Exploring Ancient World Cultures
Essays on the Ancient Near East

Storytelling, the Meaning of Life, and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

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Stories do not need to inform us of anything. They do inform us of things. From *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, for example, we know something of the people who lived in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the second and third millenniums BCE. We know they celebrated a king named Gilgamesh; we know they believed in many gods; we know they were self-conscious of their own cultivation of the natural world; and we know they were literate. These things we can fix -- or establish definitely. But stories also remind us of things we cannot fix -- of what it means to be human. They reflect our will to understand what we cannot understand, and reconcile us to mortality.

We read *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, four thousand years after it was written, in part because we are scholars, or pseudo-scholars, and wish to learn something about human history. We read it as well because we want to know the meaning of life. The meaning of life, however, is not something we can wrap up and walk away with. Discussing the philosophy of the Tao, Alan Watts explains what he believes Lao-tzu means by the line, "The five colours will blind a man's sight." "[T]he eye's sensitivity to color," Watts writes, "is impaired by the fixed idea that there are just five true colors. There is an infinite continuity of shading, and breaking it down into divisions with names distracts the attention from its subtlety" (27). Similarly, the mind's sensitivity to the meaning of life is impaired by fixed notions or perspectives on what it means to be human. There is an infinite continuity of meaning that can be comprehended only by seeing again, for ourselves. We read stories -- and reading is a kind of re-telling -- not to learn what is known but to know what cannot be known, for it is ongoing and we are in the middle of it.

To see for ourselves the meaning of a story, we need, first of all, to look carefully at what happens in the story; that is, we need to look at it as if the actions and people it describes actually took place or existed. We can articulate the questions raised by a character's actions and discuss the implications of their consequences. But we need to consider, too, how a story is put together -- how it uses the conventions of language, of events with beginnings and endings, of description, of character, and of storytelling itself to reawaken our sensitivity to the real world. The real world is the world without conventions, the unnameable, unrepresentable world -- in its continuity of action, its shadings and blurrings of character, its indecipherable patterns of being. The stories that mean most to us bring us back to our own unintelligible and yet immeasurably meaningful lives.

The Epic of Gilgamesh opens with the convention of a frame -- a prologue that sets off the story of Gilgamesh's life. An unnamed narrator states, "I will proclaim to the world the deeds of Gilgamesh" (61). Thus the narrator introduces himself before he introduces the hero, and by doing so, welcomes us, as the imaginary listeners and actual readers, into the endless present of the telling of the tale. The deeds of Gilgamesh took place in the past. Having returned from his journey and resting from his labor, Gilgamesh, the narrator recounts, engraved the whole story on a clay tablet. What we are reading, then, is the transcription of an oral telling that repeats a written telling. On the one hand the frame helps verisimilitude. By referring to Gilgamesh's own act of writing, the narrator attempts to convince us that Gilgamesh was an actual king and that the story that follows is a true story. On the other hand, by calling our attention to the act of telling, the narrator reminds us that the truth of a story might lie in the very fact of its being a story -- the undeniable fact of its narration. To deny its narration would be to deny our own existence. Either way, the frame blurs the distinction between Gilgamesh's world, or the world of the tale, and our own.

And yet there is an irony in the prologue of which the narrator himself seems unaware -- an irony that highlights our position as readers and not listeners. Praising Gilgamesh's accomplishments, the narrator invites us to survey the city of Uruk: "Look at it still today.... Touch the threshold, it is ancient.... Climb upon the wall of Uruk; walk along it, I say; regard the foundation terrace and examine the masonry: is it not burnt brick and good? The seven sages laid the foundations" (61). It seems as if the narrator is counting on the walls themselves to verify his story, while from where we stand in time and space, these walls are nowhere to be seen -- they have been buried for centuries. However, we could say that the writer of the clay tablets anticipates our distance from Uruk and asks only that we imagine the walls, the way all storytellers ask their audiences to imagine what they are about to hear. Our ability to imagine the walls -- our inability *not* to as we read the sentence that describes them -- once again makes the act of narration part of the story and forces us, as readers, into the world of the text. The story has been passed on from

narrator to narrator to listener to reader -- from writer to reader to reader. Thus even before we begin to read this story about the death of a friend and the hero's failed attempt to find immortality, we are made aware of the passage of time that connects us even as it separates us.

