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Underlying Motifs in the Hero's Quest for Immortality in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Allen Elia Seudin

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Resumo

Há cinco mil anos, o povo da fértil terra da Mesopotâmia cantava a literatura da sua notável civilização. Um único poema, contudo, permaneceu firme no seu coração e memória ao longo dos próximos milénios. O povo da cidade de Uruk (a Érec bíblica) celebrou a vida do seu poderoso rei Gilgamesh que, dotado de poderes sobrenaturais, embarcou numa longa demanda por glória e imortalidade física durante a qual matou monstros, confrontou deuses e deusas, perdeu o seu amigo mais próximo, buscou o sobrevivente do dilúvio de quem aprendeu segredos e regressou a casa mais maduro onde escreveu a sua história numa estela em pedra. Embora Gilgamesh não tenha conseguido alcançar a imortalidade física, o seu poema perpetuou o seu nome pela eternidade.

A história miraculosa da recuperação da epopeia em meados do século XIX e o seu impacto contínuo nos leitores durante o século XX são uma prova sólida da sua intemporalidade. *Gilgamesh* não é apenas espantoso devido ao seu tema eminente, mas também devido a todos os outros ingredientes que dele sobressaem e que nos tocam profundamente. Muito semelhante à Bíblia, o livro de Gilgamesh expressa a ânsia e curiosidade humanas por aquilo que se encontra para além do nosso horizonte. Impele-nos a sair da nossa zona de conforto e enfrentar os desafios da vida. Também nos ajuda a lidar de forma correcta com questões existenciais, e guia-nos ao longo do nosso caminho de modo a tornarmo-nos indivíduos melhores através da empatia que devemos mostrar em relação aos nossos semelhantes. Em última instância, a história promove a ideia de que o conhecimento substitui a imortalidade física sendo a solução perfeita que devemos incorporar nas nossas vidas.

Esta dissertação faz um esforço para aludir a tudo o que era relevante na antiga Mesopotâmia e em particular na *Epopeia de Gilgamesh*. O conhecimento sobre esta cultura remota, sobre a sua evolução a nível literário, e sobre os seus ideais religiosos facilita a tarefa de compreender os vários motivos, símbolos e elementos dispersos ao longo da epopeia.

Deste modo, no primeiro capítulo deste estudo, oferece-se uma breve visão geral sobre a história da Mesopotâmia, sobre a recuperação das tábuas de Gilgamesh das ruínas da biblioteca do grande rei assírio Assurbanípal (687-627 a.C.) e sobre a historicidade do rei Gilgamesh. Abordam-se ainda os métodos de circulação da literatura de Gilgamesh dentro e fora da Mesopotâmia e da tradição oral para a escrita. Na secção seguinte, esta dissertação traça os estádios de evolução da literatura de Gilgamesh a partir daquilo que no início eram apenas contos dispersos escritos em língua suméria, passando pela primeira tentativa, já no período Paleo-Babilónico, de os unificar numa única obra literária, até à versão mais completa da epopeia, a designada Versão Corrente Babilónica.

A estrutura desta versão tardia é observada cuidadosamente, uma vez que apresenta características muito significativas, tais como o prólogo, a conhecida estrofe que enquadra a narrativa, e a simetria que subjaz a todo o poema. Mais ainda, esta trabalho aborda ainda dois aspectos que continuam a fomentar acesos debates entre investigadores e assiriologistas, nomeadamente a consistência da Tábua XII e o autor provável da Versão Corrente Babilónica. A última secção deste primeiro capítulo reflecte sobre questões essenciais relacionadas com a religião e ideais mesopotâmicos. Por exemplo, até que ponto a religião da antiga Mesopotâmia influenciou a *Epopeia de Gilgamesh*? Quais eram os deuses mesopotâmicos? Como concebiam os mesopotâmicos o seu universo e as suas divindades? Assim, o presente trabalho percorre o panteão mesopotâmico, bem como os papeis e funções dos deuses que protagonizam a *Epopeia de Gilgamesh*. O que é mais surpreendente nesta última secção, todavia, é o conceito de deus pessoal que constituía uma parte significativa das vidas dos antigos mesopotâmicos. Além do mais, discute-se também os ritos de rejuvenescimento, as aplicações cosméticas que sustêm a linhagem familiar e os serviços prestados aos deuses de forma a ilustrar as várias alternativas procuradas pelo povo da Mesopotâmia em relação à longevidade.

O segundo capítulo introduz uma nova interpretação da *Epopeia de Gilgamesh* que, de certo modo, redefine os aspectos da narrativa e abre possibilidades para investigações futuras. Este facto é conseguido por intermédio de duas linhas de aproximação. Em primeiro lugar, são traçadas comparações de temas, imagens e personagens entre a *Epopeia de Gilgamesh* e outros textos literários sumero-babilónicos de forma a construir uma leitura a partir de uma visão da própria Mesopotâmia antiga. Em segundo lugar, estes motivos são simultaneamente analisados a partir de perspectivas mais recentes baseadas no trabalho de

estudiosos e investigadores especialistas em mitologia. Assim sendo, o título das secções principais deste capítulo são retiradas das expressões utilizadas por Joseph Campbell relativamente à viagem do herói, uma teoria que ele denominou de monomito no seu livro *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Na primeira secção, Partida, são discutidos certos aspectos, tais como as causas por detrás do carácter impulsivo de Gilgamesh.

Esta discussão questiona a perspectiva tradicional que identifica a primeira vez que o herói se sente esmagado pelo medo da morte. Logo depois é oferecida uma solução possível para o enigma da genealogia de Gilgamesh, dois terços deus e um terço humano. As secções seguintes exploram a questão da deusa mítica da terra que representa a dualidade. São encontrados significados e implicações para fórmulas utilizadas de forma abundante ao longo da epopeia, como, por exemplo, os "seis dias e sete noites" e as cinco fórmulas do sonho. Ao mesmo tempo, são também interpretados, do ponto de vista mesopotâmico, os números que caracterizam a epopeia. São ainda referidos os objectivos que presidiram à criação de Enkidu e o motivo que levou o herói à Floresta de Cedros de forma diferente das abordagens mais convencionais que defendem que Gilgamesh, na sua primeira expedição, apenas procura fama e glória.

Na segunda secção, Iniciação, faz-se uma tentativa para reconstruir um verso fragmentado das preces da mãe de Gilgamesh ao deus sol na Tábua III que pode clarificar o mito do dilúvio contido na epopeia. Noutros momentos desta secção são ainda analisados vários símbolos, tais como o monstro, criaturas fantásticas, árvores altas, resina, montanhas, túneis, jardim cheio de jóias, etc.

O conceito de Adjuvante Sobrenatural, que auxilia o herói em momentos de adversidade, é também elucidado. Os episódios que revelam um conflito entre a natureza e a cultura, e entre humanos e deuses, bem como aqueles que contextualizam o Hades mesopotâmico, a corte dos deuses e os mecanismos para produzir um veredicto contra malfeitores são também examinados à luz da concepção mesopotâmica dos seus deuses e do Mundo Inferior. A morte de Enkidu não é abordada com superficialidade e consequentemente são revelados ainda mais aspectos que merecem uma reconsideração.

Esta dissertação procede no sentido de clarificar ainda mais questões, na segunda viagem de Gilgamesh na sua busca pela imortalidade, tais como o facto de o herói matar animais selvagens e vestir as suas peles, o que será decerto o resultado do seu desejo subconsciente de absorver a sua vitalidade. Do mesmo modo, o motivo mítico dos Guardiões,

que se erguem no limiar de acesso ao reino desconhecido, é aqui discutido. As múltiplas associações sugeridas são baseadas em materiais mesopotâmicos, como por exemplo, o sol é associado ao elemento vida, os donos das tabernas às sacerdotisas dos templos que eram, na verdade, substitutas da deusa Ishtar, o sobrevivente do dilúvio, Uta-napishti, é associado ao deus da sabedoria, Enki. Curiosamente, esta dissertação sublinha ainda as ironias que dominam a *Epopeia de Gilgamesh* que haviam previamente escapado à nossa atenção. Para além disso, algumas das notas de rodapé documentam os hábitos seguidos pelas pessoas que actualmente habitam o Iraque herdados de gerações anteriores. Estas notas ajudam os leitores a familiarizar-se com vários aspectos que são, muitas vezes, mal interpretados por alguns estudiosos. Por fim, esta dissertação sustenta que a história do dilúvio contada por Uta-napishti não deve ser considerada irrelevante ou redundante, mas sim fundamental em relação à intriga principal uma vez que ela desvenda alguns segredos e ensina a Gilgamesh lições essenciais.

No que diz respeito ao último estádio da viagem do herói, Retorno, o presente trabalho pretende alterar a atenção do leitor da Planta de Rejuvenescimento, perdida para a serpente, para o rito de purificação, por intermédio do qual Gilgamesh é primeiramente curado do seu medo da morte e posteriormente do seu desejo de alcançar a imortalidade física. Este estudo conclui com a demonstração de que Gilgamesh preenche o papel do herói mitológico típico. Ele é aquele que traz conhecimento após o Dilúvio e estabelece hábitos há muito esquecidos. Após todos os seus desafios, medo, sofrimento e humilhação que contribuem para o seu processo de crescimento emocional, Gilgamesh acaba por ser representado como um rei sábio, preparado para servir não só a si próprio, como também aos seus cidadãos.

Abstract

For nearly more than one century scholars, like archeologists, have been digging down into the ancient literature of Mesopotamia to find meanings for the highly symbolic and esoteric language of this remote civilization. At the peak of a massive literary *corpus* stands the intriguing Babylonian masterpiece, *The Epic of Gilgamesh.* The poem narrates the expeditions and wanderings of a legendary king of the Sumerian city-state Uruk, Gilgamesh, who with his extraordinary potentials crosses thresholds, slays monsters and endures hardships, in a quest for fame and physical perpetuity. The epic explores various themes, such as love and friendship, fear of death, family, nature/culture, and man/god among several others. However, central and the key theme to *Gilgamesh* is the concept of wisdom, through which the hero eventually comes to terms with the fact of the inevitability of human mortality. By selecting *The Epic of Gilgamesh* as its chief source, this study makes an endeavor to illustrate the underlying motifs in Gilgamesh's quest for immortality. One of the main recourse to accomplishing this is by decoding enigmatic elements scattered along the epic that are of relevance to the themes of life, death, and immortality. Ultimately, the study reaches the conclusion that the hero overcomes his fear of death and his desire to physical immortality only when he attains a certain level of consciousness.

Keywords: Mesopotamia, Sumer, Babylon, Assyria, Gilgamesh, Gods, Hero, Monomyth, Quest, Fear, Fame, Wisdom, Immortality.

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INTRODUCTION

"I will praise the lord of wisdom."[1]

In primordial days, according to what the Bible tells us, our first two ancestors were fashioned by God to enjoy an everlasting life, but the tree of knowledge and the serpent caused them to be outcasts. From that day onwards, fear found its path into the human heart. Human beings became aware of their extinction. Humanity still holds a grudge for their fateful banishment from the creator's blissful garden, and yearn for the day of reunion with God. With the invention of writing, more than 5000 years ago, like the Biblical author centuries earlier, people from Mesopotamia expressed this fear into literature and art. The king of Uruk, Gilgamesh, became the archetypal figure for fighting against the dreadful reality of death, and whose story was later weaved into an epic.

Ever since, many were those who harped on the same strings upon which the hero Gilgamesh played: kings, intellectuals, and commoners, all alike. And the harping has not ceased to this day. Are not the scientific breakthroughs and medical developments of today all pursuing the Mesopotamian abyss, *Apsu*?

World literature is fraught with instances of human longings. Maleuvre's words better describe it: "the voyage into the horizon *is* the narrative of the human existence."[2] Amid such uncertainties, how can one best treat the predicament of his mortal life? Taking the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as a model for investigating into the human condition, this study hopes to address this question by presenting a new reading of the epic. Through a closer look into the thematic, structure, and style of the story, we will try to highlight the two central forms of immortality that the hero Gilgamesh strove to achieve, namely an immortality through legacy or fame,

[1] The incipit of the Babylonian poem, The Righteous Sufferer, translated by Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 21-61.

[2] Didier Maleuvre, *The Horizon: A History of Our Infinite Longing,* (California: Univ. of California Press, 2011), 37.

and physical immortality. Most importantly, however, is the exploration of the concept of human wisdom. In other words, we are interested in examining the processes by which Gilgamesh matures as a result of his attaining a certain level of consciousness.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is chiefly about the transformation of a hero from a naïf, immature youth into a wise individual who is finally enabled to run his state of affairs as a king. The story explores human condition vividly, portraying a preoccupation with and an exertion of oneself beyond human limits for a lost fight, ultimately bringing the devastated to accept the reality of his inevitable death. Nevertheless, it fosters the idea of extraordinary human capacities, especially when ambitions become charged with determination and piercing observation. The story introduces other universal themes, such as friendship and adventure, family and the role of women, nature/culture and human/god polarities, and alongside with motifs relevant to human origins. The bond that draws Gilgamesh and Enkidu together, by which they establish a comradery to set out for expeditions, fight monsters side by side, and one mourning over the other's death, is an exemplar of friendship untainted by our modern definitions. The regard that Gilgamesh has for his mother, Ninsun, is impressive. The creation of the wild man, Enkidu, and his early life on the uplands is similarly spectacular; it reminds us of our primitive way of life, as the sons of nature.

Since our world is separated in time and space from that of ancient Mesopotamia, we find it significant to have some relevant elements clarified. Thus, Chapter 1 offers an overview to most of what concerns *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* ranging from the context in which the text originated and its gradual development through phases of time, to religion and cultural traditions that left an enormous influence on the epic. The chapter will draw on the work of various scholars, mainly those of Assyriologists: Andrew George (2003), Jefferey H. Tigay (2002), and Thorkild Jacobsen (1976). This chapter, we believe, is essential in terms of providing substance for the main analysis of our topic. Taking the outstanding theory of the Monomyth initiated by the great American scholar Joseph Campbell (1904-1987) in his groundbreaking work, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* as our critical device, we will proceed in the Second Chapter to present a sketching of the spiritual journey of the hero Gilgamesh in reconciling with the most pressing issue of his death.

In the present work, we are not going to rehearse on the enormous volume of interpretation applied on *The Epic of Gilgamesh.* Instead, we venture to present a genuine

reading that somehow will open up new vistas, from which future research can profit. Neither, do we intend to focus on comparative data between *Gilgamesh* and later ancient literature, such as the Greek's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Hebrew literature and the Bible, Persian and Indo-European texts, etc.[3] except at some rare instances, but very briefly. The reader who is familiar with ancient mythology, we suppose, can easily discern parallels between *Gilgamesh* and the aforementioned sources. As an alternative, in underlining the parallels and comparisons between different literary sources, we will restrict our material mostly to the Sumero-Babylonian literature. We are aware of the complexity of our task, and by no means claim that the results of our analysis are definitive. Further, we will refrain from following the traditional method of contradicting earlier theories and assumptions to prove our own perspectives. In one way or another, the collected sources have contributed to the development of the current thesis to reach its final arrangement. However, we will target specific elements in the story which have—to our knowledge and opinion—escaped the notice of scholars, and others that are treated literally or at face value. The abounding symbols, esoteric numbers, and motifs in the poem will be carefully analyzed to highlight their associations with the themes of life and death. Through employing this particular methodology, we hope to arrive at a number of satisfying conclusions.

[3] Comparative studies on *Gilgamesh* can be found in the book *Gilgamesh: A reader,* ed. John Maier (Illinois: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1997). For further sources see References page at the end of his book.

CHAPTER 1: *THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH*, AN OVERVIEW

"We must turn to Mesopotamia if we wish to see the great spring." Jean Bottéro[4]

To fully grasp and appreciate the meaning of the concepts that pervade *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* it entails a certain degree of familiarity with the Mesopotamian context: an overview of the history of the epic's city, Uruk; the excavation of the *Gilgamesh* manuscripts; and the historicity of the protagonist. Understanding the process of the epic's development, the way it assumed its current form, can further contribute to this study. This could be achieved by tracking down earliest texts celebrating the king Gilgamesh, and their gradual progression towards an integrated piece of literature. While investigating all these materials, it is critical to discuss the two controversial elements associated with the epic, namely the epic's probable author and its Tablet XII. Lastly, a survey of Mesopotamian religion, and of course its approach to aging that led to the emergence of a fervent desire for longevity among the people of Mesopotamia is likewise significant in treating the subject of immortality.

1. History of Mesopotamia and the Recovery of Gilgamesh Tablets

Mesopotamia is universally regarded as the home of the first civilization; dating back to the fifth millennium BC. The region was inhabited by Sumerian people from the south, and its upper southern and northern regions were home to Babylonians and Assyrians, respectively. Since prehistoric times and even after the succession of the Semitic Akkadian empire[5] in the last quarter of the third millennium BC, Sumer remained a nucleus for socio-economic

[4] Jean Bottéro, Clarisse Herrenschmidt, and Jean-Pierre Vernant. *Ancestor of the West: writing, reasoning, and religion in Mesopotamia, Elam, and Greece*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 6.

[5] Sumer was conquered by the king Sargon of Akkad (c. 2340-2284 BC), the founder of the Akkadian empire. During his rule and the rule of his successors, the dominions of Mesopotamia extended to cover Anatolia from north and the Gulf region from the south.

sophistication. At a time when memory could hardly accommodate the rapidly growing administration of the Sumerian palaces and temples, the oldest writing system, Cuneiform, was invented. Under the reign of Sargon of Akkad, Sumerian language and literature remained the two official components at institutions.[6] It was highly recommended—especially, for a Babylonian scribe learning cuneiform—to maintain a proper knowledge of the Sumerian language and writing.[7] Sumerian literature reached its apex in Ur III dynasty—founded by the King Ur-Nammu (c. 2047-2030 BC)—which came to be known as Sumerian Renaissance. Ur Nammu's son, King Shulgi (c. 2029-1982 BC), better known for his Tablet Houses (Mesopotamian name for the library), was literate and competent in scribal training. He established libraries and allowed scribes to consult and copy from master copies reserved there. Shortly, in the beginning of the second millennium BC, with the prevalence of Babylonian culture, Sumerian language gave way to Akkadian. Thus, Sumer gradually witnessed its extinction.

Sumer consisted of highly urbanized city-states. Uruk (the Biblical Erich and modern Warkaa), the city of the legendary Gilgamesh, was one of the biggest and vital arteries of Sumer. Geographically, the city lied along the riverbank of Euphrates and was encircled from other sides by marshes that made a good living for herders and fishers. Mesopotamians greatly profited from agriculture: grain, fruit and vegetables were good means of sustenance for the settlers.

