

“Have To” History: The Epic of Gilgamesh

Stuff You Don't Really Want To Know (But For Some Reason Have To)

Three Big Things:

1. The oldest surviving work of literature from anywhere in the world – put into writing nearly 4,000 years ago.
2. Gilgamesh was most likely fictional. If he *did* exist, it's unlikely he was called “Gilgamesh” or lived in Sumer or did any of the things attributed to him here or in other Mesopotamian fragments. Unless maybe he *did*. If he existed. Which he probably *didn't*.
3. The Gilgamesh story contains the earliest known account of a huge flood wiping out all life on earth except for one man and his immediate family and every variety of animal in order to repopulate the earth. Sound familiar?



Background

Mesopotamia was one of the earliest civilizations in all of world history – maybe *the* earliest. Agriculture up and down the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers evolved over 5,000 years ago, roughly the same time the Egyptians were enjoying the seemingly supernatural blessings of the Nile. The richness of regularly flooded soil allowed for abundant crop production, which in turn meant that while laboring in the earth was no cakewalk, it was possible to produce a surplus of food without every member of the community participating directly.

That allowed for specialization. Diversity of energies. It also meant strong central authority, the building of cities, and the development of writing in order to keep accurate records and facilitate both taxation and trade. The ancient Sumerians (Mesopotamia's oldest known civilization) are remembered for developing cuneiform – a funny little system in which little triangles and crescents and golf tee-shapes were etched onto clay tablets as a way to retain and share information. It's arguably the earliest form of writing known to man.

A number of those little triangles and golf tees on various fragments unearthed over the past 150 years tell the story of Gilgamesh. We still don't have all of the pieces, and some of the bits we *do* have suggest the tale evolved over time and from place to place. There are also shorter, even *older* stories involving Gilgamesh which have been uncovered as far away as Syria or Turkey – so clearly he was a thing, at least literarily. The most complete version of the Epic of Gilgamesh was discovered in the library of Ashurbanipal in Nineveh, capital of the ancient Assyrian empire, in modern-day Iraq. It's recorded on twelve stone tablets, broken and worn, and its translations supplemented by miscellaneous other sources – not all of which agree. It's incomplete, and at times bewildering, but it's also amazing, because... well, it's just *so freakin' old*.

The Story

Gilgamesh was the King of Uruk, a Sumerian city whose name likely evolved into today's “Iraq.” Two-thirds god and one-third man, he was a total stud in the worst ways. His physical training regimens, contests of strength and skill, and constant warfare utilizing the men of the city was oppressive, and the death toll high. He abused *prima nocta* (the right of the king to sleep with any virgin on her wedding night, before her new husband) so that no bride was safe, and few grooms content. The people were frustrated, and cried out to their gods for help.

The gods created Enkidu, a hairy wild forest-man who, like Gilgamesh, was part god and part mortal. He was so wild, though, that he stayed in the woods and drank out of ponds, hanging in peace with the animals. He was eventually discovered by a fur trapper who – on the advice of his god – hired a prostitute to teach him civilized living... gluttony, drunkenness, and sexual pleasures for six days and seven nights.

Enkidu was exhausted, but also quite happy, the story suggests. Weird, right?

Now that he was “civilized,” the wild animals wouldn’t hang with Enkidu the way they used to, so he figures he might as well head into town and see what’s up. There he discovers Gilgamesh about to exercise his prerogatives on yet another fresh young bride, and Enkidu blocks his way. They fight, breaking through walls and smashing through buildings, until eventually Enkidu acknowledges that Gilgamesh is, in fact, *the man*. They embrace and are besties forever thereafter.

All the sweaty wrestling and hugging may seem a bit awkward to modern readers, especially when they kiss on so many occasions and love one another “like a bride.” But these were different times, and among warriors such things were *quite* manly – even when Gilgamesh then took Enkidu home to meet his mother.

They later journey together to kill the unfortunately named – but apparently quite scary – Humbaba, monster-guardian of the forest. Kill him they do, but this upsets the gods (who are an unpredictable bunch) and they decide that Enkidu must die as a result. Gilgamesh mourns his friend, loud and long, after which he sets out to uncover the secret of eternal life as held by Utnapishtim and his wife, survivors of the great flood.

The Flood and Other Things That Sound Kinda Bible-ish

The offense which led the gods to destroy mankind varies with by version and translation. In some, people are simply *too loud*, and Enlil – one of the annoyed gods – offers the flood as a solution. Other versions suggest that the destruction was a natural result of their own sin and wickedness. None mention global warming, although this may simply reflect the limited scientific understanding of the times.

In any case, one of the gods warns Utnapishtim to build a big boat for his family and to fill it with animals. He also takes along craftsmen whose skills will be needed after the deluge.

