

The Spirituality of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

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The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a masterpiece of world literature. This four-thousand-year-old classic is uniquely valuable as the world's oldest extant written story, for the window into ancient Mesopotamian culture it provides, and for its continuing ability to enthrall and entertain. It is an exciting, heroic adventure tale on the order of the *Odyssey*, but much older. Almost completely lost and forgotten for centuries, the epic's nineteenth century rediscovery - one of the most astonishing chapters in modern colonial archaeology - is a wonderful tale in its own right. Since then, it has been the subject of fascinating literary forensics as scholars have reconstructed the history of its composition. It has been treated as a children's tale, set to music, and made into a futuristic anime film.¹

A very brief review of the plot of the epic might go something like this. Gilgamesh, two-thirds god and one-third human, is the tyrannical king of the city-state, Uruk. The gods hear the cries of his subjects and create an equal - a rival and a distraction - for Gilgamesh: Enkidu. At first Enkidu lives among the animals in the wild until being civilized through sex with, and instruction from, the temple prostitute, Shamhat. He comes to Uruk and engages Gilgamesh in a great wrestling struggle. He loses the wrestling match but gains the respect of Gilgamesh, and the two become great friends. There follows a series of adventures together including victorious battles with Humbaba, the guardian of a cedar forest that Gilgamesh wishes to plunder, and with the Bull of Heaven sent by the spurned and vengeful goddess, Ishtar. Eventually, for causing such upheaval, Enkidu is killed by the gods. Gilgamesh, in his despair, launches into a great quest for immortality. After a long and arduous journey, he is refused the gift of immortality by the gods, and a rejuvenative plant that could restore his youth literally slips from his grasp and is lost. Finally, Gilgamesh returns home to Uruk convinced of his own inevitable mortality. Ultimately, his solace is in knowing he will be remembered for the great city he built, the wisdom he has gained, and his story.

The spiritual quest of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*

Such a bare-bones summary of the plot does not do justice to the epic because the real value in any story lies in our process of interpreting its meaning. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, like any provocative story, may be viewed through any number of interpretive lenses.² The present essay considers *Gilgamesh* through a lens of contemporary spirituality, attempting to generate insights about both the epic and our own spiritual situation. The notion of “spirituality” is, however, greatly contested and confused. To clarify, I assert for the purposes of this essay that “spirituality” entails three perennial and widespread human concerns:

- Questions of identity / meaning / being. Who am I?
- Questions of purpose / life practice / doing. What should I do?
- Questions of fulfillment / happiness. What truly satisfies?

How well does *Gilgamesh* model success in meeting these three concerns of spirituality?

Identity / meaning / being

The *Gilgamesh* we first meet is confident in his identity as a two-thirds divine warrior-king. However, it is a false confidence in that he does not understand his humanity, especially as it involves his mortality. This becomes painfully clear when Enkidu dies and *Gilgamesh* realizes that the same fate awaits him. It shatters and terrifies *Gilgamesh* that Enkidu *is* no more. He wants to go on having an identity, meaning something, being something, and death appears to frustrate utterly this desire. For a man whose sense of meaning and identity is so entirely dependent upon vitality, action, and recognition for his deeds, the thought of being nothing and doing nothing is entirely unacceptable. Even at the end of the story, it is unclear that *Gilgamesh* has developed a self-understanding that is any more positive and able to withstand life’s vicissitudes.

Purpose / life practice / doing

Being a man of action is no guarantee that one does the *right* things. From the very beginning of his story, King Gilgamesh demonstrates poor judgment in terms of how he will rule. Despite his blustery confidence, he does not know how to act, how to live, how to relate to others. Enkidu is deliberately taught by Shamhat how to act like a civilized man, but there is no one to teach Gilgamesh how to live well within civilization. He neither rules well nor knows what to do with his restless youthful energy. Early lines of the epic describe Gilgamesh as a rapacious tyrant:

*In the enclosure of Uruk he strode back and forth,
Lording it like a wild bull, his head thrust high,
The onslaught of his weapons had no equal.
His teammates stood forth by his game stick,
He was harrying the young men of Uruk beyond reason,
Gilgamesh would leave no son to his father,
Day and night he would rampage fiercely. . .
Gilgamesh would leave no girl to her [mother]!
The warrior's daughter, young man's spouse,
Goddesses kept hearing their complaints.³*

Enkidu, before meeting and reconciling with Gilgamesh, is horrified at hearing this report about the king of Uruk from a traveler:

*People's loins are open for the king.
For Gilgamesh, king of ramparted Uruk,
People's loins are open for the taking!
He mates with the lawful wife,
He first, the groom after.
By divine decree pronounced,
From the cutting of his umbilical cord, she is his due.*

*At the man's account, his [Enkidu's] face went pale.*⁴

When turned outward toward conflicts with Humbaba and Ishtar, Gilgamesh's reckless, combative exploits are celebrated by his people – perhaps in part because these adventures distract their king from abusing them for a time. But when the epic refers to Gilgamesh as “the people's shepherd,” the sarcasm and irony are quite clear: this is a shepherd who victimizes his own flock.

Ultimately though, Gilgamesh becomes disillusioned with all this militant heroism when Enkidu is cut down by a protracted, feverish illness. Confronted by the problem of death, he doesn't know what course to set, what is worthwhile doing. What is left for the man of action when he faces a foe he can do nothing about? What is left for the man of action when he can no longer *do anything*? Gilgamesh sits for days with the body and mourns, but such inactivity is not his way. He sets out to do something about mortality, and his failure is not for lack of trying.

Fulfillment / happiness

For Gilgamesh, as for all of us, the three elements of spirituality are interconnected and happiness is dependent upon finding solutions to the first two problems. What we need is a life pattern anchored in the reality of who we really are, lifting us toward our best potential selves, and providing rich experiences of profound satisfaction. The *Epic of Gilgamesh* offers as many as six alternative values systems - six different ways of “doing happiness.”

The first proposal we meet for a life of happiness is the Gilgamesh of the early part of the epic. His is a life of fame-obsessed, hyper-masculine, heroic bravado. The Gilgamesh of the early part of the epic wants to be remembered for his heroic exploits. He expresses contemptuous fearlessness in the face of danger and death, asserting that to die a glorious, heroic death is a fine fate. A warrior's compensation for death is in being remembered as a great hero. However, this bravado crumbles when he finally faces the personal reality of death. He and Enkidu had achieved the pinnacle of heroism and fame,

yet when Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh is utterly undone, finding his value system shockingly useless in the face of the actual experience of death. To honor his friend, and in keeping with a fame-oriented value system, Gilgamesh commissions the construction of a glorious statue of Enkidu. Here is a tangible, long-lasting tribute to his friend's life of heroic action. And yet, although it will increase and preserve Enkidu's fame, Gilgamesh recognizes that even this is not enough to provide lasting satisfaction. Gilgamesh is a famous warrior-king, and his exploits will be remembered at least for a time after he is gone, but it is not enough; it does not satisfy. Rather than build a similar statue for himself, he abandons his life in Uruk and sets off in pursuit of immortality.

A second life-model is represented by Enkidu's original naïve naturalism. A reader bringing contemporary ecological sensibilities to the story might find the early Enkidu charming and inspiring, but within the world of the text his example is not taken as a serious option at all. Remaining one with the animals is portrayed in the story as impossible for one who is truly human. To be human is to be civilized, urbanized, unnatural. Even as he dies, Enkidu acknowledges that it was better to leave his natural state and come to Uruk than to have remained in his animal form. It is too much to ask of the Mesopotamian worldview that it would produce a Romantic celebration of living in close harmony with the natural world. The epic and its culture of origin are utterly convinced of the superiority of the urban and civilized.

A third understanding of fulfillment is found in the words of Siduri, an inn-keeper Gilgamesh meets while on his immortality quest. Siduri's advice to Gilgamesh emphasizes simple, relational domestic values. As she says:

*As for you, Gilgamesh, let your stomach be full,
Always be happy, night and day.
Make every day a delight,
Night and day play and dance.
Your clothes should be clean,
Your head should be washed,
You should bathe in water,
Look proudly on the little one holding your hand,*

*Let your mate be always blissful in your loins,
This, then, is the work of mankind.*⁵

Her alternative vision of happiness is not so much argued against as ignored. Gilgamesh's friendship with Enkidu, in fact, has been diverting him from establishing marital or paternal relationships in his life. The epic could have ended in an affirmation of the value of Gilgamesh's loving relationship with Enkidu, asserting that this love - despite its inclusion of heartbreaking loss - was enough for a lifetime, but it simply does not. We might imagine Gilgamesh moving on to establish new loving relationships, but he does not. He neither develops new intimate friendships nor takes pleasure in marriage and children. We might like relationality to be the ultimate value of the story, but it is not.