Throughout the history of Mesopotamia, intercity and tribal clashes were constant, until the collapse of the great Assyrian and Babylonian empires in the sixth century BC. Eventually, all that was left from the legacy of Mesopotamia was covered by mounds of dust; and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was lying beneath such mounds for nearly 1500 years.

The Epic of Gilgamesh was unearthed in the mid-19th century from the ruins of the library of the great Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal (668-627 BC), in the northern Mesopotamian city of Nineveh. The raid of Babylonians and Medians against the Assyrian empire in 612 BC caused countless damages, such as the demolition of libraries. Manuscripts remained under

[6] The influence of Sumer over Akkad did not end there, in fact—as Jean Bottéro (2000) points out—Akkadians borrowed a vast number of Sumerian vocabulary, learned from them the art of gardening, and Sumerian religious ideology and principles were embraced by Akkadians.
[7] The Sumerian language has nothing in common with any known language. The Akkadian language, however, is a Semitic language that has affinities with Hebrew and Arabic languages.

ruins for a long time to be recovered again in the second half of the nineteenth century. Austin Henry Layard and Hormuzd Rassam began their excavation campaign in 1849-54 in Nineveh. The great amount of tablets unearthed at the site stunned the two excavators. Thousands of clay texts were soon dispatched to the British Museum, as both were unable to read cuneiform. The task of sorting and deciphering[8] these fragments was initiated by George Smith in the 1860's, when—to everyone's surprise—he detected a similar version of the biblical flood story in Gilgamesh manuscripts.[9] In later decades, older versions of the story were excavated by Smith, L. W. King and R. Campbell.[10]

The recovered tablets have various dates; going back to approximately 800-1000 BC.[11] Most of the tablets bear Assyrian imprints, but it is unclear whether they were copied from the Babylonian imports or some other texts existing in that period. In fact, through closer examination of individual fragments, scholars figured out that some of the tablets were written in the last quarter of the second millennium BC. The current version is, by no means, a Ninevite recension therefore. Some tablets belong to other regions and were retrieved to Ashurbanipal's library by the king's orders. It is well known that Ashurbanipal persevered to establish an enormous library by collecting all pieces of literature available in his time, setting a *scriptorium* and hiring scribes to not only copy from older materials but also produce new literature.

Although there are as many finds as those excavated at Ashurbanipal's library in Nineveh, these texts are too fragmentary, in contrast to the former ones. The tablets found in cities other than Nineveh include Ashur, Kalah, Huzirina, Uruk, Babylon and Sippar. Nevertheless, these fragments are significant in the reconstruction process of the epic. Wherever gaps are found or in cases of eligibility in the Standard texts [12] because of damages to the clay tablets, they are filled with earlier versions in which parallel passages are identified.

[8] For an account of the history of uncovering and deciphering cuneiform manuscripts, in particular those written in Sumerian, see Kramer*, Sumerian Mythology* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 1961), 1-25.
[9] Andrew George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic: Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 379.
[10] Idem*,* 385.
[11] Jeffery H. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Illinois: Bolchazy-Carducci publishers, 2002), 131.
[12] The Standard is a term that refers to the Nineveh tablets and the most complete version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

2. Gilgamesh as a Historical Figure

In order to sustain the actuality of Gilgamesh, A. R. George makes a brilliant comparison between this hero and king Arthur in the Introduction of his translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, where he says: "as perhaps there was once a real King Arthur, so there was once an actual King Gilgamesh."[13] The document designated as the Sumerian King List attests to the kingship of Gilgamesh. He is placed the fifth in the rank of Uruk's postdiluvian rulers, reigning for 126 mythical years. The list also cites Gilgamesh's sons: King Ur-Nungal who succeeded his father and reigned for thirty years, followed by his brother, King Udul Kalama, ruling for fifteen years. Gilgamesh is likewise mentioned in the Early Dynastic I god list found in Shuruppak (modern Al-Qādisiyyah Governorate), Old Babylonian god list from Nippur and Isin, and in the Middle Babylonian god list.[14]

Gilgamesh's parentage becomes enigmatic from the prevalence of different versions of stories associated with him. The Old Babylonian epic identifies Ninsun, The Wild Cow (a metaphor for a herdswoman[15]) as his mother, and Lugalbanda as his personal god. In the Standard version, however, Lugalbanda is described as his biological father. This is the only reference made to Gilgamesh's father during the course of the entire epic. Noteworthy, the Sumerian King list states that Gilgamesh's father was a phantom.

The Akkadian name Gilgamesh is a variant of the Sumerian Bilgamesh which is translated as "the offspring (is) a hero."[16] It often happens, when names are transferred from one language into another, they become subject to phonetic alteration (a parallel case is the change of the Greek name "Odysseus" into Roman "Ulysses"). Gilgamesh is supposed to have been living during 2700-2500 BC. The period between 2500-2100 BC is, however, presumed to have witnessed the casting of the King's heroic deeds into literature and oral tradition by poets and singers.

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[13] Andrew George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian* (Penguin, 2003 revised ed.), xxxi.
[14] George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 119-121.
[15] Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion,* (New Haven: Yale University, 1976), 41.
[16] George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic,* 74.

The kings of the Third Dynasty of Ur also testified to the reality of Gilgamesh. They even regarded him as the ruler of the Netherworld, the realm of the dead that was characterized by sheer darkness, and claimed him to be their ancestor. The first king, Ur-Nammu, wrote "I am the brother of the great Gilgamesh, I am the offspring of Ninsuna". His son, Shulgi, declared that Gilgamesh's parents are his as well, and Gilgamesh himself was his "brother and comrade."[17]

Gilgamesh became object of devotion to whom Sumerians presented votives, and offerings were made to him in festivals. In literature, he is deified and appointed as the judge of the Netherworld by the gods; passing verdicts alongside other chthonic deities.

Besides, Gilgamesh gained his popularity from other achievements. Conceivably, he built The Walls of Uruk, which provided the city with an unprecedented robust fortification. The walls were essential for settlers, in terms of defense against invaders. Fiore observed: "the wise ruler protected his community by building thick walls and impenetrable fortifications, and by manning these armaments with soldiers."[18] Today, archaeological evidence confirms to the construction of the walls of Uruk, dating it back to the Early Dynastic II period (2600-2500 BC).[19]

The tradition of cutting cedar trees is ancient, to which Gilgamesh can be ascribed as a pioneer. Old Babylonian literary and historical records abound with instances of Kings—to name a few Sargon, Naramsin, Yahdun-Lim, Samsi-Adad I of Assyria, Tiglat-pilseri I and Nebuchadnezzar II—setting in eastern and western Mesopotamia to cut cedar trees from highlands. The wood was conveyed back to their city-states and used in fashioning temples for deities, such as the god Enlil.[20]

Apart from his felling cedar trees, Gilgamesh was given several epithets, such as "well digger", "herald", and "ferryman of the dead." People in Mesopotamia remembered Gilgamesh as one who dug wells during his expeditions, and they named several wells after him. Gilgamesh crossed the Waters of Death, met Uta-napishti (The Babylonian Noah) and

[17] Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness,* 158.
[18] Silvestro Fiore, *Voices from the Clay: The Development of Assyro-Babylonian Literature,* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), 75.
[19] Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, 147.
[20] Fiore, *Voices from the Clay, 93-4.*

brought back knowledge before the flood, thereby establishing the long forgotten customs. Gilgamesh occupies another position in the realm of the dead as their ferryman, a function which was conventionally performed by Humbaba or Ur-Shanabi.[21] Moreover, Gilgamesh is credited with bringing the kingdom from Kish to his city-state of Uruk, and diving the ocean for coral. Finally, in the Sumerian poem, *The Death of Gilgamesh,* the poet makes an intriguing statement: he gives a vivid description on how Gilgamesh, before he died, ordered his men to block the waters of the river Euphrates and build a solid tomb for himself out of stones on the dry riverbed. The poet proceeds to declare that when Gilgamesh died his wives, children, courtiers, and servants were buried with the king inside his tomb. The tomb was eventually sealed and the dam on Euphrates was opened in a way, as the poet says, "his [resting place] the waters removed from view."[22] One cannot help imagining the probability of Gilgamesh's tomb still lying somewhere, along the historic walls of Uruk, waiting to be discovered in the future.

Elsewhere, in art, Gilgamesh is depicted on clay plagues, cylinder seals and metal work slaying the furious Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. It is hard though to verify which traits from those given to the epic's hero can be attributed to the historical Gilgamesh.

3. Popularizing *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (and Oral Tradition)

Gilgamesh literature is believed to have had entertaining functions, whereby court minstrels and poets gained admittance to royal palaces.[23] Besides, *Gilgamesh* was popularized even in the marketplace in the form of songs. The outbreak of writing, presumably, did not replace the oral tradition fully; it is not difficult to imagine the survival of the oral tradition within domestic sectors alongside scribal profession. Indeed, Old and Standard Babylonian versions of the epic benefited from oral tradition. In other words, what once circulated by word of mouth developed subsequently into written form. Several writings that run parallel to the Old Babylonian version of the epic, the so-called Yale and Penn tablets, demonstrate different accounts of episodes. Also, variations in format of some tablets

[21] George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic,* 130.
[22] George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* 207.
[23] Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic, 36, and 52.*

distance themselves from the Old Babylonian version, for example some tablets contain six columns, others four.[24] The impact of the vernacular dialects on the Standard Babylonian version can also be detected.[25]

Literary texts—like *Gilgamesh*—had didactic, moral, and scholarly functions. Therefore, one can venture to suggest a presence of divisions among communities. While the majority of people could not afford to send their children to scribal training schools, they managed to recite episodes out of their memory to them. Elsewhere—in other houses—a literate father would take the role of an instructor; his children would become apprentices at home.[26] Ultimately, the final product qualified learners and proved them as proficient in the scribal tradition. Some of these tablets were later deposited in temples as votive gifts for the gods.[27]

By the Middle Babylonian period (1600-1000 BC), the epic circulated outside Mesopotamia.[28] The popularity that the epic came to acquire made the demand for copying and transmitting it throughout the west: regions like Syria, Palestine, Anatolia,[29] Egypt,[30] and Greece[31] adapted the story into their context.

4. The Development of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Several factors—such as changes in the Mesopotamian ideals and upgrades to the style and structure of literature—had a profound influence on the development of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* into the Standard Version. This section aims to pursue the stages of the epic's evolution from separate Sumerian poems celebrating the glorious king Gilgamesh, to the Old Babylonian attempt in integrating these poems into a unified piece of literature, and lastly to its most complete version the so-called, The Standard Babylonian manuscript. For a span of

[24] George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic,* 21-2.
[25] Idem*,* 435.
[26] Idem*,* 37-38.
[27] Ibid.
[28] Jean Bottéro (2000) expounds the mechanism of this transmission, in his article, "The Birth of Civilization", 5.
[29] The adaptation of *The Gilgamesh Epic* into the Hittite and Hurrian versions may sometimes reflect Anatolian local interests. The alterations made to the epic include: the insertion of the storm god and extra emphasis to the Cedar Forest episode.
[30] Several correspondences between Pharaohs of Egypt and Mesopotamian kings were made in Akkadian.
[31] For a comprehensive discussion of the epic's potential influence on ancient Greek literature, see George's section, The Epic of Gilgamesh Outside the Cuneiform Tradition, (2003), 55-71.

1500 years, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* undergone various alterations; ranging from style, theme, and structure. The archaeological evidence found in Mesopotamia and neighboring regions enabled scholars in the field of Assyriology to assign the stories about Gilgamesh into three categories, each featuring a distinct version: the Sumerian tales, the Old Babylonian Version and the Standard Babylonian Version.

4.1 The Sumerian Tales

The Sumerian Gilgamesh tales were, presumably, written at a time between 2100-2000 BC.[32] They originate from the traditional Sumerian *corpus* that circulated across King Shulgi's academies in Nippur and Ur. For the first time, in 1944, Samuel Noah Kramer stated that the recovered Sumerian texts represented separate tales.[33] Kramer initiated the task of reading, identifying and sorting out thousands of Sumerian clay tablets. The number of the Sumerian Gilgamesh tales, nevertheless, is five in total: *Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven*, *Gilgamesh and Hwawa* (also entitled *Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living*), *Gilgamesh and Agga*, *The Death of Gilgamesh*, and *Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld*. These inscriptions arrive in the form of poems, into which the achievements of the great king Gilgamesh are recounted. These, by far, are considered the earliest literary attempts to celebrate the legendary hero. Noteworthy, the poem Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven from Nippur is the oldest Sumerian reference to Gilgamesh, dating back to the Ur III period.

The most distinctive features that separate the Sumerian tales from the late Babylonian epic are: the status of Enkidu as Gilgamesh's servant rather than a bosom friend, the episode portraying Ishtar's marriage proposal is missing, and the name of the hero himself, which in Sumerian is Bilgamesh. The most prominent theme that prevails almost in all versions of Gilgamesh literature is, however, that of an existential nature. Gilgamesh is portrayed as preoccupied with the fact of human death, thus engaging himself in a futile enterprise to obtain physical immortality, as it is explicitly depicted in *The Death of Gilgamesh*, in which the hero is thought to have been troubled by the reality of death. Throughout the poem,

[32] Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic, 15.*
[33] Idem, 23.

Gilgamesh is reminded by the gods of his lot, in that he was not awarded with the gift of eternal life.

It can be argued that the Sumerian poem, *The Death of Gilgamesh*, summarizes the main episodes extant in the late version of the epic. If proved correct, any claim made against the integration of the epic into a homogenized text in the Old Babylonian period or later in the Assyrian era can be put at risk. The assembly of gods—in *The Death of Gilgamesh*—recount multiple deeds of the protagonist, which are present in the Standard Babylonian version, for instance, the hero's expedition to the Cedar Forest, his slaying of monsters, his journey to the end of the world, his meeting with Ziusudra (the Sumerian Uta-napishti). In addition, the gods in this Sumerian poem console the hero for his inability to achieve immortality by reminding him that—after his death—he is going to reunite with his dearest friend, Enkidu. Regardless, the conventional assumption based on current sources leaves out any possibility of there being an integrated Sumerian version or even a cycle of texts. These five tales about Gilgamesh, therefore, remain the only Sumerian sources available to date.

4.2 The Old Babylonian Version

The Old Babylonian version is the first manuscript that demonstrates a series of episodes combined into a coherent literary work celebrating the feats of the king Gilgamesh. The story is believed to have been written around 2000-1800 BC. The Akkadian name for the protagonist is Gilgamesh. The epic narrates the episodes of the creation of Enkidu, the journey to the Cedar Forest, and the encounter with Shiduri, Ur-shanabi, and perhaps with Uta-napishti. The major episodes that are absent in this Old Babylonian epic, nevertheless, are the fight with the Bull of Heaven, Enkidu cursing the prostitute, Enkidu's dream of the Netherworld and the flood story. Some of these episodes later appeared in the Middle Babylonian period, but certainly not the flood story, and because of that, it is still uncertain whether it was a part of the epic or not.

The Old Babylonian texts are mostly fragmentary in nature except for the two tablets, namely the Yale and Penn tablets, which are less damaged than their counterparts. Penn and Yale are the main tablets which constitute the Old Babylonian version of *The Epic of*

Gilgamesh. Admittedly, editors and translators have greatly benefited from the content of these tablets, in terms of bridging specific gaps found in the Standard Babylonian version. Penn and Yale were, most likely, copied by the same scribe, for Yale is clearly complementary to Penn. According to Fleming and Milstein, Yale tablet was modeled on the once separate Akkadian Hwawa narrative.[34] The tablets designated as Yale edition narrate the introduction of Enkidu into society, the preparation for the Cedar Forest adventure, and the journey itself. What appears in Penn, on the other hand, reflects the author's vision. Nevertheless, Babylonian texts, which continue the storyline after the Hwawa episode do exist, and these include Sippar, Nippur, Harmal, IM, Ischali, and Schoyen Tablets.[35] It is worth mentioning that a large number of tablets which belonged to the would-be-scribes is predominantly about the first quarter of the epic. It can be assumed that the reason behind this is that the scribes started from the beginning and sometimes left their tasks unfinished.

While the episodes consistently follow each other, it cannot be determined whether or not the Old Babylonian version displays a fully integrated piece as the one witnessed in the late version. Consequently, this led scholars to speculate on the existence of different recensions of the poem developing in the Old Babylonian period; one that ends precisely at the Cedar Mountain expedition, while others continue the storyline through inserting further events.[36] It is hard to track down the number of editorial stages the text underwent during this period and until the appearance of the Standard version. In fact, there is no specific author to whom the Old Babylonian version can be attributed with certainty, and it is undecided whether the epic was written by a single author or several writers were involved.

[34] In their recent study, *The Buried Foundation of the Gilgamesh Epic* (2010), Fleming and Milstein tend to prove that the Sumerian Hwawa tale set the foundation for the integrated epic of Gilgamesh. In the Old Babylonian period, they claim, scribes were more interested in the Sumerian Hwawa episode than in other tales present in the epic. Besides, George (2003) already made it clear that some of the Sumerian literature lost its ground during the rise of Babylon. Nevertheless, the story of Bilgamesh and Hwawa survived among its counterparts.

[35] These texts belong to trainers found in scribal houses. They do not seem to represent an entire work. In all likelihood, they are the product of student copying exercises. These all come with a single column. In order to demonstrate that these pieces once constituted a larger literary work, Fleming and Milstein prefer to term these tablets as extracts.

[36] Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, 23.

4.3 The Standard Babylonian Version

The Standard Babylonian version is the most fully preserved rendering of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* among its Babylonian counterparts. Unlike the Old Babylonian version—which differs from the Sumerian prototypes, in terms of wording and style—the Standard version shares, occasionally, similarities with its forerunner. The textual parallels with specific Old Babylonian passages are significantly identical, so much so that they can be deemed as verbatim.[37] Therefore—it can be said with some degree of confidence that—the Standard Babylonian version is an expansion of the Old Babylonian *Gilgamesh*, in which the repetition of specific passages, the dropping of others, and the invention of new ones can be detected. In short, it is a revision of older Gilgamesh stories. Nevertheless, that does not diminish the creative role of the late author. In respect of poetics, the writer skillfully rephrased the flowing of certain passages of the Old Babylonian Version.

