



The Epic of Gilgamesh: A Saga of Humanism Mythified

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Abstract

Gilgamesh is the story of the eponymous hero. Gilgamesh recounts the saga of the oldest order. Thorkild Jacobsen, a noted Sumerologist observes that it is the story of learning to face reality, a story of "growing up". Essentially a primary epic or what is known as epic of growth, Gilgamesh depicts the god-centric world view in which human pursuit of glory was limited. Nevertheless, Gilgamesh's virility is suggestive of the cultural matrix that made the earliest human effort in epical dimension to cross the bar imposed on the mortals by the Immortals above. In this paper, an attempt will be to find that heaven and gods, as mythified by human imagination, are the first step towards the civilizational mechanism, and a hero like Gilgamesh is instrumental in this civilizational mission.

Keywords: Gilgamesh, Mythified, transformation, human barbarism, Mesopotamia.

"Gilgamesh is stupendous", - said Rainer Maria Rilke after reading the translation of the epic made by the German Assyriologist Arthur Ungnad. Rilke observed that Gilgamesh was "das Epos der Todesfurcht" – "the epic about the fear of death." Written in Cuneiform script in hundreds of tablets discovered from various places of ancient Mesopotamia, ostensibly by several hands through the centuries, Gilgamesh is the story of the eponymous hero. He was the king of Uruk, a province of ancient Mesopotamia by the river Ufrates. This earliest effort to compose a great saga of human virility and quest for immortality was started, as evidence certifies, during 2600 B.C. However, the systematic epical efforts started probably from 2100 B.C. The epic was discovered by modern Assyriologists Austen Henry Layard, Hormuzd Rassam and W.K. Loftus in 1853 from the ruins of the library in Nineveh of the 7th century B.C. Assyrian king Ashurbanipal. George Smith was the first modern translator of this epic who made it during the 1970s, though the first Arabian translation by Taha Bariq was done in the 1960s. This sumptuous saga has been translated in no less than sixteen languages, and the original story is scattered in more than eighty manuscripts retrieved from various places. The

clay tablets were mainly found in the ancient cities of Mesopotamia, the Levant, and Anatolia, the sites in modern Iraq. The Cuneiform writing was invented in the city-states of lower Mesopotamia in about 3000 B.C. Gilgamesh was the ruler of Uruk during 2700 B.C., and he was started to be mythicized in written form during the century that followed. The available texts of Gilgamesh fall broadly in five chapters. The first chapter, 'He who saw the Deep', composed in Akkadian language, is of central significance in so far as the story-line is concerned. Chapters 2-4 are fragmentary in nature. Chapter 2 contains texts of the Old Babylonian period; Chapter 3 comprises materials from the Middle Babylonian period; and Chapter 4 contains texts from the same period, found from the Levant and Anatolia. The final chapter has five narrative poems in the Sumerian language, which are often regarded as of seminal significance as these poems are about Bilgamesh, the Sumerian name for Gilgamesh.

The epic's setting is the Sumerian city-state Uruk governed by Gilgamesh, a semi-divine person, as his mother was the goddess Ninsun and his father was Lugalbanda king of Uruk. The description of the physical features of Gilgamesh in tablets 3 – 15 of Chapter 2 is fascinating, and it draws parallelism with Achilles in *The Iliad*:

Two-thirds of him are divine and one-third human. The gods themselves perfected his body; Ninsun, moreover, endowed him with beauty. Within the walls of Uruk, he displayed strength as great as that of a buffalo with its head held high, and his weapon blows are without rival. (Homer)

Gilgamesh was a tyrant at whose pleasure all women waited, and all men served. He enjoyed the 'Lord's Right' to sleep with brides on their wedding day. Crushed by this oppression, his subjects begged gods to free them from this torturer and decided with the gods' help to create a giant to fight against him and purge them of this curse of a king. Thus gods helped them with Enkidu, a beastly human being who lived in caves. Unaware of civilizational decorum, this hairy ape with enormous strength destroyed everything that came in his way. Gilgamesh first saw him in a vision, and then, coming to learn of his existence from a hunter, sent Shamhat, a temple courtesan to seduce him. This courtesan spent seven days and nights with Enkidu and succeeded in changing him with human qualities. Enkidu followed her to the city and gradually was civilized. He met the king and fell into a harsh confrontation. The two got involved in fierce combat, combat that ended in enduring friendship. They went together to fight Humbaba, a fire-spitting monster, and the two succeeded in killing with the help of Shamash, the sun-god.

The story takes a different turn as, after their return from successful adventures, goddess Ishtar, bewitched by the exploits of Gilgamesh, made her advances, but Gilgamesh summarily rejected her as he knew of her mistreatment of her earlier lovers like Dumuzi. Gilgamesh called her 'a shoe which hurts the foot', and, blinded by the spirit of revenge, the goddess created a heavenly bull capable of destroying Gilgamesh and his state. Gugalanna, the bull was sent by the god Anu, the father of Ishtar. Enkidu managed to hold the bull by its tail and Gilgamesh plunged his sword between its withers and its horns. Spirited by this success, Enkidu insulted Ishtar so that the goddess took her revenge by making him ill and agonized for twelve days, and eventually, Enkidu died. The metamorphosis of Gilgamesh followed the death of Enkidu. Inconsolable Gilgamesh wept for his friend for seven days and nights with the hope of bringing him back to life. After his burial, Gilgamesh wandered in the deserts, terrorized by the prospect of death. He was haunted by seeking ways to immortality. Encouraged by the instance of Uta-Napishtim who survived the god-sent flood, Gilgamesh began his adventures in quest of

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immortality to finally realize that the best way to gain immortality for a mortal is through the path of good deeds rendered for the betterment of mankind. The walls of the city-state of Uruk, made by Gilgamesh, were such a great work that gave him immortality.