Gilgamesh did not give Siduri's relational values fair consideration, but the same can certainly not be said of the next route to fulfillment. The entire second half of the epic is taken up with Gilgamesh's pursuit of fulfillment through immortality. If death is the problem, then surely the answer is not to die. Since death is the natural fate of all humans, Gilgamesh hopes *supernatural* powers will provide the solution he seeks. But he finds that even being two-thirds god can not prevent him from dying. Only the gods have the power to grant immortality, and Gilgamesh has no leverage with them. They are arbitrary and unpersuadable on this point. The supernatural solution is denied him and there is nothing he can do about it.

Considering the essential soteriological role gods play within the subsequently developing religions of the West, it is noteworthy that, within the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, their role in persons' achievement of spiritual satisfaction is rather limited. The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, like the Greek pantheon or the Hindu *Vedas*, assumes a polytheistic system of gods and goddesses with different personalities and varying purposes and interests. These deities have the power to influence human welfare for better or worse. They vary in their relations with Gilgamesh from friendly assistance to murderous hostility. They are sometimes helpful to him in accomplishing his goals but they are inconsistent allies. They can be wise counselors and will sometimes intervene in worldly affairs on behalf of their human favorites, but they are also apt to be powerful, even deadly, opponents of

human plans. Ultimately though, they won't give him what he really wants - to be immortal like them – and they offer very little in the way of positive, constructive spiritual advice.

Near the end of the epic, Gilgamesh's hopes are temporarily raised when he thinks he has found another route (the fifth in our counting) to fulfillment: bodily rejuvenation, perpetual youthfulness, through herbal remedy. Instead of a supernatural gift from the gods, this plant is a natural substance that provides, a bit more awkwardly, something very close to the immortality that he thought he might receive by divine gift. But in the end the alchemy solution escapes him due to his own all-too-human carelessness. He loses the plant to a snake that sloughs off its skin (it is rejuvenated) and escapes. Apparently, a natural solution can not overcome his natural, mortal, fallible condition.

In its final lines, the epic returns at last to the city walls of Uruk and abruptly reveals the story's ultimate solution to Gilgamesh's spiritual problems: lasting achievement. Gilgamesh declares:

*. . . Pace out the walls of Uruk.
Study the foundation terrace and examine the brickwork.
Is not its masonry of kiln-fired brick?
And did not seven masters lay its foundations?
One square mile of city, one square mile of gardens,
One square mile of clay pits, a half square mile of Ishtar's dwelling,
Three and a half square miles is the measure of Uruk!*⁶

It is the city itself - its size, proportions, temple and fine construction - that is Gilgamesh's final source of satisfaction. The story closes with Gilgamesh striking a familiar boastful pose but, given all that he has been through, perhaps we may interpret these words more charitably than had they been spoken by a younger, less experienced man. Having lived out his epic spiritual journey, he is wiser now with a richer appreciation for his worldly accomplishments. He has a compelling story to share with others, even if it is largely a cautionary tale. He has been both the author of his own story

and its main character, and at the end of the epic he returns home to be its narrator. The story does not describe Gilgamesh as a happy man; it cites his accomplishments and leaves it at that.

The Spiritual Failure of Gilgamesh

The fact that the story ends where it began – at the walls of Uruk – provides a beautiful and compelling symmetry and closure to the epic. And yet, as one finishes reading the epic, there remains a nagging sense that we must have missed something in the final lines of the story. What exactly did Gilgamesh learn? Is he a changed man and will he live any differently for having experienced all he has? We are assured by the opening lines of the epic that Gilgamesh “was wise in all things,” but as we reread the final lines it is difficult not to conclude that Gilgamesh has made disappointingly little spiritual progress. He has come home from his adventures with a wonderful story to tell and two spiritual options (immortality and natural rejuvenation) decisively eliminated, but he has surprisingly little to offer in the way of a positive response to the spiritual issues that propelled the epic all along. The difference between the ending’s achievement-oriented spirituality and the story’s early emphasis on heroic fame - which the story itself found wanting - is unclear and unconvincing. And that’s the great spiritual failure of the epic.