Conceivably, the Standard Babylonian epic went through a gradual process of modification in structure, style, language, and motifs. In other words, variants in the Standard Babylonian version are the result of a newer linguistic system prevalent in the Middle-Babylonian era, upgrades in style, and alterations in religious ideologies. In addition, specific sections were restructured and new ones added in this late version, for example Gilgamesh's taking Enkidu to his mother, Ninsun, for a consultation and blessing prior to their expedition in Tablet III is exclusive to the Standard version. There are also changes in the character's roles: the role of the Sun god, Shamash, is magnified in the late version. Whereas, in the Old Babylonian version Gilgamesh is self-inspired; he wishes to establish a name eternal, and the Sun god is portrayed as his helper. In the Standard Babylonian version, however, the initiative for the journey remains Gilgamesh's; still, the Sun god is perceived as more than just an assistant to Gilgamesh. This becomes clear in Ninsun's prayer to the Sun god, when she claims that her son, Gilgamesh, was instigated by him (Tablet III). The development of Mesopotamian religious principles greatly informed *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (see below). After the Old Babylonian period, Uruk's Eanna temple belonged mostly to Ishtar, as a result Anu's dominance gradually faded. The aversion towards Ishtar as depicted in the episode of the Bull of Heaven, presumably, explains a decline in the theological notions: a shift of power from

[37] Idem, 131-132.

temple to palace.[38] Hence, the effects on literary texts becomes flagrant, as Joseph Campbell noted, "When a civilization has passed from a mythological to a secular point of view, the older images are no longer felt or quite approved."[39] Moreover, some changes are due to subjective interventions: the editor(s) may have found it favorable at some places to add, exclude, and modify certain phrases, passages, and the word order according to their tastes.[40] Aside from all these variants, major elements—like the prologue and the flood story that were formerly absent in the Old Babylonian version—are introduced into the new story. The following lines will treat the prologue of the epic in detail. The latter is virtually a literal translation of the Deluge myth, *Atrahasis*; narrated by the survivor of the great flood, Uta-napishti in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

4.4 The Structure of the Standard Babylonian Version

The Epic of Gilgamesh is written in cuneiform on eleven smooth and rectangular clay tablets (Babylonian equivalent for chapters). It is called an epic because it is centered on the heroic achievements of an extraordinary being, it attempts to explain latent events that took place in distant ages, and portrays men's confrontation with mythical gods and monsters.

The colophon[41] of the Standard Babylonian epic begins with an incipit, which represents the title of the epic. The inscription reads *Ša naqba imuru* that can be translated as "He who Saw the Deep". This is followed by another inscription, *Iškar Gilgameš*, the Akkadian words for the "Series of Gilgamesh". In the Old Babylonian version, the incipit starts with *šutur eli šarri* (Surpassing all other kings).[42] In the Standard version, however, we encounter these words in the line twenty-nine of the first tablet. Accordingly, the preceding twenty-eight lines inserted in the beginning of the Standard Babylonian version are considered a prologue into which the trials of the protagonist are summarized.

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[38] Tivka Frymer-Kensky, "The Marginalization of the Goddesses," *Gilgamesh: A Reader,* ed. John Maier (Illinois, Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1997), 102-103.

[39] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces,* (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008), 213.

[40] Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, 71-2.

[41] Most of the tablets have colophons, conceivably, attached to them at some time after the completion of the text. The colophons attribute texts to different authors; in some cases, including the king himself.

[42] George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic,* 28-9.

The prologue lines stress on the aspect of wisdom rather than the heroic deeds or immortality which the protagonist strove to achieve. The author brings his audience's attention to Gilgamesh's writing down his story shortly after his return from his expeditions, thereby serving as a testimony for his work. In other words, it is an indication that the epic is an autobiography told in the third person. The prologue also attests that Gilgamesh built the city walls of Uruk, which have been interpreted as a metaphor for immortality through legacy. Leaving an achievement for later generations to behold and admire the mastermind of a remarkable construction was, probably, a compensation for the physical immortality that the hero failed to attain. The epic states that the foundation of the city walls was laid by the Seven Sages. The Seven Sages were primal characters who introduced the arts of civilization (Akkadian *mes*) for the first time to the Urukians. Enki, the god of wisdom, held the *mes* in his subterranean realm of the freshwater, *Apsu*.

Notably, within the prologue lines the popular stanza (Tablet I, 16-21) is utilized, and is repeated at the end of the epic (Tablet XI, 303-7); thus, creating a framework to the story. The concluding lines are, according to George, the author's reflection on the grand theme of immortality, on which the author demonstrably proposes wisdom as a substitute for an everlasting life.[43]

In addition, the lines following the prologue are viewed as an introductory passage. The description of Gilgamesh's supernatural creation reflects ancient royal hymns written specifically to award kings with a divine status, an example is Shulgi's hymns.[44]

Nevertheless, the genius of the author is reflected in the overall structure of the epic. The visible symmetry within the tablets makes the story a typical literary work. The epic is made of eleven tablets, which can be divided into two distinct parts, in terms of themes. The first five tablets recount the glorious feats of the hero. Tablet VI can be conceived as a connector of the first part to the contrasting tablets, VII-XI. It fixes the hero on the peak of his achievements: recapitulating the events of the first part in a feat of hubris that foreshadows the proceedings. The second five tablets exhibit grief over losing a close friend and the hero's

[43] Idem*,* 48.
[44] For a survey of royal hymns, see Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic,* 154-56.

failure in attaining immortality. In addition, literary devices, folk tales, and wisdom sayings proliferate throughout the epic. Apart from the figures of speech, different formulas are employed to reflect the characters' social statuses. For instance, Ishtar's speech mirrors her lascivious aspect, whereas the words of Uta-napishti are refined to fit his elevated status. Repetition of specific phrases and lines serve the purpose of building suspense in some cases, while in others it has its own unique function (see Chapter 2). Extensive use of assimilation; within passages are occurrences that could be regarded as borrowings from popular wisdom (proverbs, Barmaid's advice), curses and blessings (Enkidu cursing and blessing Shamhat), rituals (sacred marriage), and cultic instances (wrestling contests). Motifs found in folktales, such as the character of Enkidu which shares some affinities with the Sumerian poem, *The Marriage of Martu,*[45] are also incorporated in the story.

Modifying word order and manipulating tenses, on the other hand, characterize the Standard version. Finally, numbers are used in a great frequency throughout the epic, and an attempt will be made for their interpretation in the next chapter.

4.5 Summary of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Gilgamesh, two-thirds god and one-third man, is handsome, extraordinarily powerful, and intelligent. His character no other king has outshined. The great walls of Uruk and the temple of Eanna are his crowning achievements. Though Gilgamesh is the shepherd of Uruk, he does not behave like a *sharru-ken,* a legitimate king. He does not exercise his duties properly; he is harassing young men and women of his city. When the arrogance of Gilgamesh is no longer tolerated, the women take their plaint to the gods. The gods answer their outcry; they commission Arruru, the begetter of mankind, to fashion a replica of Gilgamesh—one equaled in strength—so that both can contend and Urukians can, eventually, find rest. Arurru creates Enkidu and throws him among animals on the uplands. He grows up grazing grass with the gazelles on the steppe and suckling the milk of wild asses.

[45] The story recounts the lifestyle of Martu's tribe and the hero himself, who are uncivilized and feed on raw food and grass.

One day, a hunter is shocked by watching Enkidu rescuing animals from his traps. The hunter rushes back to the city to describes the matter first to his father then to the king Gilgamesh, and ask them for an advice of how to get rid of Enkidu. Gilgamesh sends a harlot called Shamhat along with the hunter in order to seduce Enkidu and bring him back civilized to the city. Shortly, the hunter and Shamhat arrive at the spot; they discover Enkidu drinking water with his animals from the same spring. Shamhat does exactly what was bidden: she strips off her clothes and approaches Enkidu, whose desire is provoked by her charms. The two make love for "six days and seven nights". When, at last, Enkidu is sated, he decides to go back to his friends. But the animals shy him and flee from his presence. Enkidu tries to run after them, but to no avail. A transformation has taken place into his physique; his feet turned stiff, thus he lost his ability to run like a gazelle. Nevertheless, Enkidu has grown wise on the hands of Shamhat. She persuades him to go back with her to Uruk, and teaches him the arts of culture: how to eat bread and drink wine. Shaved, washed, groomed, and clothed, Enkidu becomes charming like a prince.

Meanwhile, in Uruk, Gilgamesh has some ominous dreams which he carries to his mother for an interpretation. Ninsun assures him that his dreams are favorable. A young man—she tells him—is coming to his city, he will become Gilgamesh's closest friend. Thereupon, she is going to adopt Enkidu and make him Gilgamesh's equal. Upon Enkidu's arrival to the city, the people gather around him in crowds and admire the resemblance Enkidu shares with their king. Earlier on his way to Uruk, Enkidu learns that there is a wedding, in which Gilgamesh is going to exercise his *droit du seigneur*. Enkidu is incensed; he is determined to thwart Gilgamesh's entry to the bride. The two meet at the threshold of the bride room. Enkidu blocks Gilgamesh's way, thus both engage into a fight in which the latter is victor. Subdued Enkidu realizes the strength of Gilgamesh; he praises him in front of everyone. Instead of punishing Enkidu, Gilgamesh has a unique feeling towards him. They shake hands, and from that day on Gilgamesh and Enkidu become intimate friends and companions.

The idle city-life distresses Enkidu, whose muscles wane day after day. To save his friend from depression, Gilgamesh suggests an expedition to the Cedar Forest to slay its guardian, Humbaba, and cut some cedar trees. Enkidu, who is familiar with the ways of the wild, tries to dissuade his friend from taking this risky enterprise. He warns Gilgamesh that the ogre,

Humbaba, was assigned by the god Enlil to protect the trees in the forest. Gilgamesh disregards Enkidu's words and goes to the city elders for a consultation. The elders give the same warning to Gilgamesh: who dares to face the furious Humbaba? Humbaba, they say, with his seven fiery rays is indestructible. Gilgamesh is heedless; he intends to make a name eternal for himself while he is still young. Amid the obstinacy of Gilgamesh, Enkidu consents to accompany his friend and provide him with protection throughout this journey. Various weapons are forged for Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and both are furnished with food stuff. With the blessing of Ninsun, the two friends set out on their adventure.

On their way Gilgamesh and Enkidu decide to camp every three days and make a fire. Each time Gilgamesh has similar nightmares about Humbaba, which Enkidu interprets in reverse. Eventually, they arrive at the Cedar Forest where they are confronted with the ferocious Humbaba. Humbaba scolds Enkidu for showing Gilgamesh the path to his forest and their audacity to enter it. Subsequently, Shamash, the sun god, launches thirteen winds on Humbaba which obscure his sight. Gilgamesh tops Humbaba and Enkidu takes hold of his leg. Humbaba finding himself helpless implores them to release him. Gilgamesh relents, but Enkidu cautions him that Humbaba is deceitful. Whereupon, Gilgamesh strikes Humbaba's neck with his dagger and severs his head. The two cut the finest cedar trees in the forest and bring them back along with Humbaba's head to Uruk.

In Uruk, festivals are held in honor of the two heroes. Gilgamesh retreats to the river to wash off the grime of the ogre from his body, and put on his kingly outfit. Gilgamesh's appeal attracts the attention of the goddess Ishtar. She proposes marriage to him. For her dowry, Ishtar promises to bring splendid gifts and make Gilgamesh like a god. Nevertheless, Gilgamesh turns down her advances in an insulting manner; he reminds her of all her previous affairs that brought injury to her lovers. Ishtar is infuriated. She soars to the celestial realm of the supreme god, Anu, and asks for the Bull of Heaven to avenge Gilgamesh. At first, Anu is reluctant, but Ishtar threatens to awaken the dead who will devour the living. Ishtar takes the Bull of Heaven and together they descend to Uruk. The Bull of Heaven wreaks havoc on the city; its snorts open pits on the ground into which people fell in great numbers. Gilgamesh and Enkidu wrestle with the bull until they succeed to seize the monster. Together they slay the Bull of Heaven. Enkidu tears a haunch of the bull and hurls it at Ishtar, who has climbed the city walls. The goddess with her temple courtesans weep over the killing of the bull.

Inhabitants of Uruk celebrate another victory, and the two heroes boast their deeds on the street of the city-square. On that night Enkidu dreams of the gods holding a court to judge the transgressions perpetrated by him and Gilgamesh. The gods inform Enkidu that he is going to die. In the second dream that he relates to Gilgamesh, Enkidu is dragged to the Netherworld where he observers the fates of the dead people. Enkidu laments his lot. He becomes sick and is confined to bed, and on the thirteenth day he dies.

Gilgamesh mourns the death of his dearest friend. He doesn't lend Enkidu's body for burial until a maggot drops from his nostril. The death of his friend reminds him of his own. Fear and sorrow enter Gilgamesh's heart. He becomes distraught. He decides to seek the faraway Uta-napishti, who survived the deluge and became immortal. Gilgamesh would ask him how he achieved immortality, so that he can do the same. Thus, Gilgamesh wanders the wild, killing lions, feeding on their flesh, and clothing himself in their skin. His patron—the Sun god—commiserates his condition, but Gilgamesh persists. He reaches the twin mountains where the sun rises and sets, and asks the scorpion men who guard the pass to let him cross to the other side. The scorpion men try to explain to Gilgamesh the adversity of his venture, reminding him that no other being has crossed the mountain tunnel before. Seeing Gilgamesh undeterred by their words, the creatures allow Gilgamesh to traverse the dark tunnel. Gilgamesh races against time to reach the other side before the sun makes its round. He succeeds and finds himself amid fairy trees that bear jewels. Gilgamesh is indifferent to the treasures. He proceeds on his journey until he reaches a tavern along the edge of the sea, and meets its keeper, Shiduri. The tavern keeper apprises Gilgamesh that he is pursuing a vanity, because immortality is restricted to the gods. Gilgamesh is again adamant, therefore Shiduri sends him to the forest where he can find Ur-shanabi, the ferryman of Uta-napishti. Gilgamesh can board with Ur-shanabi on his boat and cross the Waters of Death on the way to Uta-napishti's island. Gilgamesh dashes to Ur-shanabi. He finds him, and in his madness he fights him and smashes the only means of crossing the Waters of Death, the Stone-Things. Now Gilgamesh must cut several trees to use them as punting poles for the boat.

The two sail into a perilous voyage, and finally make it to Uta-napishti. Gilgamesh is surprised to find Uta-napishti no different than humans in appearance. He beseeches him to divulge his secret of immortality. Uta-napishti begins to narrate the story of the flood; how the god Ea (Akkadian Enki) whispered to him to build an ark, how the gods brought rains for

days until the entire race was annihilated, and how Enlil awarded him and his wife an eternal life for saving a species from all sorts of animals. But Uta-napishti's case was exceptional and no one can assemble the gods for Gilgamesh again. Further, Uta-napishti decides to put Gilgamesh into a trial, in which Gilgamesh must not sleep for seven days. Gilgamesh burdened with fatigue fails the sleep test, and when he wakes up he comprehends his vulnerability. Uta-napishti commands his ferryman to dress Gilgamesh in the finest clothes fit for kings, and take him back to his city. When the two are in the boat again, Uta-napishti's wife sympathizes with Gilgamesh and urges her husband to give him a parting gift. Uta-napishti reveals to Gilgamesh the place of a secret prickly-plant, which grows under the waters of the sea and has the power to reverse aging. Gilgamesh dives in, snatches the rejuvenating plant, and brings it back to the boat. The two embark on their journey. Gilgamesh is pleased with the plant; he intends to try it on an old man from his city first. When they reach the land, Gilgamesh finds a refreshing pool, into which he decides to swim. Meanwhile, a serpent creeps in and eats the plant. It sloughs its skin on the spot and flees. When Gilgamesh discovers what has happened, he mocks his fortune, reconciles with his failure to overcome death, and returns with Ur-shanabi to his city. The story ends at the city walls, which reflect the merit of Gilgamesh. The hero sends Ur-shanabi to inspect the intricate geometry of his city walls that no other king has surpassed.