This flood is shorter than Noah’s – a week or so – but when it’s over, Utnapishtim and his wife are granted immortality and allowed to live forever at the mouth of the life-giving river – a very big deal in a time when every known civilization in existence was built around river valleys and their flood patterns.

The story varies from its cousin in Genesis in a number of ways, but there are enough similarities to grab one’s attention. In addition to the actual flooding and the saving of animals, Utnapishtim releases various birds to determine whether or not there’s dry land available. The gods regret their decision – or at least most of them do – and while they don’t invent the rainbow as a result, they *do* scold the primary perpetrator, Enlil, and demand that in the future any punishments be more proportional to the perceived crimes. In other words, no more destroying all the earth with floods!

Once the topic of Biblical connections is breached, all sorts of things jump out at the thoughtful reader. Take Enkidu, a combination of clay and the supernatural, and Adam, made from dirt and the divine – both are happy in the wilderness (or garden) hanging out with wild animals, and both find companionship in a woman who turns out to be... compromised (at least as traditionally interpreted).

And when Gilgamesh, still torn up over the death of Enkidu, wants Utnapishtim to hook him up with eternal life, our faux-Noah isn’t sure he’s worthy. After a weird test involving lots of sleeping and moldy bread, he informs Gilgamesh of a plant which can provide eternal life – not a tree in the Garden, in this case, but a weed at the bottom of the sea. Gilgamesh seeks it by tying rocks to his feet so he can walk underwater, a nice contrast to the flood survival story he’s just heard and a clear metaphor for the grave (think baptism). He finds the appropriate vegetation, but a big snake prevents him from holding on to eternal life.

So, familiar themes and characters, but not quite the same stories.

The final tablet contains a tale out of order and out of sync with the rest. Enkidu is still alive, and Gilgamesh has lost something to the Underworld (it's not clear exactly what, although most translations go with... a mallet and a ball?) Enkidu (our Adam / Messiah figure, don't forget) offers to go get it for him, despite Gilgamesh's protests. Enkidu is a stubborn fellow, however, and down he goes. As predicted, he ends up trapped in the Underworld.

Gilgamesh prays and some gods agree to help. They crack open the ground and Enkidu's spirit rises out "like a wind." The friends are reunited and discuss the Underworld until the story ends (somewhat awkwardly and in mid-thought).

It's not clear whether or not Gilgamesh retrieved his croquet supplies.

Reflections

Like most legends or folktales, the Epic of Gilgamesh is certainly an interesting (albeit indirect) look into the lives, values, and concerns of those for whom it was composed and to whom it was told over the centuries. Historians, of course, can't help but consider ways in which it may have shaped some of the stories in the Book of Genesis. The question becomes whether or not the possible influence of the former in any way negates or reduces the spiritual importance or power of the latter.

It shouldn't, of course – but people hang their faith on the weirdest details.

Spiritual implications aside, the tales of Gilgamesh and Enkidu echo every buddy movie or superhero story composed since. Folks who study such things love debating to what extent such common themes recur endlessly because of the ways culture diffuses over time and place, or whether it's simply a matter of human wants, needs, and experiences, inevitably leading to the telling and retelling of the same basic myths.

Mostly, though, it's just plain cool because it's so freakin' old, and allows us to reach back thousands of years in time and in some small way brush up against our own humanity, our own wants and fears and thrills. Violence, sex, religion, and friendship surround this very first "hero's quest" – the same reason we read novels or binge-watch Netflix today. The good guys don't always win, but neither do they ever quite give up. Surely there's some comfort in knowing that ideal hasn't changed much.

You Wanna Sound REALLY Smart? {Extra Stuff}

Consider comparing the opening chapters of Ecclesiastes (in the Old Testament) to Tablet X:

Utnapishtim replied: "Why cry over your fate and nature? Chance fathered you. Your conception was an accidental combination of the divine and mortal. I do not presume to know how to help the likes of you."

Utnapishtim continued: "No man has ever seen Death. No one ever heard Death's voice but Death is real and Death is loud. How many times must a home be restored or a contract revised and approved? How many times must two brothers agree not to dispute what is theirs? How many wars and how many floods must there be with plague and exile in their wake? Shamash is the one who can say..."

Behold the cold, cold corpse from a distance, and then regard the body of one who sleeps. There seems no difference. How can we say which is good and which is bad? And it is also like that with other things as well. Somewhere above us, where the goddess Mammatum decides all things, Mother Chance sits with the Anunnaki and there she settles all decrees of fable and of fortune.

There they issue lengths of lives; then they issue times of death. But the last, last matter is always veiled from human beings. The length of lives can only be guessed."