The spirituality of achievement has an enormous “Ozymandias” problem. That famous poem by Percy Bysshe Shelley seems a direct rebuttal to Gilgamesh’s final speech. It describes the ruins of an ancient statue found in a barren wasteland, and the pathetic inscription on its pedestal:

*“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!”
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”⁷*

So much for the walls of Uruk. Time destroys all material achievements of this world; something Gilgamesh senses but manages to repress in his final statement. And if the spirituality of achievement is ultimately ineffective for heroic, partially-divine warrior-kings like Gilgamesh, it is even less promising for ordinary mortals! If even King Gilgamesh's fulfillment via achievement rings hollow, of what constructive spiritual use is that model to his subjects? Given the inability of the epic to provide convincing fulfillment for its readers/hearers, it is little wonder Middle Eastern culture continued to develop other spiritual paths.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* settles upon a naturalistic spirituality. Despite an obvious belief in gods, a lively sense of relationship with them, and an assumption that they have the power to directly affect human wellbeing, Gilgamesh ultimately pins his hope for satisfaction on this-worldly achievements largely of his own doing. The Mesopotamian worldview took for granted a Netherworld of the dead, but it was not a locus of human hope. Judaism, Christianity and Islam eventually put more emphasis upon divine rescue to a blissful other-worldly paradise or heaven, the faithful survival of a Godly people, or a messianically reconstructed world, but these options are simply not within the imagination of the *Gilgamesh* epic. We have noted three other naturalistic alternatives the epic either abandons or never really considers: herbal rejuvenation, a spirituality of nature as modeled by the primal Enkidu, or a spirituality of relationship as recommended by Siduri. The first of these options has always had its adherents and today is echoed in hopes for technologically-assisted immortality via "post-human" genetic engineering, cloning, and nanotechnology. Although the second and third spiritualities appeal to many in our own time, they were dismissed within the epic, no doubt reflecting the values of the dominant (urban, male) story-telling voices of the Mesopotamian culture.

Conclusion

We might at this point remind ourselves that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has always been a dynamic, evolving tale. It likely began as separate, oral hero stories gradually and inconsistently collected and reframed around Gilgamesh. Although scholars refer to one edition of the epic as the "standard Babylonian version," this is one snapshot moment in

the history of the tale. There is no once-and-for-all version. A controversial twelfth tablet, although usually not considered part of the standard version of the epic, illustrates the ongoing process of reconsidering and editing the Gilgamesh story. Apparently, some in the ancient world felt a spiritual dissatisfaction with the epic similar to that expressed here. They developed additional Gilgamesh stories but none provided a significant advance on the spiritual issues of identity, purpose, and fulfillment. For example, a tale of Gilgamesh's funeral (featuring a wife and son not mentioned in other stories) merely extends the heroic-fame motif that the story already found wanting. And a story of Gilgamesh in the Netherworld turns out to be just another adventure of a brave and resourceful superman rather than a serious attempt to offer people a compelling vision of a hopeful afterlife.

Our understanding of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* has evolved considerably over the past century with the discovery of new fragments of the stories. It is possible that archaeology might yet bring us more Gilgamesh stories or fill in missing details from the stories we know so far. However, considering what we have seen to date, it seems unlikely that a version of the Gilgamesh story will emerge from the ancient world that provides a truly satisfying spirituality. Gilgamesh's spiritual quest, like that of the Western world, is incomplete and in need of ever new chapters.

Notes

¹ See Benjamin R. Foster, trans. and ed., *The epic of Gilgamesh* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2001). This Norton Critical Edition of the epic includes an ancient Mesopotamian children's poem, "The Gilgamesh letter" (pp. 167-168). For a modern children's edition of the epic see Geraldine McCaughrean, *Gilgamesh the hero* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, 2003). For a musical adaptation, see Tony Garone, *The epic of Gilgamesh* (Helipolis Productions, 2001). The film is Masahiko Murata, *Gilgamesh* (ADV Films: 2007).

² For example, see W.T.S. Thackara, "The epic of Gilgamesh: A spiritual biography" (<http://www.theosophy-nw.org/theosnw/world/mideast/mi-wtst.htm>. Retrieved 12-1-09.) for a theosophical interpretation. Or see my "Exploring diversity through the 'epic of Gilgamesh,'" *Confluence*, vol. xiv, no. 2 (spring 2009), for an interpretation emphasizing the epic's pedagogical value for studying modern issues of diversity.

³ Foster, 5.

⁴ Ibid, 15.

⁵ Ibid, 75.

⁶ Ibid, 95.

⁷ Percy Bysshe Shelley (1818 originally). *Ozymandias*. Retrieved 12-27-09 from http://www.online-literature.com/shelley_percy/672/.