4.6 The Author and the Tablet XII Controversy

The debate on the probable author of the Standard Babylonian version is still ongoing. Some scholars agree among themselves that the epic is the work of some Middle Babylonian scholars who in the last quarter of the second millennium engaged in sorting, adding, subtracting, and expanding extant literary texts, that lasted until the cessation of the cuneiform writing system. Whereas others—like Jacobsen (1976), George (2003), Tigay (2002), and Harris (2000)—attribute the epic to one Babylonian scholar, Sin-leqi-unnini, whose name is written in the Babylonian colophons. Sin-leqi-unnini (translates as 'O Moon God, Accept my Prayer!') was an exorcist priest (akkadian: *ãsipu*) who, presumably, lived in

the Middle Babylonian period. He must have been a gifted writer because later distinguished scribes from Uruk considered him their ancestor.[46]

Making a connection between religion and literature validates the presumption that the epic is a work of a religious man, for "art was the servant of cult."[47] Indeed—for ancient Mesopotamians—poetry functioned chiefly in summoning the presence of the divine powers.[48] It is not improbable then to conjecture that most of this *corpus* was written by an exorcist priest. Harris observed that the epic utilizes "the author's *Sitz-im-Leben* in remarkable ways."[49] Plainly, the work reflects the personal knowledge, interests, and aspirations of the exorcist, Sin-leqi-unnini. This is explicitly and implicitly presented throughout the epic in the first lines of the prologue by the author and the end by the survivor of the flood, Uta-napishti. At the onset, the author uses esoteric phrases conventionally associated with exorcism; like "saw the deep" (I, 3), "saw what was secret" and "discovered what was hidden" (I, 7). Again, Uta-napishti's words to Gilgamesh in Tablet XI are charged with mystery, when he says "Let me disclose, O Gilgamesh, a matter most secret/ to you I will tell a mystery of gods" (XI, 9-10). In addition, George suggests that the prologue, the paean, which recounts the feats of Gilgamesh and the remarkable stanza repeated at the end of the epic, could have been the work of Sin-leqi-unnini. He, further, maintains that the scholar Sin-leqi-unnini incorporated tablet XII in the epic as a prose appendix to serve as a reminder for mortals on the fact of inevitable death.[50]

Tablet XII is a translation of the later part of the Sumerian poem, *Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld*. It is inconsistent with the preceding eleven tablets on the grounds of plot, style, structure, and language. Enkidu dies in the middle of the story, but he is seen alive here. He is detained in the Netherworld and his spirit temporarily returns to recount the fates of the shades of dead people in the Netherworld. This tablet has a distinctive style and language that differs from the preceding ones; it is a prose that's void of literary touch. The symmetry within the eleven tablets (discussed above) and the epic's framework leave out any possibility

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[46] George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic,* 29.
[47] Fiore, *Voices from the Clay,* 45.
[48] Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 15.
[49] Rivkah Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia: The Gilgamesh Epic and Other Ancient Literature*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2000)*, 35.*
[50] George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic,* 32.

for this tablet to be an integral part of the story. Noteworthy, the tradition of framing a literary work was not uncommon among the circle of scribes in ancient Mesopotamia. The Babylonian composition, *Ballad of Early Rulers*, begins and ends with identical lines.[51]

The debate on the consistency of this tablet has produced various assumptions. Some scholars believe that this tablet was appended to the epic at some time after the revision of the late version. Jacobsen claimed it to be the "work of a copyist: rather than an author."[52] The appendage could be due to, as Jacobsen noted, a growing interest among people of the first millennium in further becoming acquainted with the established customs of the Netherworld.[53] Others maintain that the tablet was the work of Sin-leqi-unnini, because it contains features typical of the Middle Babylonian period.[54]

We argue in favor of the view that considers Tablet XII irrelevant to the epic. Therefore, it will be precluded in the analysis of this study. The reason behind this appendage, presumably, was to acquaint the hero with the customs of the netherworld. Gilgamesh remained a national symbol throughout generations. The author of the Sumerian poem, *The Death of Gilgamesh*, mentions to his audience that Gilgamesh was given the title of the judge of the Netherworld as a compensation for not achieving eternal life. Simultaneously, this realization affords the reader with an impression that the hero Gilgamesh is not dispatched into oblivion, rather he attains a semi-divine position as the ruler over the shades of dead people. Subsequently, the audience begin to form a notion that after their death they are going to face Gilgamesh and be ruled by him. In addition, the attempt to insert the last tablet clearly bestowed some moral lessons, and had political intentions behind. Hence, Tablet XII can be construed as an injunction for the next generations to preserve the commemorative rites, such as libation for the deceased for the shade of the dead suffers not starvation in the Netherworld. It sermons the respect of parents, and implies a scheme for procreation as it is revealed for Gilgamesh: the more children one has the more his shade finds comfort in the Netherworld. Furthermore, in the poem *Gilgamesh and the Netherworld*, the hero

[51] The poem is cited by Yoram Cohen, *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age,* (Atlanta: Society of the Biblical Literature, 2013), 129.
[52] Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 215.
[53] Idem, 229.
[54] For a summary of various viewpoints see George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic,* 50-52.

institutionalizes the rites of mourning, thereby setting nine successive days to honor the dead. During these days, the poem states, people wrestled on the streets. Elsewhere, in the Babylonian Menologies a reference is made to the commemorative rite, in which people dedicated a month called Abu to Gilgamesh.[55] This is, by its very nature, advantageous in terms of perpetuating a popular figure. Another reason, which sounds plausible, is that number twelve was highly valued among ancient Mesopotamians, for it constituted the twelve months of the year based on their astronomical observations; as Schimmel points out that "The interest in the 12 is likely to have developed out of the observation of the zodiac. As was well-known in ancient Babylonia, the moon wanders through the 12 stations, and so does the sun."[56] Therefore, it can be concluded that 12 was treated as a circle leading to the same point, thus by adding Tablet XII the round could be accomplished.

5. A Glance into the Mesopotamian Religion (Recurrent Elements)

Two elements are central to *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* namely the spiritual element and the existential element. The spiritual element depicts the relationship between the human and the divine, and men's attitude towards certain gods. This aspect becomes more prominent in the first part of the story, whereas the second part demonstrates a shift in focus towards the human condition: a preoccupation with the fact of human death, and seeking means to avoid it by achieving an everlasting life.

Mesopotamian principles immensely influenced *The Epic of Gilgamesh* throughout ages of its development. In the fourth millennium, the concept of divinity was approached as a supernatural power residing in nature and revealing itself through various phenomena that occurred therein. The third millennium—on the other hand—saw an expansion in spirituality, in which this invisible force was incorporated into the cultural domain as well, ultimately taking a role of an overseer and governor over the affairs of the mankind and the cosmos.[57] This explains the intensity of the interaction between humans and gods in the epic. In every

[55] George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic,* 32.
[56] Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 192.
[57] Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness,* 73.

turn of their lives men relied on these powers that were personified by gods. Hence, we can ask who were these gods, and how Mesopotamians saw their lives in relation to them?

5.1 Mesopotamian Pantheon (Gods Featuring in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*)

The Mesopotamian religion was one of polytheism and plurality that comprised multiple gods; each of those gods had the potential of transforming and manifesting itself in a variety of guises. Jacobsen remarked: "There is in the experience of the Numinous both dread and fascination."[58] Indeed, the gods of Mesopotamia were not altogether benevolent, as demonstrated by their cataclysmic whims. They were a source of awe, admiration and fear for the people. Mesopotamian religion strictly stressed on the service of gods, whom people considered as their patrons. Without the intercession of gods, Mesopotamians regarded themselves as helpless. Defying the authority of gods – either by rulers or commoners—resulted in their rage. Accordingly, to ensure the presence and satisfaction of the "numinous power" particular practices were performed. [59] Magnificent temples were built in the heart of cities, in which their inhabitants placed representative anthropomorphic statues. They watched over these embodiments, to an extent that they clothed them, fed them, and entertained them with music and dancing.

Gods featuring in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* include major and lesser deities found in the ancient Mesopotamian pantheon. Anu (also, An) was the major god, progenitor of all other gods and demons, who presided over the celestial realms. He is frequently called by his epithet, The Fecund Breed-Bull. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Inanna asks the Bull of Heaven from Anu, in order to kill Gilgamesh (Tablet VI). Conceivably, the bull typified thunderstorm because of a resemblance between the sound of thunder with that of a bull.[60] Anu's spouse was the earth goddess, Ki. The second in rank of the pantheon is Enlil, the god of winds. He was the governor of gods and men's affairs and had his dwelling on earth, specifically in Nippur (modern Nuffar). In literature, Enlil is frequently depicted as sulky toward deities and unfriendly to menfolk. Ea (Akkadian Enki)—the third in the pantheon—on the other hand, was excessively sympathetic to gods and men alike. He was the god of wisdom. His realm was

[58] Idem, 11.
[59] Idem, 14.
[60] Idem, 95.

the freshwater beneath the ocean called *Apsu*. Enki was responsible for sending the Seven Sages, to whom a reference is made in the epic*,* to teach the arts of civilization to Mesopotamian people (Tablet I). He was the son of Anu, and was conceived by the goddess Nammu (trans. producer of water). Enki was the sagest among the gods; he was the one who would come up with solutions whenever other deities happened to be in trouble. His shrewdness was often tinged with ruse. Since Enki represents wisdom much attention will be given to his character.[61] Ninhursaga or Aruru (Lady of the stony ground) occupies the fourth place in the rank of deities. She was the creator of gods and mankind. In fact, it was she who shaped the form of the great kings, and she functioned as a midwife likewise.

The lesser gods incorporated in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* are grandchildren of Anu. The goddess of fertility, love, war and destruction, Ishtar (Sumerian, Inanna), appears extensively in the epic*,* especially when the hero rejects her marriage proposals in a manner that greatly offends her (Tablet VI). Conceived as a mother goddess, Ishtar embodies various guises, namely those of mother, harlot, mistress, tavern-keeper, and wife. Elsewhere in Mesopotamian creed, Ishtar represented the ultimate power, which was delegated to her by Anu, as she herself proclaims: "The heavens he [Anu] set as a crown on my head/ The earth he set as sandals on my feet."[62] Ishtar's brother was Shamash, the sun god of justice, and the personal god of Gilgamesh. We encounter Shamash throughout the epic guiding the hero, and participating in the assembly of gods who were judging the case of Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

According to Mesopotamian belief, a personal god was a source of good fortune and safety.[63] Therefore, every individual must have had elected for himself a specific god as his patron. A personal god, Jacobsen notes, was "a power for effective thinking, planning and inspiration." Furthermore, the god would furnish the individual with "impulse and power to realize his dreams." Whether these dreams lend good outcomes or bad, eventually his god had to answer for them.[64] To support this aspect with an example from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*: Ninsun blames Shamash for inspiring her son, Gilgamesh; she claims that the sun god gave her son a restless heart for taking adventures (Tablet III, 46). And, when Gilgamesh along with

[61] The second chapter attempts to identify Enki with Uta-napishti, as the former is the god of wisdom and the latter an immortal being who imparts knowledge on Gilgamesh.
[62] Cited by Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness,* 138.
[63] Idem, 156-7
[64] Ibid.

his friend Enkidu are found guilty for slaying both Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, the Sun god intercedes for Gilgamesh and saves him.

Verdicts were issued against wrongdoers—whether human or divine—in an assembly of gods comprising the deities, Anu, Enlil, and Enki. In cases of a necessity, other gods were invited to attend the trial. The execution of judgment was carried out by Enlil. The decisions made by the gods were communicated to offenders in various ways, particularly through dreams, in which these people learned about their impending dooms. In fact, dreams were considered as "a means of coming in closer contact with the gods."[65] Once the verdict was articulated it could not be bended in any way, to use Enlil's words, "there is no revoking a verdict."[66] This entire scenario is enacted in Enkidu's dream and the later stages of his death.

Lastly, there are other gods who are transiently mentioned in the epic, but were instrumental in the Mesopotamian religion. Nanna-Suen (Akkadian, Sin) was the moon good, the illuminator of darkness. He was the first son of Enlil, and father of Ishtar and Shamash. The god appears in the episode when Ninsun prays for the sun god and entreats him to entrust Gilgamesh to his father (Tablet III). Again, Gilgamesh is seen praying for the moon god in Tablet IX for protection against the beasts of night. Ereshkigal, the goddess of the Netherworld—along with her husband Nergal and the chthonic gods, Anunnaki—ruled over the shades of the dead people in Arallu (the Mesopotamian Hades). In *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* Enkidu relates his dream to Gilgamesh about the awful conditions of the Netherworld (Tablet VII). Adad, the god of rainstorm, is mentioned in passing; he brought rains for seven days that caused the great flood (Tablet XI).

5.2 Mesopotamian Views on Aging, Death, and Afterlife

Such an immersion into religion and devotion for the gods did not restrain Mesopotamian thinkers from finding out explanations to the most stressful and urging questions of the human condition; i.e. the questions of life and death. Earlier in antediluvian times, man was believed to have enjoyed an everlasting life. But the god of worldly affairs,

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[65] Fiore, *Voices from the Clay, 56.*
[66] Cited by Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 91.

Enlil, was disturbed by the incessant noise of mankind. Consequently, he decided to wipe out humanity in a variety of ways. At first, he brought on them disease and famine, but this attempt proved futile for mankind was resilient and managed to survive. Ultimately, living creatures were eliminated by the cataclysmic Deluge, which Mesopotamians believed was caused by Enlil. The flood story is a historical event that may have taken place during 2900 BC in southern Mesopotamia. The classical Akkadian version of the flood story is the *Atrahasis Epic*; built on its Sumerian prototype, *The Deluge*. The former, however, appears to be the main source for the author of the late version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, because of their textual affinities. It is not unusual to discover different names for the survivor of the great flood in all its three versions that share similar meanings. In the Sumerian tale, the hero is Ziusudra, which basically means "Life of Long Days". Old Babylonian Atrahasis is translated from the Akkadian as "Exceedingly Wise." Finally, the name Uta-napishti – who was granted immortality because of his ability to survive the catastrophe—literally means "He found Life."[67]

Mesopotamian literature proliferates with allegories which deal with the transitional state of being, that is, with the transition between life and death. The creation myths make an exertion in describing the conception of man. After the deluge, the gods set age to mankind: a bleak reality that haunted Mesopotamians for ages. Unlike people from other areas, Mesopotamians rarely searched for solutions to avoid death in medicine, they however found means in religion. They believed that immortality was a privilege exclusive to the gods, thus these were the only source to rely on in attaining a long life. These aspects are vividly portrayed in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In addition, the colophons of Babylonian texts deposited in temples as votive offerings for the gods by scribes attest to the authors' desires for durable physical capacity and longevity.[68]

Being firmly religious people, Mesopotamians expressed their attitudes toward life and death through various rites of rejuvenation. Festivals of rejuvenation were fundamental in their lives through millennials. They commemorated the coming of Ishtar, the goddess associated with revival, and her husband Dumuzi's provisional resurrection from the

[67] George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, 152-155.
[68] Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia,* 54.

Netherworld. The New Year festival was a symbol of rebirth, as nature comes to life again in spring. A reference is made to this festival in *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* when the hero promises that he will celebrate the New Year twice when he returns home victorious (Tablet II), denoting the triumph of life over death. Usually, during the festival, the rite of sacred marriage was performed by the king who, conventionally, personified a god and his queen or a high-priestess represented the fertility goddess, Inanna. The rite of the sacred marriage was an emphasis on the procreation aspect; "[the king] sees it as a divine engendering which brings into being spring's glorious burst, the sacred cosmic sexual act in which all nature is fertilized."[69] The sexual act was not only a metaphor for the fertility of the land but also a suggestion of the longevity of the king. Gilgamesh is restrained from performing this rite by Enkidu who blocks his entrance to the bride room, consequently the two engage into a fight (Tablet II). In addition, another ritual associated with water was fundamental in Mesopotamian cult as Mesopotamians considered it a sacred element. Water was used in rituals to cleanse a man from evil powers, thus establishing another rejuvenation pattern in which the initiate is transformed into a new state.[70] In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the author makes use of this element quite extensively: Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and Ninsun are depicted taking showers prior or after commencing an enterprise.

The stage into which an individual makes a transition from intellectually immature youthfulness into developed adulthood as is central to *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was crucial for Mesopotamian people as well. Coming to terms with one's mortality marked their full maturity. Harris notes that "the eventual acceptance of responsibility to community and the inevitability of death are features of mature adulthood."[71] Mesopotamian records do not make an explicit reference to the rites of passage. Nevertheless, if we take Campbell's perspective into consideration—that "the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage, separation, initiation, and return."[72]—then we might say that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* typifies the rite of passage. Indeed, the poem alludes to the three rites of initiation which the hero undergoes. The author sums

[69] Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 47.
[70] Idem, 112.
[71] Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia*, 23.
[72] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 23.

up Gilgamesh's journey in the prologue by stating Gilgamesh's departure, his travails, and, ultimately, his return.

Old age for some Mesopotamian people did not arrive free of complications, as Harris puts it, "old age was not a golden age for Mesopotamians."[73] When Mesopotamians reached the stage of limited physical and mental capacity, they had to hand over the management of their estates to their juniors. Potential tensions may have had arisen between the old and the young due to inheritance issues. Perhaps, this could be the underlying motive for Gilgamesh in challenging the authority of the gods. Apparently, the elderly suffered from marginalization; contributing less to society, hence receiving less rations, in contrast to younger men who constituted the fundamental workforce. When people grew old they would become susceptible to the threat of being deposed by the young, and to the fear of looming death.

The theme of parricide is expressed in the creation myth, *Enuma elish*. Elder gods, like Apsu and Tiamat,[74] are portrayed in the myth as inactive divinities who prefer silence over the noise of younger gods. Consequently, these elder gods resolve to wipe out their offspring, but they are unsuccessful. And, when the young god Marduk, son of Enki and grandchild of Anu, slays his grandmother, Tiamat, he is appointed as the supreme ruler of earth and heaven. The Akkadian terminology for the elderly are *šibu* (for man) and *šibtu* (for woman) which literally mean "gray/white hair". "So unpleasing was gray hair for the ancients, such as Mesopotamians and Egyptians," Harris noticed "that they sometimes dyed their hair."[75] Aside from reversing age through hair dyes, Mesopotamians strove to look elegant by taking excessive care in grooming their hairs and wearing the finest of costumes. These features are evident throughout *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, but more explicit, perhaps, in Shiduri's exhortation to Gilgamesh found in an Old-Babylonian tablet reportedly from Sippar: "Let your clothes be clean/let your head be washed, may you bathe in water!"[76]

[73] Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia*, 72.
[74] Tiamat was a personification of salt in the sea and her husband, Apsu, represented the freshwater. According to this myth, the major gods were created from their union.
[75] Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia, 51.*
[76] George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* 124.

As an alternative to death, Mesopotamians, oftentimes, shifted their attention to the family aspect. They believed that their offspring represented the family, since they carried the family's lineage to the next generation; thus, achieving another form of immortality, that is immortality through family name and blood. Harris remarks that to Mesopotamians "the most horrific of curses was the decimation of descendants."[77] The significance of children for Mesopotamians can be summed in Jacobsen's lines: "without children, without sons, there could be no personal adequacy, no success in life."[78] Incantations and exorcism were, apparently, performed to ward off evil forces that were believed to haunt and murder infants.

Funerary practices (Akkadian, *kipsu*) were also substantial across Mesopotamian community. A proper burial followed by frequent offerings, prayers, and libations- they believed- secured a better place for the deceased in the Netherworld. Regular offerings to the dead were made with the intention for their ancestors to enjoy a better prospect in the Netherworld. The account of Enkidu's dream to Gilgamesh in Tablet VII fully reports this aspect.

To sum up, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* which was written in cuneiform in the rich land between the two rivers experienced a slow process of transformation; from what was at first the word of mouth to separate written tales, next to an integrated cycle of stories, and ultimately to its fully evolved Standard Version. It recounts the deeds and travails of a legendary hero, Gilgamesh, whose futile quest to attain eternal life brought him home wise. We revealed that the grand theme of immortality is not limited to *The Epic of Gilgamesh*; actually, it was a fervent desire among Mesopotamians since time immemorial. Being extremely religious people, Mesopotamians venerated their gods and—in return—they expected their compassion. People became mature when, at some stage in their lives, they came to terms with the reality of inevitable death. Therefore, Mesopotamians shifted their attentions to aspects, such as family lineage and good deeds in life which afforded them with an alternative kind of timelessness. Interestingly, this longing for infinity did not stop in Mesopotamia; it has been, indeed, an innate feeling of humankind who carried it along throughout centuries and until our present day.

[77] Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia*, 5-6.
[78] Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 158.