In the prologue we learn that Gilgamesh was two-thirds god and one-third man, and this knowledge is key to all that follows. Gilgamesh is a hero -- more beautiful, more courageous, more terrifying than the rest of us; his desires, attributes, and accomplishments epitomize our own. Yet he is also mortal: he must experience the death of others and die himself. How much more must a god rage against death than we who are merely mortal!And if he can reconcile himself with death then surely we can. In fact, without death his life would be meaningless, and the adventures that make up the epic would disappear. In celebrating Gilgamesh -- in reading *The Epic of Gilgamesh* -- we celebrate that which makes us human.

The story begins with the coming of Enkidu. As a young man and a god, Gilgamesh has no compassion for the people of Uruk. He is their king but not their shepherd; he kills their sons and rapes the daughters. Hearing the people's lament, the gods create Enkidu as a match for Gilgamesh, a second self: "`Let them contend together and leave Uruk in quiet'" (62). The plan works in several ways. First, Enkidu prevents Gilgamesh from entering the house of a bride and bridegroom; they fight and then they embrace as friends. Second, Enkidu and Gilgamesh undertake a journey into the forest to confront the terrible Humbaba. There they encourage each other to face death triumphantly:

> All living creatures born of the flesh shall sit at last in the boat of the West, and when it sinks, when the boat of Magilum sinks, they are gone; but we shall go forward and fix our eyes on this monster. (81)

While everlasting life is not his destiny, Gilgamesh will leave behind him a name that endures. "I will go to the country where the cedar is felled," he tells Enkidu. "I will set up my name in the place where the names of famous men are written" (70). Thus Gilgamesh turns his attention away from small personal desires to loftier personal desires -- desires that benefit rather than harm Uruk. We remember from the prologue that the walls of the city, made from the cedar taken from the forest, still stand in actuality or in imagination to proclaim Gilgamesh's fame, and the very first sentence of the epic attests to the immortality of his name. But the immortality of a name is less the ability to live forever than the inability to die. Third and most important, Enkidu teaches Gilgamesh what it means to be human; he teaches him the meaning of love and compassion, the meaning of loss and of growing older, the meaning of mortality.

From its beginnings, Enkidu's story raises many questions on the nature of man. Created of clay and water and dropped into the wilderness, Enkidu is "innocent of mankind," knowing "nothing of cultivated land" (63). He lives in joy with the beasts until a trapper sees that Enkidu is destroying the traps and helping the beasts escape. The trapper needs to tame Enkidu just as the people of Uruk need to tame Gilgamesh, or to redirect his desires. As we read the story, we are not necessarily on the trapper's or the people's sides; we may identify more with the heroes -- with Enkidu and Gilgamesh. Civilization is less a thing than a process, the transformation of the primitive. Without the primitive, civilization would cease to exist. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* helps us see past the conventional classifications of "civilized" and "primitive" so that we might recall what each of us gains and loses in developing from one state of being to another. Would civilized man, if he could, go back to being primitive? Or, to put it another way, what does primitive man lose in the process of becoming civilized -- and what does he gain?

What Enkidu gains is wisdom. The harlot -- brought to the wilderness to trap Enkidu -- stands for this wisdom and speaks for civilization, even as she stands also as an outcast and an object of sexual desire. Enkidu is seduced by the harlot and then rejected by the beasts. This seems a dirty trick. Recognizing the corruption in himself, civilized man corrupts primitive man to weaken him and make him one of his own. Yet for Enkidu as for human beings in general, sexual desire leads to domesticity, or love. "Enkidu was grown weak," the narrator tells us, "for wisdom was in him, and the thoughts of a man were in his heart." The woman says to him, "You are wise, Enkidu, and now you have become like a god. Why do you want to run wild with the beasts in the hills?" She tells him about "strong-walled Uruk" and "the blessed temple of Ishtar and of Anu, of love and of heaven," and about Gilgamesh himself. Enkidu is pleased: "he longed for a comrade, for one who would understand his heart" (65).

Ultimately, Enkidu's journey out of the wilderness and his adventure with Gilgamesh lead to his death, and, looking back in his sickness, Enkidu curses the walls of the city: "O, if I had known the conclusion!If I had known that this was all the good that would come of it, I would have raised the axe and split you into little pieces and set up here a gate of wattle instead" (90). He curses the trapper and the harlot, who had destroyed his innocence -- as if innocence were precisely innocence of death and without consciousness, or knowledge, or wisdom, there would be no death. Yet Shamash, the Sun God, reminds him that the loss of innocence brings recompense:

> Enkidu, why are you cursing the woman, the mistress who taught you to eat bread fit for gods and drink wine of kings? She who put upon you a magnificent garment, did she not give you glorious Gilgamesh for your companion, and has not Gilgamesh, your own brother, made you rest on a royal bed and recline on a couch at his left hand?