Gilgamesh had his transcendence through a series of adventures and quasi-divine experiences. The door of the sun was opened to him by its guardians, men-scorpions. The sight of one of them was enough for a man to die, but the divine part of Gilgamesh was recognized, and he was spared. He made his journey for twelve hours through the underground darkness. On his way, he met the nymph Siduri who made her futile effort to divert him from his purpose. Gilgamesh crossed the waters of death to finally meet Uta-Napishtim, who advised him not to sleep for six days and seven nights to get him accustomed to immortality. Gilgamesh, however, slept a profound sleep to wake up only after the seventh night. He perceived his folly and submitted to Uta-Napishtim for help. Uta-Napishtim then revealed to him where he would find the plant called 'the-old-man-becomes-young-again'. Gilgamesh searched the plant from the bottom of the sea and took it with him on his way home to share it with his subjects. On the way back, he stopped to bathe in a stream, and a serpent, attracted by the magic plant, ate it. Gilgamesh lost his last hope of gaining immortality and went back to Uruk to accept his fate and resume his royal duties of a mortal.

The most prominent feature of the saga of Gilgamesh is the immense space created for hundreds of other myths and epical narratives. Gilgamesh is the Sumerian Achilles, though not so ill-fated. The transformation of Enkidu finds a modern fictional version in the popular stories of Tarzan. Humbaba, the fire-spitting monster, finds the form of a fire-spitting dragon in the Old Norse story of Beowulf. The story of Gugalanna, the heavenly bull, is retold with a difference in Ovid's *Metamorphoses* story of Dedalus. The story of the god-sent flood for six days and nights, which Gilgamesh hears from Uta-Napishtim, is retold in the Old Testament Bible in the form of the great Deluge and Noah's ark. Most importantly, the mortal quest for immortality finds thousands of mythical versions like the stories of Tithonus and the Sybil of Cumae. Following Andrew George, we may say that Gilgamesh emerges out as a 'cultural hero' of the old world, a world in the infancy of civilizational progress. He is the 'Everyman' who transcends the mortal milieu successfully in search of the ideal.

That Gilgamesh is a composite work of epical efforts for centuries by many minds of ancient Mesopotamia is evident from the scattered tablets discovered from various places, and the lack of epic unity, even if we ignore the conspicuous lack of balance in the narrative. Gilgamesh is, of course, the central point of reference and the linking cord in the narrative thread, but the story certainly lacks an epical sense of ennoblement and unity. The deeds of the hero follow a pattern of development with a motive of exploration for the ultimate truth, and Gilgamesh certainly has the grandeur of an epic hero; nonetheless the narrative, despite several efforts from modern editors, cannot fill up the gaps at certain points, and definitely fails to smooth out the jolting and hackneyed blocks. It is primarily because Gilgamesh recounts the saga of the oldest order. Thorkild Jacobsen, a noted Sumerologist observes that it is the story of learning to face reality, a story of "growing up". Essentially a primary epic or what is known as epic of growth, Gilgamesh depicts the god-centric world view in which human pursuit of glory was limited. Nevertheless, Gilgamesh's virility is suggestive of the cultural matrix that made the earliest human effort in epical dimension to cross the bar imposed on the mortals by the Immortals above.

The close proximity of the human world and the divine, as depicted in Gilgamesh, is of immense significance. The world of Gilgamesh was almost savage, men roaming the land like the beasts of the field, naked but hairy, and for sustenance grazing on grass. Early human history, as depicted by Berossus, a Babylonian scholar of the fourth century B.C., was without government, cities or social institutions, and men at this stage 'lived without laws just as wild animals'. The creation of Enkidu in Tablet I, alludes to this tradition:

He knows not a people, nor even a country, Coated in hair like the god of the animals,
With gazelles, he grazes on grasses.

This early phase of human barbarism is in contrast with the city-dwelling gods. In Sumerian literary tradition this conflicting co-existence has prefigured recurrently. The innately rebellious and unruly nature of man needed mythification to be schooled for a better life under the divine's auspices. A superior human being is conceived and mythified, often with quasi-divine potentials, to lead the baser human beings to the paths of glory and greatness. According to Babylonian mythology, the civilization of mankind was the work of the gods, who sent kingship from heaven, and especially the god Ea, who dispatched the Seven Sages to Eridu and other early cities. Foremost among the sages was the fish-man Oaness-Adapa who rose from the sea. So, we find that heaven and gods, as mythified by human imagination, are the first step towards the civilizational mechanism, and a hero like Gilgamesh is instrumental in this civilizational mission.

William L. Moran (1984), an Assyriologist, has observed that Gilgamesh is 'a document of humanism' as it is a tale of human world, characterized by an 'insistence on human values' and an 'acceptance of human limitations'. Nothing can be truer than that. What Moran insists is to read this fictional enterprise as a human saga of ambitions and frustrations, not as a myth in form of an epic. In fact, any piece of mythological composition should have two obvious features: god-centricism and explanation of the origin of some aspect or aspects of the natural and social world. Both the features are there in Gilgamesh, but the primary focus is on man rather than god. Andrew George (2014) makes a very pertinent observation at this point: "In the main the function of the poem is not to explain origins. It is more interested in examining the human condition as it is."

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The Epic of Gilgamesh: A Saga of Humanism Mythified

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