Chapter 2: UNDERLYING MOTIFS IN THE HERO'S QUEST FOR IMMORTALITY IN *THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH*

"Now you have touched him, and he will tread the distant path" Tablet III

Is the hero autonomous in his desire to travel? Or, is there a driving force that bestows upon him courage and assistance, and prompts him to undertake perilous journeys to unveil dark recesses that are inherent in him? In the case of our hero, Gilgamesh, both possibilities sound credible; in fact, at times they appear intertwined. However, there seems to be a slight difference in terms of objectives between the human and the divine aspects of the hero: the human aspect of Gilgamesh is more materialistic, he aspires to transcend death, whereas the divine aspect urges the hero towards a higher consciousness by which he is enabled to reconcile with the fact of his physical mortality. In his 2008 book (third ed.), *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* Joseph Campbell brilliantly charts the hero's journey through garnering evidence from various ancient cultures. We, the readers, are stunned by the great scale of parallel elements and motifs of different peoples, who were distanced from each other in time and space. Campbell categorized the journey of the hero into three stages: *Departure*, *Initiation*, and *Return*. In *Departure*, the hero answers the call for adventure, equips himself with sufficient tools for his journey, and is often instigated by a mythical figure or force. *Initiation*, on the other hand, marks the hero's crossing of the threshold into the uncanny, where he slays monsters, confronts the mother goddess, endures trials, and often is rescued by the same mysterious protecting force. The hero in his final stage, *Return*, comes back home more experienced, and restores the long forgotten rites and orders.[79] Inspired by Campbell's outline of the hero's adventure, this chapter covers three main sections, namely Departure, Initiation, and Return, to highlight Gilgamesh's journey in achieving immortality. The principle

[79] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* (New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 2008), 28-29.

aim of this chapter is to reveal the underlying motifs in the epic which—to our current knowledge—have been unexplored; and, at the same time, the current chapter is going to address the following concerns: How is Gilgamesh about to achieve a state of tranquility, whereby he is enabled to extinguish the flame of desire, hostility, and delusion? What does exactly the author suggest, or what is the core of his message? Is it truly that immortality can be attained through fame, or in the form of physical perpetuity, or through achieving wisdom one learns how to transcend death? Finally, does Gilgamesh become wise—as the writer declares—after he returns from his journey? With all these questions in mind, we may begin our analysis of the hero's journey in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

1. Departure

1.1 Prologue: Gilgamesh, The King of Uruk

The poem's prologue begins with the remarkable lines taken from where the story ends that form its famous framework, like a full circle that repeats itself and reflects the human life cycle. The author briefly tells of how the hero Gilgamesh returned from his journey worn out, brought back secrets, became wise, wrote his story on a stele stone, and found peace (I, 1-10). Then, he proceeds to celebrate the hero's achievements: Gilgamesh built the temple of Eanna, which was dedicated to the goddess Ishtar and the god Anu, and he also built the wall of Uruk whose magnificence no other king can match. Thus, with our attention directed to the wall, the author invites us to:

> Climb Uruk's wall and walk back and forth!
> Survey its foundations, examine the brickwork!
> Were its bricks not fired in an oven?
> Did the Seven Sages not lay its foundations? [80] (I, 18-21)

Subsequently, the author paves the way for us to follow his story by briefly sketching the events in the hero's journey, and he makes us further acquainted with his protagonist by

[80] Lines from Andrew George's (2003) translation of the epic are employed throughout this chapter. In cases of other translations, they are duly referenced.

describing Gilgamesh's extraordinary features. The most striking trait that Gilgamesh is endowed with, however, is his dual character, human and divine: "two-thirds of him god and one third human." (I, 48).

Gilgamesh possesses the world, but he is discontent. Agitation has taken hold of him. Campbell's words better express the condition of Gilgamesh: "[the hero's] life feels meaningless—even though… he may through titanic efforts succeed in building an empire of renown."[81] Gilgamesh's conduct turns excessively impulsive and is disturbing the inhabitants of his city: young men are being dragged into wrestling contests, and young women are forced into sexual acts and sacred marriage (I, 65- 76). A king is assigned by the gods to ensure the wellbeing of his people and maintain justice among them, but Gilgamesh is arrogant and self-centered; he does not treat them like a shepherd does to his sheep. The act of oppressing citizens can best be described as a projection of the hero's inner struggles with existential issues. His inner turmoil foreshadows and sets a starting point for an alteration in his character. Gilgamesh must learn to suppress his excessive passions, and instead listen to the summons of life transformative calls which his divine patron and helper, Shamash, is trying to communicate to him. But, perhaps, time is not yet ripe for the hero to answer the call of adventure.

Hence, the city men are put to forced labor in building the great Wall of Uruk, which is a metaphor for defense against external threats, specifically those of nature, and akin to the protective human skin against diseases. Moreover, the act of exploiting young women serves the hero's tenacity in achieving a kind of physical longevity. The rite of the sacred marriage, in which the hero indulges with, was performed by ancient rulers to ensure the fertility of the land, and even to prolong a king's life (see Chapter 1). In brief: Gilgamesh is seething from the inside. He is experiencing an anxiety, and casting it toward his people. We are introduced with a problem from which the major plot generates, i.e. the predicament of achieving immortality. The author gives us a hint at the outset; in the halfway of his retrospect on the life of his protagonist, he states that his hero "scoured the world ever searching for life" (I, 41).

[81] Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 49.

The riddle of Gilgamesh's genealogy, two-thirds god and one-third human, has baffled readers and scholars, likewise, who either avoid to resolve it or give tentative explanations.[82] After investigating into the matter deeply and trying to solve this dilemma, we arrived to the following conclusion. Gilgamesh's parents were the goddess Ninsun, and the human Lugalbanda.[83] Thus, Gilgamesh inherited two thirds: one divine third from his mother and another human from his father. The question is: how did Gilgamesh retain another divine "third"? Through a closer look into *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, we will discover a striking bond between him and his personal god, Shamash. The prostitute, Shamhat, informs Enkidu from the beginning that "Gilgamesh it is whom divine Shamash loves" (I, 241). In his illustration of the personal god in ancient Mesopotamia, Jacobsen noted "[the personal god] is the image of parent… A common way of referring to the personal god is as 'the god who created or engendered me'… we may realize that the god dwelt in the man's body."[84] The writer then provides a host of instances in which Mesopotamian rulers considered their personal gods as their parents. Therefore, we suggest that Gilgamesh acquired his other third from his patron, Shamash. Another question, perhaps, can be asked: what is the significance of three, as a number? It has been revealed that ancient Mesopotamians considered three a sacred number;[85] it represented the three principle deities who correspond to the three elements: heaven (Anu), air or atmosphere (Enil), and earth (Ki, but later replaced by Enki). Three, apparently, repairs the damage caused by duality. Schimmel found that "in many traditions 3 was considered to mean "much", thus beyond duality."[86] One seeking a divine status must reach the level of three principle gods, but Gilgamesh is incomplete: two-thirds of him are divine and one-third human, to illustrate with a proverb Enkidu uses: "a three-ply rope [is not easily broken]" (V: 76). Notably, three, as a number, is incorporated in the epic quite extensively. Furthermore, Schimmel states: "[3] is cumulative, and it denotes finality: what

[82] See Fink (2013-2014) for a list of possible solutions. Also, see Kluger (1991), 23.
[83] Lugalbanda was the King of Uruk in Early Dynastic Ur I period, who was later deified; the same as Gilgamesh who later became the ruler of the Netherworld.
[84] Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*, (Yale University, 1976), 158.
[85] The readers of Gilgamesh are already aware that the poem is replete with numbers, and scholars in the field of ancient Near East can confirm to us how far Mesopotamians were fond of mathematics and astronomy. However, less attention has been given to these numbers and their relation with motifs that prevail in the story. It was critical to investigate deeper into this aspect, and the findings are quite remarkable. For economic reasons, only the numbers that are relevant to our subject are going to be treated.
[86] Annemarie Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 69.

has been done for thrice becomes a law."[87] Interestingly, this view applies to all the instances in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*; to cite one example out of many, on the third day Enkidu comes down to the water-hole, and thus the waiting of Shamhat and the trapper for Enkidu is brought to an end.

In addition, the initiative to deify Gilgamesh is implicitly expressed by Gilgamesh's mother, Ninsun, when she bathes, perfumes, grooms herself and ascends the rooftop sending her prayer to Shamash to protect her son during his journey. Ninsun makes this fragmentary request: "Let me make him, O Shamash, ... ,\ lest he ... , lest he ... in the Forest of Cedar." (III, 107-108). If we attempt to reconstruct these lines, our conjecture will be: Ninsun asks for Shamash's approval to make her son a god, and thus immortal, lest he perishes in the Forest of Cedar. We find a striking allusion to Ninsun's request in the old Sumerian poem, *The Death of Gilgamesh*. In this poem, Enki briefly relates the story of the Great Flood and the oath the gods swore to set a lifetime for mankind: "And now we look on [Gilgamesh]\ despite his mother we cannot show him mercy!" (M, 78-79). Apparently, the sun god, Shamash, refuses Gilgamesh to be immortalized for some reasons that are going to be revealed in the analysis of the flood story[88] (see below). However, what is more remarkable here is the way Shamash takes in the role of Gilgamesh's father, Lugalbanda, whose presence is unaccounted for in the story. Consequently, this is a clear indication that Shamash constitutes an essential part in Gilgamesh's life.

Scholars have studied the liminal state of Gilgamesh and other heroes like him, who are part human and part divine. Van Nortwick, for instance, points out that "such creatures [divine and human] are by nature problematical, to themselves and those around them… Too powerful to have real peers among mortals, not strong enough to mix with the gods, the hero may be an isolated, lonely man."[89] And this is precisely what the state of our protagonist is: Gilgamesh is unable to integrate within his society, and his superhuman power brings harm

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[87] Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers,* 69.

[88] If our inference of Ninsun's fragmentary lines is verified, then the Flood myth will no longer be considered as an addition to the Standard Babylonian version of the epic. It is often argued that the inclusion of the flood story does not advance or influence the plot. In contrast—based upon current outcomes—we find that this story is, indeed, consistent with the epic. The reason behind Shamash's refusal to deify Gilgamesh can be gleaned from the narration of the Deluge by its survivor, Uta-napishti, to Gilgamesh.

[89] Van Nortwick, *Somewhere I have Never Traveled Before: The Second Self and the Hero's Journey in Ancient Epic,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 12.

to his people. Rivkah Harris, on the other hand, illustrates how the hero's damaging powers are not only negative for his surroundings but also for himself. Thus, she says "The liminality is the period of suffering and woe… In the liminal stage Gilgamesh is neither alive nor dead; rather he is betwixt and between… The geography of this liminal space is not of the human world or where the gods reside. It is a mythic geography outlandish, an unfamiliar world."[90] Harris's last statement concords with what Tzvi Abush has earlier demonstrated: "[Gilgamesh] must learn that he is neither a normal human being nor a god whose immortality can be enjoyed among the living."[91]

Ultimately, the king who is oppressing his people is not fit to be a representative of higher authorities; which, in this case, are the gods above who appoint a king below.[92] Thus, as Campbell discerned "the upholding idea of community is lost. Force is all that binds it. The emperor becomes the tyrant ogre… the usurper from whom the world is now to be saved."[93] Consequently, the city inhabitants need a relief; they send their cries to the gods, and the gods answer affirmatively. The gods decide to create someone who can be equal to Gilgamesh, in order to harness the king's powers and divert them from his community.[94] Nevertheless, the decision made by the gods has a dual advantage for the commoners and for the king, likewise because the hero needs a friend, someone who can understand his heart, and the gods' objective was to fashion a creature to "be a *match* for the *storm* of [Gilgamesh's] heart" (I, 97). In this manner, the primitive-man-like Enkidu was created, and cast into the wilderness to graze on grass and suckle from the milk of animals.

[90] Rivkah Harris, *Gender and Aging in Mesopotamia: The Gilgamesh Epic and Other Ancient Literature*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 2000), 45.
[91] Tzvi Abusch, "Ishtar's Proposal and Gilgamesh's Refusal; An Interpretation of the *Gilgamesh Epic*", (1986), 183.
[92] In the Mesopotamian belief, a king was assigned by the gods to attend for the needs of his people and enforce law among them, so that these people can accommodate their gods properly. See Bottéro (2005), 225-228.
[93] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 299.
[94] The episode in its entirety shares elements similar to and comparable with the initial stages in the Akkadian myth of human origins, *Atrahasis.* In this myth, the inferior gods protest for forced labor the superior gods imposed on them, and consequently wise Enki proposes a plan to create the first humans from clay (like Enkidu) to substitute the inferior gods. For *Atrahasis* text, confer Stephanie Dalley, (2000), 1-38.

1.2 The Seduction of Enkidu (Nature/Culture)

Time being propitious—by gods' virtue and by chance—it happens that a hunter meets Enkidu while setting his traps for animals near a water-hole. Enkidu is hindering the hunter from doing his profession, by saving other animals from the latter's traps. Observing for the first time a wild creature resembling in great details a human breed, the hunter becomes perplexed; his aspect turns gloomy and his mood dejects, similar to someone returning from a faraway journey (I, 113-121). The hunter’s changed features are a metaphor for someone who has traveled back in time and met with his origins. Enkidu, for him, is a counterpart of his ancestors before they were introduced to culture.

The hunter realizes that he cannot challenge or subdue Enkidu like he does with other animals. He therefore consults his father and later Gilgamesh, who both advise him to take Shamhat, a high-priestess and prostitute of Eanna temple, along with him in order to seduce the wild Enkidu and bring him back to Uruk. Back in wilderness, Shamhat does as bidden; she performs her art to attract Enkidu:

> Shamhat unfastened the cloth of her loins,
> she bared her sex and he took in her charms.
> She did not recoil, she took in his scent:
> she spread her clothing and he lay upon her […]
> For six days and seven nights
> Enkidu was erect, as he coupled with Shamhat. (I, 188-194)

It is the beauty that tames the beast, a compassionate look—though erotically charged— from a high-priestess. It is essential to note here however that Enkidu is not portrayed in terms of ferocity; in the contrary, he is naïf and his innocence is akin to the gazelles with whom he fares on the uplands. He is endowed with a notion of imminent danger; thus, his animal friends are rescued by him from the hunter's traps, or even from the predators who try to prey on them.

We are, for the first time, introduced with the benign aspect of the earth goddess, Ishtar, [95] who is incarnated in the person of Shamhat, the priestess at Ishtar's temple. Ishtar is the goddess of earth, the mother goddess of nature. Ishtar is a two-dimensional deity: she is the numen of fertility, and at the same time of sterility and death. Humankind makes a distinction between nature and culture, however, to her there is no sense of such polarity; she embraces all. In other words, the goddess is ubiquitous; her presence can be felt and seen in infinite manifestations.[96] She has her dwellings at the center of a city, and at the same time in the heart of nature. She is the nurturing mother—personified by Gilgamesh's mother and the wives of various characters in the epic; namely, the wives of Shamash, Scorpion-man, Uta-napishti—who protects her children. We also find her in the form of single prostitutes: the priestess Shamhat, and Shiduri, the tavern keeper. She is the fountain, best described in Campbell's terms: the goddess is the womb and the tomb, simultaneously. This is the goddess of fertility who unconditionally offers in abundance, but expects to receive too. In other words, Ishtar is the scale that balances life phenomena: she offers and receives, but if she is not given in full measure this nature embodied goddess rebels.

In her psychoanalytical study on the character of Gilgamesh, Rivkah Kluger—based upon and inspired by the work of the renown psychoanalyst C. J. Jung—makes a brilliant observation: "Every cultural achievement" she remarks "is connected with some sacrifice of nature."[97] The most plausible reason that Enkidu's birthplace is being in nature rather than in culture is to emphasize that nature offers boons to culture, and the latter has to realize that this understanding is based on reciprocal exchange of what originated from nature in the first place. In brief, there must be harmony between nature and culture.

A quite remarkable formula is utilized in the above lines which calls for our attention; it bears certain implications and unfolds the proceedings in the story. Thus, when the author says "for six days and seven nights", he plays with the temporal order in a brilliant manner which renders it difficult to recognize.[98] We can assert that the author inverted temporal

[95] The destructive aspect of the earth goddess, Ishtar, will be addressed in the following sections.
[96] Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 143.
[97] Rivkah Schärf Kluger, *The Archetypal Significance of Gilgamesh: A Modern Ancient Hero*, ed. Yehezkel Kluger, (Einsiedeln: Daimon, 1991), 28.
[98] In the Old Babylonian Pennsylvania tablet, the intercourse between Enkidu and Shamhat lasts for "seven days and seven nights" (George, 49), and another Old Babylonian tablet, unearthed in Sipar, describes Gilgamesh's mourning over Enkidu; he refuses to hand his body for burial "for seven days and seven nights/until a maggot

order while describing the duration of the intercourse between Enkidu and Shamhat; speaking in a technical manner, the phrase should be “seven days and six nights” instead of saying six days and seven nights. The reason behind this implementation by the author, we suggest, was to devise a conundrum, whereby his audience could prefigure the outcomes. The puzzle here can simply be solved with a calculation of the numbers involved: 6+7=13. And thirteen as we know was detested by Mesopotamians, who regarded it as a number that brought misfortune to whomsoever run into it. “In Babylonia,” Schimmel found “13 had a certain negative aspect owing to its role in astronomy”; because the twelve—which was the number of the hours in a day, the months in a year, and the planets—was transgressed by the number thirteen.[99] So much so, as Fiore noticed, on the 13th of each month walking on the streets was forbidden in ancient Mesopotamia.[100] In *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* there is a striking occurrence in which thirteen is employed to denote a negative sense, as when the author says: “There rose thirteen winds and the face of Humbaba darkened” (V, 141). In short: the “six days and seven nights” formula can be interpreted as a foreshadowing for Enkidu’s fate. Indeed, at the “first glimmer” of the thirteenth day Enkidu dies (VIII, 1).

To suppose this occurrence as a happenstance is certainly a misrepresentation of the story. In fact, the same formula is repeated several times throughout the epic, and—in each episode—it denotes a sense of adversity. We can point out, as examples, Gilgamesh’s wild wandering when he recounts his mourning over his friend, Enkidu, to each character he meets: “Six days I wept for him and seven nights. / I did not surrender his body for burial” (X, 58-9); Uta-napishti’s account of the deluge: “For six days and [seven] nights, / there blew the wind, the downpour, /the gale, the Deluge, it flattened the land.” (XI, 127-29); again, in Utnapishti’s challenge for Gilgamesh which proves futile: “For six days and seven nights, come, do without slumber!” (XI, 209).

It is quite essential to note that all these events took place during daytime: Enkidu and his animals come to the water-hole on the third day; at the “first glimmer” of the thirteenth day Enkidu dies which marks the beginning of Gilgamesh’s mourning; Uta-napishti while

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drops from his nostril” (Si, ii: 8-9). The author of the Standard version, however, totally changes this formula; thus, the new “six days and seven nights” formula is introduced to replace the old one.

[99] Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers,* (1993), 204.