Above all, Shamash reminds Enkidu that he will be mourned by the people of Uruk and that "When you are dead [Gilgamesh] will let his hair grow long for your sake, he will wear a lion's pelt and wander through the desert" (91). Hearing Shamash, Enkidu changes his curse to a blessing. Bitter as his death is to him, and to Gilgamesh, it gives meaning to his life, for it makes companionship a thing of consequence. When Enkidu tells Gilgamesh his dream of the Underworld, Gilgamesh responds, "we must treasure the dream whatever the terror; for the dream has shown that misery comes at last to the healthy man, the end of life is sorrow" (93). Enkidu is in the story to die. In his rage and despair, Gilgamesh must live with the death of his friend, and with the knowledge that "What my brother is now, that shall I be" (97).

Afraid of this knowledge, even hoping to deny it, Gilgamesh goes on a search for everlasting life. Two-thirds god, he is able to go farther than the rest of us could go except by participating in the act of storytelling. In the repetition of passages, the story gives us not only a description but the sense of Gilgamesh's journey into the twelve leagues of darkness: "At the end of five leagues, the darkness was thick and there was no light, he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him. At the end of six leagues the darkness was thick and there was no light, he could see nothing ahead and nothing behind him" (99). Gilgamesh speaks for us when he says, "Although I am no better than a dead man, still let me see the light of the sun" (100). And in the repetition of his own description of himself and recounting of what has happened to him, we feel his grief over the loss of his friend; we feel his aging, and the inevitability of our own grief and aging: "[W]hy should not my cheeks be starved and my face drawn? . . . Enkidu my brother, whom I loved, the end of mortality has overtaken him" (101).

Beside the sea, Gilgamesh meets Siduri, "the woman of the vine, the maker of wine," who reminds him of the meaningfulness of being human. "Gilgamesh, where are you hurrying to?" she asks.

> 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. (102)

If it is "life" the gods retain in their keeping, it is not human life, for human life depends on the passage of time and the possibility of death.

Yet Gilgamesh still cannot rest. He continues his journey to Utnapishtim the Faraway, the only mortal to whom the gods have given everlasting life. With Urshanabi, the ferryman, Gilgamesh crosses the waters of death. Like Siduri, Utnapishtim asks Gilgamesh, "Where are you hurrying to?" (105), and in answer to Gilgamesh's question, "How shall I find the life for which I am searching?" he says, "There is no permanence" (106). But he reveals the mystery of his own possession of everlasting life. He tells Gilgamesh the story of the flood, of the time when the gods, unable to sleep for the uproar raised by mankind, agreed to destroy mankind, and would have succeeded had not Ea, one of man's creators, instructed Utnapishtim to build a boat and "take up into [it] the seed of all living creatures" (108). The story is familiar to us not only because it anticipates Noah's story in the book of Genesis, but because it is the story of life, the story of destruction and renewal.

When Gilgamesh is ready to begin his long journey home, Utnapishtim, at the urging of his wife, reveals a second mystery of the gods. He tells Gilgamesh of a plant growing under water that can restore youth to a man. Gilgamesh finds the plant and picks it; he decides to take it to Uruk to give it to the old men. But as Gilgamesh bathes in the cool water of a well, a serpent rises up and snatches away the plant; immediately it sloughs its skin and returns to the well. Again this story is familiar to us, not only because we recognize this snake as a precursor of the more sinister one that appears in the Garden of Eden, but because we comprehend it as a symbol. In the Sumerian world, Ningizzida, the god of the serpent, is "the lord of the Tree of Life" (119). While Gilgamesh himself has lost the ability to live forever, or the opportunity to pass on this ability to the men of Uruk, it is enough that the snake recalls for us, in its sloughing of its skin, nature's pattern of regeneration.

And with this dramatic statement of theme, Gilgamesh returns to the strong-walled city of Uruk, and the story itself returns to its beginning. Gilgamesh says to the ferryman, with whom he has made the journey home, "Urshanabi, climb up on to the wall of Uruk, inspect its foundation terrace, and examine well the brickwork; see if it is not of burnt bricks; and did not the seven wise men lay these foundations?" We have taken the ferryman's place by passing the story on -- even if only to ourselves. The narrator tells us once again that Gilgamesh, worn out with his labor, "engraved on a stone the whole story" (117). And finally, with the death of Gilgamesh -- the end of the story and the end of the telling of it -- the text returns us to our mortal lives.

Works Cited

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