Gilgamesh says to him, to Utnapishtim the Faraway:
'Scarcely had sleep surged Over me,
When straightway thou dost touch and rouse me'*
*Utnapishtim says to him, to Gilgamesh:
'Go, Gilgamesh, count thy wafers,
That the days thou hast slept may become known to thee:*

*Thy first wafer is dried out
The second is leathery, the third is soggy;
The crust of the fourth has turned white; The fifth has a mouldy cast,
The sixth (still) is fresh coloured.
As for the seventh, at this instant thou hast awakened.'
Gilgamesh says to him, to Utnapishtim the Faraway:
'What then 'shall I do, Utnapishtim,
Whither shall I go,
Now that the Bereaver has laid hold on my members?
In my bedchamber lurks death,
And wherever I set my foot, there is death!'
Utnapishtim says to him, to Urshanabi, the boatman:
'Urshanabi, may the landing-place not rejoice in thee.
May the place of the crossing despise thee!
To him who wanders on its shore, deny thou its shore!
The man thou hast led (hither), whose body is covered with grime,
The grace of whose members skins have distorted,
Take him, Urshanabi, and bring him to the washing-place.
Let him wash off his grime in water clean as snow,
Let him cast off his skins, let the sea carry (them) away,
That the fairness of his body may be seen.
Let him renew the band round his head,
Let him put on a cloak to clothe his nakedness,
That he may arrive in his city,
That he may achieve his journey.
Let not (his) cloak have a mouldy cast,
Let it be wholly new.'
Urshanabi took him and brought him to the washing-place.
He washed off his grime in water clean as snow.
He cast off his skins, the sea carried (them) away,
That the fairness of his body might be seen.
He renewed the band round his head,
He put on a cloak to clothe his nakedness,
That he might arrive in his city,
That he might achieve his journey.
The cloak had not a mouldy cast, but was wholly new.
Gilgamesh and Urshanabi boarded the boat,
They launched the boat on the waves (and) they sailed away.
His spouse says to him, to Utnapishtim the Faraway:
'Gilgamesh has come hither, toiling and straining.
What wilt thou give him that he may return to his land?'
At that he, Gilgamesh, raised up (his) pole,
To bring the boat nigh to the shore.
Utnapishtim says to him, to Gilgatnesh: ,
Gilgatnesh, thou hast come hither, toiling and straining.
What shall I give thee that thou mayest return to thy land?*

*I will disclose, O Gilgamesh, a hidden thing,
And . . . about a plant I will tell thee:
This plant, like the buckthorn is its . . .
Its thorns will prick thy hands just as does the rose,
If thy hands obtain the plant, thou wilt attain life.'
No sooner had Gilgamesh heard this,
Than he opened the water-pipe,
He tied heavy stones to his feet.
They pulled him down into the deep and there he saw the plant.
He took the plant, though it pricked his hands.
He cut the heavy stones from his feet.
The sea cast him up upon its shore.
Gilgamesh says to him, to Urshanabi, the boatman:
'Urshanabi, this plant is a plant apart,
Whereby a man may regain his life's breath.
I will take it to ramparted Uruk,
Will cause . . . to eat the plant !
Its name shall be "Man Becomes Young in Old Age."
I myself shall eat (it)
And thus return to the state of my youth.'
After twenty leagues they broke off a morsel,
After thirty (further) leagues they prepared for the night.
Gilgamesh saw a well whose water was cool.
He went down into it to bathe in the water.
A serpent snuffed the fragrance of the plant;
It came up from the water and carried off the plant.
Going back it shed its slough.
Thereupon Gilgamesh sits down and weeps,
His tears running down over his face.
He took the hand of Urshanabi, the boatman:
'For whom, Urshanabi, have my hands toiled?
For whom is being spent the blood of any heart?
I have not obtained a boon for myself.
For the earth-lion ⁹ have I effected a boon!
And now the tide will bear (it) twenty leagues away!
When I opened the water-pipe and spilled the gear,
I found that which had been placed as a sign for me:
I shall withdraw,
And leave the boat on the shore!'
After twenty leagues they broke off a morsel,
After thirty (further) leagues they prepared. for the night.
When they arrived in ramparted Uruk,
Gilgamesh says to him, to Urshanabi, the boatman:
'Go up, Urshanabi, walk on the ramparts of Uruk.
Inspect the base terrace, examine its brickwork,
If its brickwork is not of burnt brick,*

*And if the Seven Wise Ones laid not its foundation.
Onc "sar" ¹⁰ is city, one sar orchards,
One sar margin land; (further) the precinct of the Temple of Ishtar.
Three sar and the precinct comprise Uruk.'*

Notes

1 The Babylonian hero of the Flood, in Sumerian his name is Ziusudra.

2 The moon-god.

3 Apparently from east to west.

4 The divine barmaid.

5 Apparently stone figures of unusual properties.

6 Meaning not dear. Perhaps some magic symbols possessing properties on par with those of the Stone Things.

7 To the Stone Things.

8 By asserting that he had not slept at all.

9 An allusion to the serpent?

10 One sar is about 8,000 gallons.

Translation by E. A. Speiser, in *Ancient Near East Texts* (Princeton, 1950), pp. 72-99, reprinted in Isaac Mendelsohn (ed.), *Religions of the Ancient Near East* Library of Religion paperback series (New York, 1955) PP. 47-115; notes by Mendelsohn