[100] Silvestro Fiore, *Voices from the Clay: The Development of Assyro-Babylonian Literature (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965)*, 100.

narrating the story of the flood says to Gilgamesh: “At the very first glimmer of brightening dawn, there rose on the horizon a dark cloud of black” (XI, 97-8); and finally Gilgamesh and Ur-shanabi make it to Uta-napishti’s island during the day because the latter recognizes them from a far distance. Interestingly, all scenes share a common feature, namely of a gaze, which can also be read as an indication of a looming disaster. Thus, Enkidu’s gaze at the prostitute stimulates his sexual desire that causes his entrapment and later his death; Gilgamesh’s gaze at the maggot which drops from his friend’s nose brings home the idea of his own death, causing the hero a distraught; what Uta-napshti saw prior to the outbreak of the deluge had cataclysmic effects; finally, Gilgamesh’s visions are shattered when he finds Uta-napishti no different than him: “'I look at you, Uta-napishti: / your form is no different, you are just like me” (XI, 5-6)[101].

Later, in vivid descriptions, the author proceeds to portray a phenomenon that transpires in that context—wherein, Enkidu and Shamhat made love—and transforms Enkidu into a sentient being. To use Jacobsen’s words, something magical and decisive has happened. When Enkidu’s desires at last are “sated” with Shamhat, he decides to return to his animals; the latter, however, shun Enkidu, who is no longer able to run after them:

> When with her delights he was fully sated,
> he turned his gaze to his herd.
> The gazelles saw Enkidu, they started to run,
> the beasts of the field shied away from his presence.
> Enkidu had defiled his body so pure,
> his legs stood still, though his herd was in motion.
> Enkidu was weakened, could not run as before,
> but now he had reason, and wide understanding. (I, 195-202)

[101] Gilgamesh was intent to challenge Uta-napishti into a battle but he refrained. The epic in its basic form, perhaps, had Uta-napishti accepting Gilgamesh’s challenge by proposing to resist sleep for six days and seven nights. Thus, the lines XI 7-208 can be treated as a later addition by the author of the Standard Babylonian version; inserted to heighten the level of suspense among the Mesopotamian audience, who were already acquainted with the story from the Sumerian prototype, *The Deluge,* and the Babylonian epic, *Atrahasis*. But most importantly, the Flood myth retains a fundamental message within itself, directed toward the hero-Gilgamesh- to learn from it. As a result, we regard this addition as integral and influential to the major theme of the story (see below for an explanation).

Every transformation—as we learn from knowledge and experience—is made with a sacrifice. The initiate gives up a part of his former attributes to embrace the new personality. Enkidu is bereaved of his innocence and vitality, yet he gains wisdom and his emotions expand. Various scholars have made the assumption that animals—and Enkidu included—lack the consciousness, especially the one about death. For example, David Damrosch in an article argues that "civilized life involves a loss of an unconscious, direct relation to the natural/divine world."[102] This is true to an extent, but at the same time controversial; animals may not—like humans—contemplate death, but they certainly have a sense of fear from the approaching danger that may cause them to perish. The only line of distinction that can be drawn between humans and animals is that we, humans, contemplate on the subject of death and always find techniques to prolong our lifetime, whereas animals are chiefly interested in and concerned about the present moment.[103]

The medium through which knowledge is acquired is, obviously, sex; and its employment by the author indicates, as Foster stated, "that sex belongs to the lowest common level of human knowledge—what everyone must know and experience to become human. Once this knowledge is attained, continued non-productive sex is no longer acquisition of knowledge or affirmation of humanity."[104] This is definitely true with Enkidu that once he is civilized, the prostitute would become marginalized and consigned back to her temple.

Shamhat then takes Enkidu by the hand to a shepherds' camp, wherein his body matted with hair is trimmed, he is given a bath, and eventually turned into a man. Thereupon, the prostitute begins teaching the son of nature the arts of civilization. She introduces him to the very basic elements—yet fundamental—in the daily life of mankind: bread and beer. Enkidu, for the first time, eats bread and drinks seven goblets of beer until his mood becomes

[102] David Damrosch, "Gilgamesh and Genesis," *Gilgamesh: A Reader,* ed. John Maier (Illinois, Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1997), 199.

[103] Also, investigate the two contrasting theories of "primitivism" and "anti-primitivism": According to primitivism, early life was a bliss, humans lived carefree. While anti-primitivism sees early humans as savages who lead a wild life.

[104] Benjamin Foster, "Gilgamesh: Sex, Love, and Ascent of Knowledge," *Gilgamesh: A Reader,* ed. John Maier (Illinois, Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1997), 64.

cheerful; he begins to sing and dance.[105] At this point, the process of acculturation is accomplished; Enkidu has, eventually, transformed into a human and a civilian.

It has been frequently suggested that shepherds function as transitional figures, standing on a boundary between nature and culture. Moreover, the washing and grooming that takes place therein signifies a transition from an older to a newer state, analogous of the rites of initiation; one that is more familiar to modern people is, seemingly, the rite of Baptism.

1.3 The Friendship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu

The author puts what Enkidu has gained along the process of his acculturation into trial. Enkidu acquires a sense of morality; he is angered—when he learns from a passerby on his way to attend a wedding—that Gilgamesh is going to exercise a *droit de seigneur*. He resolves to stop Gilgamesh from performing his wicked act. Thus, Enkidu and Shamhat set off to Uruk, and they arrive at the spot where the ceremony is supposed to take place. Enkidu blocks the king's passage at the threshold of the bride's chamber; the two engage into a fierce fighting, in which Gilgamesh prevails. During the fight, Gilgamesh experiences how the strength and character of Enkidu are aligned with his own; he, thereupon, relents and accepts Ekidu as a friend. At this juncture, we observe an outstanding irony: the way Shamhat with her charms succeeds to tame the wild Enkidu, and how now Enkidu tames—a personality who is often regarded as a pinnacle of culture—the king Gilgamesh. The two, at last, embrace each other and become bosom friends. Shortly afterwards, however, the city life soon makes Enkidu despondent. As a form of entertainment Gilgamesh proposes a trek to the Cedar Forest, in order to slay its guardian, Humbaba, and cut some cedar trees.

Enkidu, despite being in strength and appearance the image of Gilgamesh, in essence and in personality he represents the opposite side of the hero. Enkidu demonstrates a sort of empathy for animals and for people, whereas Gilgamesh is indifferent to the feelings of

[105] Compare this instance with Shiduri's advice for Gilgamesh extant in the Old Babylonian version, but omitted by the author in the Standard Version. The lines can be retrieved from Benjamin Forster's (2001) translation of *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* 55-56.

others. In other words, Enkidu reflects the good side of Gilgamesh, the one that appears to be lacking within the character of the hero. Seen from this perspective, therefore, Enkidu becomes complementary to Gilgamesh, i.e. two faces of the same coin, the good and bad aspects. This brings us to the concept of polarity: "Polarity" Schimmel suggests "is essential to recognition: whatever is qualified with attributes can only be recognized because of polarity."[106] Thus, it can be inferred that Gilgamesh's second self, Enkidu, is created for the hero to recognize his true nature. The friendship with Enkidu becomes an impetus for awakening Gilgamesh's consciousness towards his people. This friendship is based on love.[107] Foster states:

> The import of [the author's] thematic on love is that love of another person is the next order of knowledge and makes a human into a social being. Knowledge of another leads to unity, which need not be based on sexual union. This unity is only apparent, for higher knowledge shows that it is doomed to disintegrate. Such integration need not be terminal for the self.[108]

True love is contagious, as soon as it enters the heart of an individual, it does not discriminate; love emanates and touches everyone. The only thing that thwarts love is fear. Fear and love do not tolerate each other; therefore, they cannot exist together in the heart of a person at the same time. The question of fear—specifically, fear of death—will be examined in depth in the following sections.

2. Initiation

This stage, in the course of the heroic journey of Gilgamesh, corresponds in great detail to the summary offered by Campbell in his study in which he remarks the hero's first

[106] Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers,* 42.
[107] It is essential to note here that usually the nature of the bond between Gilgamesh and Enkidu has been interpreted to carry sexual undertones. However, such a reading is based primarily on the standards valid in Western society. In the Middle East—Mesopotamia, in particular—friendship is approached differently: for example, it is quite common for two male friends or two female friends to walk hand in hand, and greet each other with a kiss on the cheeks. It is also common to hear metaphors, such as "they are a husband and wife", to describe the intensity of their friendship.
[108] Benjamin Foster, "Gilgamesh: Sex, Love, and Ascent of Knowledge," *Gilgamesh: A Reader,* ed. John Maier (Illinois, Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1997), 64.

departure into the unfamiliar realm is the beginning of a long sequence of trials, such as crossing boundaries, evading perils, confrontations with monsters and often with the goddess, and experiencing “moments of illumination”. He further adds: “Meanwhile there will be a multitude of preliminary victories, unretainable ecstasies, and momentary glimpses of the wonderful land.”[109] Another remark related to the mysterious power protecting the hero may shed light on the two journeys which Gilgamesh undertakes, because it resembles greatly the bond between Gilgamesh and Shamash: “the first encounter of the hero-journey” Campbell earlier noted “is with a protective figure… who provides the adventurer with amulets against the dragon forces he is about to pass.”[110]

2.1 Immortality Through Fame

2.1.1 Expeditions and Slaying Monsters

Gilgamesh is very excited about his Journey to the Cedar Forest; very typical of the modern traveler, he organizes plans and equips himself with weapons— thinking he is ready to conquer the world.[111] His friend, Enkidu, who is acquainted with that realm, warns the hero from taking such a risky enterprise. The elders—at first reluctant—exhort the hero not to rely on his strength only, but to "look long and hard" and only strike when he is certain (III, 2-3). Gilgamesh pays little heed to the counsels of the elders, and jeers at the courage of his friend; taking Enkidu as a coward:

'Why, my friend, do you speak like a weakling?
With your spineless words you [make me] despondent.
'As for man, [his days] are numbered,
whatever he may do, it is but wind. (II, 231-235)

The chief purpose of the quest is not to divert his friend who suddenly experiences a state of inertia—as it has been frequently suggested. Gilgamesh’s proposition, in fact, serves his personal interests. The hero—though, subtly implied—has already meditated on this trip and earned the support of his patron in the first place; Enkidu's condition only serves here as

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109 Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 90.
110 Idem, 57.
111 Compare this episode with the parable of the Prince Five-weapons cited by Campbell (2008), 69-73.

a pretext to justify the hero's journey. From this point of view, it is conceivable to regard Enkidu as a scapegoat. The last two lines are a clear indication that Gilgamesh was preoccupied with his excessively desired ambition. Similar passages could be detected before the death of his friend, Enkidu, which unfold the hero's true motives. For instance, the irony of Gilgamesh's resolve to make a name eternal by means of slaying the ogre at the Cedar Forest even if it costs him his death, yet when they arrive at the forest Gilgamesh urges his friend to "forget death and seek life" (IV, 255). Cedar Forest is described by Gilgamesh as the dwelling place of the gods. Enlil assigned a guardian, Humbaba, to the forest, and Gilgamesh is determined to challenge the mighty forces, in order to be, if we can use this term, qualified to achieve an everlasting life; as if he believes that by displaying one's physical strength in combat one ought to be rewarded with immortality. This is a misconception the hero repeats when he faces Uta-napishti on his island. There, Gilgamesh intends to challenge him in a battle, taking him to be different from the common people with regard to his appearance.

Ultimately, no force can stop the hero who is motivated by determination; neither can his friend Enkidu nor the city elders, who are symbolic of the guardians at the threshold who must give the hero their consent—won by persuasion or force—to step into the realm of the unknown. The city elders who dissuade Gilgamesh from venturing such a perilous adventure represent all that is conventional. Campbell's view further illustrates on this aspect: "The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals, and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for the passing of a threshold is at hand."[112] In short: the hero's task here is to shatter the archaic notions that are no longer tolerated.

Ninsun—the all loving mother, nurturing, and compassionate—blames Shamash for instigating her son, nevertheless she blesses the two heroes, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and intercedes with Shamash to protect her son:

'Why did you afflict my son Gilgamesh with so restless a spirit?
'For now you have touched him and he will tread
the distant path to the home of Humbaba.
He will face a battle he knows not,
he will ride a road he knows not. (III, 46-50)

[112] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 43.

And, later she reminds Shamash that the god after his return will be rewarded by his wife:

Your fleet-footed mules shall [bear] you [onwards.]
A restful seat, a bed [for the night] shall be [what awaits] you.
The gods, your brothers, shall bring food [to delight] you,
Aya the Bride shall wipe your face dry with the fringe of her Garment.[113] (III, 96-99)

Apparently, as Eric J. Leed points out in his study: "A departure from a "home," a space that conforms to the body and all its needs, evokes with great intensity those emotions characteristic of all partings: protest, grief, despair, and mourning."[114] It is usual then for someone who shares intimate relations with a traveler to exhibit signs of objections, and even may go further to investigate the original source or agent that motivated a desire within the traveler to travel. In *Gilgamesh,* it is Shamash who spurs the hero to journey and explore the unseen realm. Campbell uses a notable expression in describing this "Secret Helper", by referring to him as "the lurer of the innocent soul into realms of trial."[115] Later, Kluger elaborates on this idea; she offers a vivid portrayal on the relationship between Gilgamesh and his patron, Shamash. Hence, she remarks:

> The very essence of the hero appears in its full meaning: the symbol of a man awakening to a new consciousness, set on his way by the sun god, driven by the sun god, who is the god of consciousness. Shamash is the spiritual impetus which draws man out of the lethargy of the eternally circling cycle of nature, which is symbolized by the mother goddess.[116]

Truthfully, Shamash is the drive for Gilgamesh to uncover the unexplored territory within the hero. We can assume, that this mysterious power is equivalent to what we call intuition. Then if indeed this god is regarded as the "lurer" or "impetus", why do we find him in the second journey of Gilgamesh saying these words to the hero: "O Gilgamesh, where are

[113] These lines are reminiscent of Campbell's concept of the "Ultimate Boon", in which a hero after his return wins the favor of his lady, and ends up in wedlock.
[114] Eric J Leed, *The Mind of the Traveler: From Gilgamesh to Global Tourism,* (New York: BasicBooks, 1991), 29.
[115] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 60.
[116] Kluger, *The Archetypal Significance of Gilgamesh: A Modern Ancient Hero*, 104.

you wandering? \The life that you seek you never will find"[117]? Perhaps, it is because—as it has been frequently suggested—the god wants to put Gilgamesh's perseverance into trial. Or, it is likely that the god's words carry another import. Seemingly, Shamash does not oppose to the journey Gilgamesh takes, but he criticizes the hero because the god commiserates with the condition his protégé has brought himself into. Gilgamesh loses contact with the sound of reason, thus with his god, Shamash, who is the god of consciousness and justice. Justice, which is an extension of reason, constitutes a prominent quality that is absent in the character of Gilgamesh. Ultimately, Shamash can be conceived in his twofold aspects: the instinctual call compelling the hero to respond, and the reason that enables him to distinguish the good from the bad.

The two heroes, finally, embark on their expedition to the Cedar Forest; Gilgamesh taking the role of a leader, and Enkidu as a guide and protector of his friend. Throughout their journey, they face challenges that are not of the nature which threaten one's life, but are rather associated with handling obstacles any traveler may encounter in his/her travels. For example, Gilgamesh and Enkidu, in the course of their journey, find it necessary to dig wells and open paths that were formerly not traversed. When they cross certain distances, the two heroes—following Ninsun's instructions—decide to halt to have some bread and respite. Gilgamesh invokes the gods to send him a well boding dream, and Enkidu prepares the atmosphere for provoking such a dream by drawing a circle around Gilgamesh. Consequently, Gilgamesh has five dreams, in which each time Enkidu offers a favorable interpretation.[118] Eventually, the two heroes successfully make their way to the Cedar Forest whose splendor instills awe in their hearts.

There are specific elements employed throughout Tablet IV that capture our attention. These elements were mostly performed in rituals and cults; some were unique to divination

[117] Si, I: 7-8. These lines are from a Babylonian tablet designated "Si", used in the epic to fill a gap in the Tablet IX.

[118] Interpretation of dreams is something very common in Mesopotamia, where every individual has a knowledge about- if not thoroughly, like myself, then at least knows the basics. Unlike the psychoanalytical method of analyzing dreams which is mostly based on revealing the past of a dreamer, Mesopotamian dreams foretell the future. Relating dreams to friends and family—even though the dreamer may know their implications—is customary within Mesopotamian societies. And, if the dream is not boding well, the dreamer is advised to relate it nearby a flowing stream of water that, in all likelihood, carries it far and away. This is perhaps associated with the problem of fear and how to evade it (see below), and explains why in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* characters are so fervent about relating their dreams and expecting to hear interpretations from others.

priests, while others were utilized by everyone whenever setting out on a journey. For instance, Enkidu's drawing a circle around Gilgamesh was to ward off evil spirits from approaching the hero.[119] This practice had its foundations in exorcism in which a priest "traced around himself a protective circle that kept out evil."[120] Lambert also discerned the practice of drawing a circle around a patient by an exorcist priest; thus, he remarked "the circle around the bed serves as a barrier to demonic entry."[121] What is more significant however is the number of dreams which Gilgamesh has during this expedition. By having five dreams and each time repeating the same formula proceeded by different dream content to Enkidu, an impression of excess and redundancy is created with the modern reader. However, repetitions—we presume—are not used here to duplicate or emphasize, rather they bear a unique poetic function. Through an inspection in this journey and the second one, one can perceive that the author makes use of this formula only when the hero is exposed to potential dangers in his trip. Accordingly, the hero in this journey has five dreams; and interestingly enough, in his second journey, Gilgamesh comes across five personalities on his way to Uta-Napishti's island: the Sun god, Scorpion men, Shiduri, Ur-shanabi, and finally Uta-napishti. Each time Gilgamesh articulates his fear of death, and as a consequence is given access and directions to proceed on his journey, until he is sent back by Uta-napishti to his city (see below). "From time immemorial" Schimmel observed "5 has been regarded as the number of the goddess Ishtar."[122] Later the author elaborates on the association of the pentagram with the goddess Ishtar, who is a personification of the star Venus. Schimmel adds:

> [Pentagram] was used as an amulet in the ancient Near East, where the Divine Mother, Ishtar, was believed to protect humans from the evil spirits… To find the principle of life and to overcome death one has to rely on the procreation and Eros, so the *quinta essentia* again points back to the ancient life giving power of the Mother Goddess through which life is continuously renewed.[123]

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[119] There has been frequently made an association between 5 as a number and a circle; for example, in Arabic numerals five is written in the shape of a circle. In his treatment of five Schimmel calls it "circular 5". Is it a coincidence that Gilgamesh is placed five in rank of the King List of Ur?

[120] Fiore, *Voices from the Clay: The Development of Assyro-Babylonian Literature,* (1965), 91.

[121] Wilfred G. Lambert (Edited by A. R. George and T. M. Oshina*), Ancient Mesopotamian Religion and Mythology: Selected Essays*, (Mohr Siebeck: Tubingen, 2016), 153.

[122] Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers,* (1993), 107.

[123] Idem, 116-118.

Another formula that recurs five times during Gilgamesh and Enkidu's journey runs: "At twenty leagues they broke bread,\At thirty leagues they pitched camp:\Fifty leagues they travelled in the course of a day." [IV, 34-36). Again, it is also used in the end when Gilgamesh and Ur-shanabi are on their way back to Uruk (XI, 301-302). The sum of this number is 50, as the author this time does the calculation for us. Therefore, we suggest, that the number fifty very likely had a similar connotation.[124]

Meanwhile, Gilgamesh and Enkidu enter a fantastic world, home to a variety of wild animals, who are engaged in a cacophony to entertain the forest guardian, Humbaba. The cedar trees are lofty and magnificent; their barks exude resin in profusion. A majestic aura prevails over the place; amazingly charming:

They were gazing at the Cedar Mountain,
Dwelling of gods, throne-dais of goddesses
[on the] face of the land the cedar was proffering its abundance,
Sweet was its shade, full of delight
The cedar was scabbed with lumps (of resin) [for] sixty (cubits') height,
resin [oozed] forth, drizzling down like rain, […]
Through] all the forest a bird began to sing:
[…] were answering one another, a constant din was the noise,
[A solitary(?)] tree-cricket set off a noisy chorus,
[…] were singing a song, making the … pipe loud.
A wood pigeon was moaning, a turtle dove calling in answer.
[At the call of] the stork, the forest exults,
[at the cry of] the francolin, the forest exults in plenty.
[Monkey mothers] sing aloud, a youngster monkey shrieks:
[like a band(?)] of musicians and drummers(?),

[124] It is no surprising that today, in Assyrio-Chaldean communities, this rite seems to have survived even with the advent of Christianity. The women, for instance, for the duration of a journey they might take, participate in the Rosary prayer. Obviously, the rosary is divided into five parts, and each of these parts has ten beads; thus, a total of fifty beads. They recite fifty times the prayer *Hail Mary* throughout their trips.

daily they bash out a rhythm in the presence of Ḫumbaba.[125]

Suddenly, fear settles in Gilgamesh's heart, but not until he appeals to his patron deity he is able to slay the ogre, Humbaba:

As the cedar [cast] its shadow,
[terror] fell on Gilgamesh.
[Stiffness took] a grip of his arms,
and feebleness beset his legs (V, 27-31)

And, later the poet tells us:

Gilgamesh lifted up his head, [weeping before Shamash,]
[his tears] flowing before the rays of the sun.
"[Do not forget] that day, O Shamash, that I placed my trust in you!
Now come to my aid" (V, 90-93)

Gilgamesh is inflated with pride and arrogance, but once he steps outside his comfort zone fear creeps in; he shudders and his limbs stiffen the moment they arrive at the Cedar Forest. This does not reflect the hero's weakness of strength. On the contrary, Gilgamesh is invested with a mighty power and support of gods, as the author later says when he commiserates the condition of his protagonist: "The flesh of the gods he had in [his body,]/ but in [his heart] there was sorrow" (X, 7-8). Fear expressed in sorrow is the grand theme of the poem. Once an individual learns how to eradicate the notion of fear, that person attains a higher level of consciousness. It is through the journey that the hero is brought face to face with the fear of what is commonly considered as uncanny, yet very intimate and relative to him. His ego and selfishness are impeding Gilgamesh from exploring his true self, those which he has, ultimately, to learn how to overcome. The hero at this moment is at the preliminary

[125] We are fortunate to have recently discovered these new lines which exhibit the first attempt in Mesopotamian literature in portraying the landscape in such vivid details. The lines can be retrieved from F.N.H Al-Rawi and A. R. George's article "Back to Cedar Forest: The Beginning and Ending of Tablet V of The Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh" (2014), 77.

stage towards self-discovery. By merely articulating his fears and making them public, Gilgamesh is eliminating an ingredient from his arrogance, and paradoxically becoming fearless; it is as if he is expelling part of it from his inner self. The practice of exorcizing one's fear is analogous to the rite of purgation, in which the initiates are stripped from their sin. Fear—the poetic voice seems to suggest— is the locus of sin. Gilgamesh—prior to the coming of Enkidu—was suffering from an inability to express his inner fears of death, which generated anxiety within the mind state of the hero, who lashed them out on his people in the form of domination and harassment. We will shortly witness Gilgamesh reiterating his fear of death along his second journey to Uta-napishti's island.

The jungle represents the unexplored dimension in human consciousness, wherein myriads of realities are concealed. Creatures dwelling there are—at first—not of the sort familiar to the hero's eyes; consequently, they become a source for awe and admiration.[126] These creatures signify such realities, which are detained by the ogre; the guardian who discourages one to explore what lies behind his dominion. Once explored by the hero they no longer seem foreign, as Campbell remarked: "The realm of the gods is a forgotten dimension of the world we know. And the exploration of that realm either, willingly or unwillingly, is the whole sense of the deed of the hero."[127] In order to penetrate his way through that realm, Gilgamesh must slay this monster who is cloaked in seven auras, which are symbolic of distraction. Apart from ancient association of trees with immortality, the enormous cedar trees symbolize a divine medium, a channel through which gods make contact between heaven and earth. And, a resin that is extracted from tree barks in the heart of nature is brought back and burned to conjure and welcome the divine spirit to dwell among and within people.[128] Accordingly, nature becomes the pivot for the dwelling place of the gods. However, in his impetuousness the hero is ignorant about this; after slaying the monster, he cuts the loftiest cedar trees as well. It is noteworthy to recall that Shamash did not prompt Gilgamesh

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[126] For an elaborate exploration of the forest motif and its implication among various ancient cultures, see Gary R. Varner, *The Mythic Forest, the Green Man and the Spirit of Nature,* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2006), 28-44.

[127] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 188.

[128] Burning incense has survived with us since time immemorial. Today, Assyrian people in Iraq not only use it in churches but also at their houses, for the same reasons. Moreover, incense is burned at funerals too, as it is the custom with the vast majority of Christian communities. This ancient rite, probably, meant for the divine spirit to accompany a deceased into the Netherworld, and secure him/her a better prospect down there.

to cut cedar trees, neither did Ninsun mention this incidence in her prayers to Shamash. But Gilgamesh's mind is so overwhelmingly occupied with mundane issues that he views all this enterprise from his narrow perspective. Although two-thirds god, Gilgamesh tries to distance himself from the realm of the divinity. By demonstrating feats of bravery in slaying Humbaba and cutting the cedar trees that belonged to the gods, Gilgamesh thinks his acts will afford him with a kind of life equivalent to that of the gods. Also it is very likely as Jared Christman[129] assumes that "nature is a zero-sum game in which humans are active players, that people can prompt the emergence of new life through the annulment of the old."[130] In fact, the hero's act of cutting the trees is a transgression to the gods—to the earth goddess, Ishtar in particular—that is not going to pass without any consequences; as it becomes evident in Enkidu's sudden realization of the grave offense the two have committed: "[My friend,] we have reduced the forest [to] a wasteland, \[how] shall we answer Enlil in Nippur?" (V, 303-304).

Moreover, the author in his portrayal ridicules the valor of his protagonist in this episode that culminates in numerous ironies; specifically, if compared with his inflated character prior to the heroes' departure from their home. The role of Shamash as a secret helper is not infrequent in ancient lore; "the hero" Campbell noted "is covertly helped by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper whom he met before his entrance into this region."[131] For instance, in the Babylonian *Atrahasis* epic, it is the god of wisdom Enki who divulges the secret of the gods in bringing the great Deluge, to Atrahasis (the Akkadian Uta-napishti), so as to save the latter from the vagary of the other gods. Thus, when Gilgamesh is terrified, his protector comes to his aid; Shamash sends thirteen winds to obscure the sight of the ferocious Humbaba, and simultaneously encourages Gilgamesh to attack his enemy.[132]

[129] Christman (2008) makes some interesting viewpoints, which are going to be discussed in the second journey of Gilgamesh.
[130] Jared Christman (2008), "The Gilgamesh Complex: The Quest for Death Transcendence and the Killing of Animals," 308.
[131] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 81.
[132] This incident can be compared with the Babylonian myth, *Anzu*, in which the warrior god Ninurta is aided by the major gods, who send him a storm wind to slay the monster bird, Anzu.

2.1.2 Spurning of the Goddess

Gilgamesh and Enkidu return to Uruk amplified with pride for their glorious feats. Presently, the streets assume a festive atmosphere, and celebrations burst forth. While Gilgamesh was at the river removing the grim from his body and putting on his royal robes, his allure and vitality attracted the goddess Ishtar's desire, and she proposes him marriage. The hero in the most depreciating manner insults the goddess and rejects her; enumerating all her previous lovers who were worshipped at first but mistreated later. Thus, humiliated, Ishtar—in a tantrum—rushes to Anu, the god of the celestial realm, and asks for the Bull of Heaven to retaliate. She threatens Anu: if he denies her request she will bring famine on earth, and bring the dead back to life to devour the living.[133] Eventually, Ishtar with the Bull of Heaven descend back to Uruk, whereupon the bull wreaks havoc in the city and brings harm to its inhabitants. Gilgamesh and Enkidu face the monster and they engage into a fierce fighting, in which the two heroes prevail. Together they slay and dismember the Bull of Heaven; later Enkidu hurls a hunch of the monster on the goddess who was standing on the Wall of Uruk watching, all the while, the happenings. The goddess, further insulted, gathers her temple prostitutes and they mourn over the hunch of the Bull of Heaven.[134] Meanwhile, the heroes parade on the streets boasting their valor.

This time we witness Ishtar in her destructive aspect; although, she approaches the hero in disguise, straightaway her intents are revealed. To use Jacobsen's terms: An aura of death and disaster surrounds her. The earth goddess is demanding the hero's life. In his illustration of the goddess, Campbell states:

> She is also the death of everything that dies. The whole round of existence is accomplished within her sway, from birth, through adolescence, maturity, and

[133] Ishtar's threat, specifically the one quoted in two lines (VI, 99-100) is identical to the queen of the netherworld and Ishtar's sister, Ereshkigal's speech in the Old Babylonian myth, *Nergal and Ereshkigal*. After Nergal flees to his celestial domains, Ereshkigal instructs her messenger, Namtar, to apprise the gods, Anu, Enlil and Ea, that if Nergal is not sent back to her she "shall rise up the dead, and they will eat the living. [She] shall make the dead outnumber the living." Dalley, *Myths from Mesopotamia,* 173.

[134] Mourning has a special value among the peoples of Mesopotamia. They treat death in extreme terms. Gilgamesh mourns Enkidu like a hired mourner (VIII, 44-45). In fact, in Muslim communities this tradition- in which, a mourner (always a woman in women assembly) who is a professional elegist is hired to sing elegies in a funeral- is still valid. Christians also have women mourners but they attend as volunteers, in other words they do not charge money from the relatives of the bereaved.

> senescence, to the grave. She is the womb and the tomb: the sow that eats her farrow. Thus, she unites the "good" and the "bad," exhibiting the two modes of the remembered mother, not as personal only, but as universal. The devotee is expected to contemplate the two with equal equanimity. Through this exercise his spirit is purged of its infantile, inappropriate sentimentalities and resentments, and his mind opened to the inscrutable presence which exists, not primarily as "good" and "bad" with respect to his childlike human convenience, his weal and woe, but as the law and image of the nature of being.[135]

Nevertheless, Gilgamesh looks on Ishtar with aversion. Abusch cleverly discerned the awkward refusal of the goddess Ishtar; he speculated: "There must be something about Ishtar's offer that might disturb any man but would especially distress Gilgamesh, a being so very concerned about living and dying."[136] Apparently, Gilgamesh was preoccupied with the issues of life and death from early on, albeit subtly hinted from the start. "Ishtar intended Gilgamesh to think that the power and status she was offering him were to be his in this world; in reality, she was offering him the obeisance of dead rulers in the netherworld."[137] Abusch derived such evidence to his claim from certain Babylonian formulas involved in funerary rites. More telling is the *Gilgamesh Incantation* text which its lines parallel with those extant in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*: "Kings, courtiers, and nobles shall kneel before you" (VI, 16). In the incantation piece, these officials dwell in the Netherworld and pay homage to Gilgamesh who judges over the shades of dead people.[138]

Moreover, the gods approaching another god or a human while bathing is not infrequent in Mesopotamian lore. Nevertheless, what is unique in this episode is a reversion of the canon: this time, instead of a male god, it is a female goddess who makes the initiation. Bathing scenes in ancient Babylonian literature are, often, utilized to ensnare characters by means of stimulating a sexual desire within the observer.[139] One evident example can be

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[135] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 95.
[136] Tzvi Abusch, *Male and Female in the Epic of Gilgamesh: Encounters, Literary History, and Interpretation.* (Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2015), 16.
[137] Idem, 20.
[138] Idem, 24.
[139] Neal Walls, *Desire, Discord, and Death: Approaches to Ancient Near Eastern Myth,* (Boston: American School of Oriental Research, 2011), 35.

derived from the myth *Nergal and Ereshkigal*.[140] According to this myth, the allure of the Netherworld queen, Ereshkigal, while bathing provokes the desire of the god Nergal who copulates with her and later escapes to his heavenly realm. Consequently, Ereshkigal demands Nergal in marriage and to dwell with her in the realm of the dead from the supreme god Anu.

Perhaps, the underlying message of Gilgamesh and Ishtar's encounter can be gathered from the cult of Tammuz and Ishtar. In these texts, we figure out that the goddess represents the numen that ensures fertility in the land, and her husband, Tammuz, is the fertilizer on whose vitality the goddess relies. The union of Gilgamesh and Ishtar, hence, will reproduce good yield and abundance in livestock. However, Gilgamesh sees himself objectified by a goddess who will pay him tribute at first, but when her desires are sated she will fling him into oblivion. The words spoken by Enkidu on his deathbed resonate with this event, when he says to Gilgamesh: "'My friend, fixed *[is my destiny,]* \ people go to their doom before their time." (VII, 88-89). The destiny of the hero has been sealed already; as Didier Maleuvre found: "At every turn of his fictional life, the protagonist of fiction is cloaked in destiny."[141] We can support this argument by citing—the god who ordained destinies—Enlil's words to Gilgamesh before the latter dies, in the Sumerian poem, *The Death of Gilgamesh*:

"O [Gilgamesh], I made your destiny a destiny of kingship, but I did
not make it a destiny of eternal life.
For mankind, whatever life it has, be not sick at heart,
be not in despair, be not heart-stricken!
The bane of mankind is thus come, I have told you,
what (was fixed) when your navel-cord was cut is thus come, I
have told you.[142]

Yet, according to some scholars, the hero has to strive to release himself from his destiny as the goddess personifies since she is, as we have said above, the representation of both life and death. "But where he is ignorant of his destiny, or deluded by false considerations, no

[140] For this myth see Dalley (2000), 163-181. And, for the other myths that feature bathing scenes, such as *Enlil and Ninlil*, and *Enki and Ninhursag*, see Kramer (1961), 43 and 54, respectively.
[141] Didier Maluevre, *The Horizon: A History of Our Infinite Longing*, (Berkley: University of California, 2011). 33.
[142] These lines can be retrieved from Andrew George's (2003) translation of the epic, 200.

effort on his part will overcome the obstacles."[143] Kluger defined this episode as "an epochal encounter." She elaborates:

> [Gilgamesh] breaks the pattern of being swallowed by the mother, and this is his greatness, this is his individuation task… Psychologically spoken, I see Gilgamesh's accomplishment as *the* heroic achievement at this time. It was really breaking the pattern, which opened a new vista, a new development out of the motherly circle of nature into a new spiritual development.[144]

However, as much as this view appears pertinent "at this time", ancient Mesopotamians presumably had interpreted this encounter quite differently. The gods in the Mesopotamian pantheon represented the dynamics of the cosmos. The earth goddess, as it has been pointed out above, desires to devour Gilgamesh's virility or "fruit" in order to furnish the land with harvest—as she openly admits that to Gilgamesh (VI, 14-24). The Bull of Heaven which needs grass as means of sustenance can be read to denote that if the goddess is unable to obtain Gilgamesh, starvation will soon follow. Also, the encounter can be approached from another outlook: the seduction of Gilgamesh is one of nature over culture. Here, the earth goddess wants a substitute for Enkidu, and obviously, Enkidu's match is the king, Gilgamesh. This may remind us of *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*. In this myth, Inanna is trapped by her sister, the queen of the Netherworld, Ereshkigal. She is released only on one condition: that Inanna must bring someone as a substitute to take her place. Eventually, Inanna's husband Dummuzi is sent as ransom.

It is not the fact of Ishtar's treatment of her previous lovers that provokes the goddess. In fact, it is in the manner of questioning and finding fault with her behavior that mostly distresses her. No matter how forcefully Gilgamesh resists this proposal, he will eventually comprehend that death is inevitable and he is returning to the womb of the goddess; thus, dissolved and transformed into good harvest. The slaying of the Bull of Heaven conveys an impression that culture is rebelling against nature. And, whenever there seems an imbalance between culture and nature, one side is forced to react. Thus, when the heroes' hubris extends to its extreme levels, nature retaliates.

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[143] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 293.
[144] Rivkah Schärf Kluger, and Yehezkel Kluger. *The Archetypal Significance of Gilgamesh,* 123.

2.1.3 The Death of a Friend

Gilgamesh and Enkidu's arrogance compels the gods to assemble in order to judge their transgressions. Discussing their cases among themselves, the gods—for reasons that may appear inexplicable for us, but not to Mesopotamians at that time[145]—at last find Enkidu guilty; thereupon, they decree his death. Enkidu learns all this in a dream. Unwilling to believe what he had dreamed about, Enkidu in bewilderment asks Gilgamesh: "My friend, why where the great gods in counsel?" (VII, 1) Shortly, Enkidu is stricken with illness; his strength wanes, and is confined to bed. In a fever, he begins to curse the hunter and Shamhat for misleading him. Shamash finds injustice in Enkidu's words towards Shamhat who taught him the ways of humans, and advices Enkidu to reverse his curses.[146] The former complies and balances his curses on Shamhat with blessings. Enkidu has another dream in which he relates how the arrival of the dark demon of the Netherworld caused thunders and turmoil on the land, and how he was seized and stricken on the head by that hybrid creature. Bounded, Enkidu was dispatched to the Netherworld, and there he witnesses various fates endured by the shades of dead people. After few days of lingering on bed, Enkidu dies. Before we proceed with our analysis, an excerpt from Enkidu's cursing of Shamhat is worth quoting here:

'Come, Shamhat, I will fix your destiny,
a doom to endure for all eternity:
'[I will] curse you with a mighty curse,
my curse shall afflict you now and forthwith! […]
'Because [you made] me [weak, who was undefiled!]
Yes, in the wild [you weakened] me, who was undefiled!' (VII, 102-131)

Curses are being deployed by the author as a narrative device, perhaps to signify a foreshadowing, subtly denoting that it is inevitable to escape what has been articulated in the

[145] In Mesopotamian conception, when someone was stricken with a sort of a malady, it was a sign that that person had sinned; even though, he or she might not remember of ever being disobedient toward the gods. See Bottéro et al (2000), 59.

[146] Mesopotamians strongly believe in the efficacy of curses; therefore, they always try not to incur upon themselves the rage of others, which—in all probability—might culminate into inflicting imprecations on the offender. The ways and formulas into which curses are casted correspond to the ones uttered by Enkidu.

form of imprecations. Thus, Humbaba's curse—when he is subdued by Gilgamesh, and comprehends his sealed fate says: "May the pair of them not grow old, \ besides Gilgamesh his friend, none shall bury Enkidu." (V, 256-257)—has taken full effect. Gilgamesh, if we recall, was hesitant to slay Humbaba, but reacts only after he hears the ogre's curse.

Enkidu's details of his second dream are suggestive of the five dreams Gilgamesh has when the two take the journey to the Cedar Forest. In both cases, we observe a sense of turbulence in nature like thunder and earthquakes, and deformed creatures like a hybrid of birds, bulls, and lions haunting the dreamers. Moreover, during the recounting of his dream to Gilgamesh, when Enkidu describes the frightful demon who took hold of him, he says "He struck me and turned me into a dove" (VII, 182). This is an allusion to Gilgamesh's earlier accusation of Ishtar who turned her lovers into animals. Thus, it can be inferred that it is the goddess who transforms Enkidu into a dove, and brings him back to the place of his origin, the womb. The author's second objective from this episode is to initiate the listener—who is Gilgamesh— to make the necessary preparations when his turn has arrived. Indeed, Gilgamesh is not an exception, all other kings—as Enkidu sees in his dream—have taken the "path of no return," he must too. Death does not differentiate between rich or poor, young or old; it arrives without prior notice. As Uta-napishti later informs Gilgamesh: "Man is snapped off like a reed in a canebrake! \ The comely young man, the pretty young woman \ *all [too soon in]* their *[prime]* Death abducts them!" (X, 301-303).

Gilgamesh is stricken with grief for Enkidu. He begins a poignant lamentation for losing his dear friend. He desperately tries to awaken his friend, who is dead, by talking to him: "Now what is this sleep that has seized [you]? \ You have become unconscious, you do not [hear me]" (VIII, 22-56). The author depicts the scene vividly:

Like a lioness deprived of her cubs,
he paced to and fro, this way and that.
His curly [hair] he tore out in clumps,
he ripped off his finery, [like] something taboo he cast it away. (VIII, 55-64)

Never death had an impact so intensely on peoples' lives as the time it affects a close person with whom they shared a unique attachment. Death pierced into the hero's

stronghold and shattered his illusions. Nortwick illustrates this incidence in remarkable words:

> Once death intrudes into the artificial world of culture, it destroys the illusion of invulnerability that man's creativity can provide. At the same time it reminds us that we, as mortal creatures, participate in the world of nature, of death and renewal- culture cannot insulate us from the destiny that we share with wild animals… [Enkidu's] death and Gilgamesh's reactions to it then offers a corrective to the original view, displacing our attention from the boundary between nature and culture, or animals and humans, which turns out to be less absolute than we thought, toward the definitive boundary between mortals and immortals.[147]

Shortly we will discover, however, Gilgamesh's contention to rebuff the reality of his mortality in his attempt to integrate himself into the world of the wilderness.

Seemingly, another aim from the creation of Enkidu—apart from bringing relief to the denizens of Uruk—was, ironically, for Gilgamesh, to witness his death. Thus, Enkidu's death becomes a stark reminder for Gilgamesh's own lot: his inevitable death that he was endeavoring to overcome. Seen from this standpoint, Enkidu's death was more a punishment to Gilgamesh than to himself. All the hero was striving to achieve from early on, all the hopes he has built, collapsed. Clearly, Enkidu was his reflection; he was his second self. The hero's greatest fear, his only weak point, has been exposed to public. Suddenly, life becomes meaningless. The hero renounces the world of mundanity, and sets out on a pilgrimage to find a meaning for his existence.

[147] Nortwick, *Somewhere I have Never Traveled Before,* 34.

2.2 Immortality Through Wisdom

Campbell’s words resonate with the second journey of Gilgamesh, when he remarks: “The departure from the world is regarded not as a fault, but as the first step into that noble path at the remotest turn of which illumination is to be won concerning the deep emptiness of the universal round.”[148] In this journey, which is a personal quest towards the annihilation of the ego, whereby the ultimate truth of his existence unfolds to him, Gilgamesh will again endure hardships and overcome trials. However, this time he will greatly suffer humiliation. These experiences will contribute to tempering the hero’s heart, and expanding his perspective beyond haughtiness and self-centeredness.

2.2.1 Crossing the Threshold

Having faced the death of his friend, Gilgamesh becomes distraught and scours the world for an explanation to the deep-rooted question of human mortality. He abandons his throne and all his fortunes he used to own, and wanders the wilderness. He resolves, regardless of perils, to find Uta-napishti, his forefather who was awarded immortality as a result of surviving the Deluge, and learn from him the ways to overcome death. Thus, he sets out and turns into a wild creature. Signs of fear—without his articulating them this time—begin to manifest on his face; he becomes frightened, and when night draws in he raises his head to Sin, the moon god, in supplication:

'I saw some lions and grew afraid,
I lifted my head to the moon in prayer,
to [Sin, the] *lamp* of the gods, went my supplications:
"[O Sin and ... ,] keep me safe!'"
[That night he] lay down, then woke from a dream:
... in the presence of the moon he grew glad of life,
he took up his axe in his hand,
he drew forth [the dirk from] his belt.

[148] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces, 142.*

Like an arrow among them he fell,
he smote the [lions, he] killed them and scattered them… (IX, 9-18)
[He] clad himself in their skins, he ate their flesh. (Si: i, 2)

The act of abandoning the city life, in the Mesopotamian conception, was going against the wills of gods. An explicit instance can be found in the composition entitled *Babylonian Theodicy,*[149] wherein a debate is raised between a sufferer and his faithful friend. The former reveals to his friend that he will forsake his home and his property and wander the wilderness. He even goes further as to rebel against his gods: "I will ignore my god's regulations and trample to his rites."[150] Men were created by the gods to function as their servants. To leave a city in which the god typically inhabited in his temple, is to leave the god's needs unattended (see Chapter 1).

We have been told to cry out to the gods, and the gods will hear our supplications and answer to them. There have been numerous inspirational figures—whether mystical or secular—throughout human history who would stress on this aspect. Nevertheless, Campbell's words will suffice: "One has only to know and trust, and the ageless guardians will appear."[151] This was encouraged in Mesopotamia, because the gods were seen as supreme powers capable of everything. Yet, these gods disliked their powers to be questioned. To provide one example in the Babylonian poem, *The Righteous Sufferer*, the speaker despite his anguish admits challengingly: "Who knows the will of the gods in heaven? \ Who understands the plans of the underworld gods? \ Where have mortals learnt the way of a god?" (Tablet II, 36-38).[152]

Gilgamesh views culture as a taboo, and finds nature as a retreat liberated from the knowledge of death.[153] The hero, however, does not show any respect for nature. His reckless

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[149] See Wilfred G. Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, (Indiana: Oxford University Press, 1996), 63
[150] Idem, 79.
[151] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 59.
[152] Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 41.
[153] Culture has been frequently associated with mortality and nature with divinity. In other words, in the animal world there is no concern for death. Thus, Gilgamesh is metamorphosing himself into a wild creature; struggling to evade the knowledge that he must face death. Stephen Cave (2012) makes this statement: "mortality is the price of knowledge". Nevertheless, this entire subject is debatable as human beings have not yet managed to penetrate into the world of animals to understand their emotional experiences adequately. There are certainly

behavior renders Gilgamesh, though being a king, inferior to animals. The hero in his first adventure to the Cedar Forest—together with Enkidu—commits an offense against flora by cutting the cedar trees, and now he does another transgression against fauna by smiting animals (lions, whose meat is commonly inedible), eating their flesh, and cladding himself with their pelt. In his fantasy to conquer nature, the hero assumes he can forfeit its fructifying source for his own. In other words, the tendency toward killing and dismembering animals is the hero's subconscious need to absorb their vitality. Through an investigation into various ancient tribes and cultures, Christman found out that people believed—and still do believe—that animals are invested with vitality; and as such "they occupy a privileged place in human rites, ranging from shamanism to sadomasochism, whose purpose is to harness the powers of nature… animal vitality succors the primal psychic need for death transcendence."[154] According to Christman, our forefathers did not slaughter animals mainly because they considered their flesh as a means of sustenance, but found in consuming animal meat a type of bodily regeneration. Animals were perceived to ward off disease from the human body, and thus prolong life. In the Babylonian collection of teachings, *Councils of Wisdom,* a brief reference is made to the animal sacrificial rite by literally stating that "Sacrifice prolongs life."[155] Animals were also assumed to possess "immortal spirits." For such reasons people—ancient and modern— unconsciously are involved into eternally sacrificial and talismanic rites.[156] As the author indicates: "more than a mere symbol of conquest, meat is the only widespread food purported to operate talismanically within the human body, exorcising from our very marrow the taint of the grave."[157]

Apart from the significance of the flesh as an invigorating foodstuff, internal organs were derived and the blood was distilled from the animal, and incorporated into divination; a performance very common in ancient Mesopotamia. In one of his articles entitled "Donations of Food and Drink to the Gods of Ancient Mesopotamia," W. G. Lambert, makes a distinction between the Hebrew sacrificial rites and those of Babylonians. Apparently, according to the

variations in the cognitive skills of different species of animals; for instance, some animals—like crows—are believed to hold funerals and mourn their relatives.

[154] Christman (2008), "The Gilgamesh Complex: The Quest for Death Transcendence and the Killing of Animals," 298.

[155] Lambert, *Babylonian Wisdom Literature*, 105.

[156] Christman, 303.

[157] Idem, 311.

Hebrew customs an animal was slaughtered on an altar, its blood was thoroughly drained and ultimately burned as an incense. Whereas, in Babylonia, animals were cooked to feed the figurines representing deities in a temple. Nevertheless, unlike the Hebrews, the consumption of the blood in Babylonia was not considered as a taboo. On the contrary, as Lambert asserts, the element of life was thought to be "in the blood."[158] One evident example, also provided by Lambert, is of the god, who was slaughtered and his blood was mixed with clay to create mankind.[159] It can be concluded, therefore, that the killing of animals by Gilgamesh was a strive to extract their vigor and imperishable spirit for his own.

All the while, the hero's pursuit for materials—that he mistakenly assumes will assist him to perpetuate his body—has diverged him from his spiritual guidance, his patron the Sun god who looks upon him with sorrow. The poet narrates:

Shamash grew worried, and *bending down,*
he spoke to Gilgamesh:
'O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?
The life that you seek you never will find.'
Said Gilgamesh to him, to the hero Shamash:
'After *roaming,* wandering all through the wild,
when I enter the Netherworld will rest be scarce?
I shall lie there sleeping all down the years!
'Let my eyes see the sun and be sated with light!
The darkness is *hidden,* how much light is there left?
When may the dead see the rays of the sun?' (Si, i: 5-15)[160]

Shamash, that sound of reason waking up like a flicker of light that flashes into the hero's mind, is trying to bring the hero back to his own senses from further inflicting injury on his

[158] Lambert*, Ancient Mesopotamian Religion and Mythology: Selected Essays*, Ed. A. R. George and T. M. Oshima*,* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck: 2015), 173.
[159] Ibid.
[160] These lines which belong to a tablet designated as Sippar, are inserted by most translators to fill the lacuna in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. It is not definitive though that the author might have used identical words; perhaps, the sun god might have had a different attitude. We, nevertheless, are going to interpret them as they are; taking them to be consistent with the epic.

body through following a path erroneously; which, in turn distances the individual from the awareness of his surroundings. Distraction encompassed in recklessness disorients and impedes the hero from fully appreciating the value of what he is seeking after. In fact, the quest is by no means unsubstantial, but the hero's agitation makes him behave in a rather irrational way. The hero's attitude reflects a lack of patience, a stressful urgency to reach his destination. Impatience, that archenemy of sobriety, is the chief trait of the hero. In brief: Shamash, the god of consciousness and justice, is trying to guide the hero and set him on the right track, but Gilgamesh is heedless.

The Mesopotamian tradition of associating light with the element of life becomes meaningful when contrasted with their views of afterlife. Mesopotamians, obviously, approached afterlife quite differently from the modern conviction that comprises heaven and hell. Mesopotamian religion maintains that when people passed away, their bodies would decay and their souls, in the form of shades, would dwell for eternity in the Netherworld. The living, therefore, saw their prospect quite disagreeable. Ultimately, they considered the sun as the nourishing source of life. In the wisdom composition, *Šima Milka,* that was uncovered among the archives of the Late Bronze Age from neighboring regions of Mesopotamia, a father who is seemingly on his deathbed exhorts his son on how to live a prosperous life; at one point the son replies to his father's advices and says "Few are the days in which we look at the Sun, but many will be the days in which we will sit in the shadows."[161] In *The Epic of Gilgamesh* this association is explicit throughout; for example, while Uta-napishti relates to Gilgamesh how on the seventh day the Deluge relented, he mentions opening the vent of his ark and sunlight felling on his cheek (XI, 137). Noteworthy, in the Sumerian poem, *Gilgamesh and the Netherworld,*[162] Enki commands the sun god to make an opening from the ground to the Netherworld and bring Enkidu who is detained by the forces of the Netherworld back to his friend Gilgamesh.

The hero moves forward on his journey, and approaches Mashu's twin mountains, "whose tops [support] the fabric of heaven, \ whose base reaches down to the Netherworld" (IX, 40-41). It is the place where Shamash in his chariot rises and sets down on his daily round.

[161] Yoram Cohen, *Wisdom from the Late Bronze Age,* (Atlanta: Society of the Biblical Literature, 2013), 99.
[162] See George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 187.

There is a tunnel that stretches from the foot of the mountains to the other side. The tunnel is guarded by a Scorpion Man and his mate, whose fearsome aspect terrify Gilgamesh. The Scorpion Man asks Gilgamesh about his affair and what brought him to them. Gilgamesh relates recent incidents, and finally asks their permission to pass the tunnel to the other side where he can proceed on his way to Uta-napishti. The Scorpion Man stunned by the hero's resilience reminds him that never before was there any man who has dared to cross the mountain to the other side;[163] but, eventually the creatures give him access, and send him with their blessings. The road through the tunnel is sheer darkness, and Gilgamesh has to race against time to reach the other side before the sun completes its round.

The Scorpion men symbolize the guardians at the threshold securing the port that opens to the unknown realm, whose consent the hero has to obtain. The guardians are moved by the cause and effect which the hero has come to embody: they feel pity for Gilgamesh's ordeal that led to his determination. In his illustration of similar figures, Campbell said: "such custodians bound the world in the four directions—also up and down—standing for the limits of the hero's present sphere, or life horizon. Beyond them is darkness, the unknown and danger; just as beyond the parental watch is danger to the infant and beyond the protection of his society danger to the member of the tribe."[164] The twin Mashu mountains which bound the heaven and the Netherworld reflect this dimension. The tunnel stands for the channel transporting the hero from his present realm to what lays beyond. This separation which is characterized by darkness denotes that light is preceded by darkness, symbolic of death to an old state and rebirth of a new one; and, very similar to the state of our universe before its creation. In other words, the transition from one stage into another is hardly traversed and obscured that requires the confidence and competence of the initiate. In the case the hero fails to complete this passage, he will remain halfway in the darkness which makes it difficult to reclaim his old state and even harder to proceed forth, because the hero's passage is

[163] The Indo-American myth recited by Campbell (2008) resembles in great detail Gilgamesh's trek to meet with the father figure, Uta-napishti. Campbell tells the tale of the Twin Gods who come across a protective Scorpion Woman. The creature cautions them: "it is a long and dangerous to the house of your father, the Sun. There are many monsters dwelling between here and there, and perhaps, when you get there, your father may not be glad to see you, and may punish you for your coming" (58). Indeed, that is exactly what is going to happen with Gilgamesh as soon as he meets Uta-napishti on his island.

[164] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 64.

determined by time, represented here by the round of the sun. Sooner, time will close on the hero and swallow him.

On the other side is the place where polarities converge; time and eternity, good and evil are experienced as one. In the Mesopotamian belief, there were two groups of malignant demons: *Utukku* who brought physical diseases, and *Edimmu* who were, basically, dead ancestors hunting their relatives for not properly performing the rites for the deceased. These demons had their dwellings in the Western mountains where the sun used to set every day, or as the Mesopotamians used to say the mountains that "swallowed the sun", identical to Mashu mountains where Gilgamesh is given access by the scorpion guards. This symbolic association can be interpreted as Gilgamesh is trying to escape the world of disease to meet the father who has authority over these demonic creatures. Noteworthy, the "River of Death" (in the epic is called the Waters of Death) was crossed by demons likewise,[165] (see below).

2.2.2 The Goddess at the Edge of the World

The hero successfully makes it to the other side of the mountain, where he comes across a dream-like grove filled with trees that bear an assortment of jewels and precious stones. The hero is bedazzled by the beauty he is surrounded with. He does not tarry there though; his steps carry him to a tavern at the edge of the ocean. The tavern-keeper, a maiden called Shiduri, spots Gilgamesh while advancing towards her tavern. Immediately, she veils her face, bars the door, and climbs on the rooftop. Gilgamesh threatens if she is not going to attend to his needs, he will smash the door and catch her. Shiduri yields. She starts by asking Gilgamesh why does his appearance look so miserable: his face, cheeks, mood, features, and clothes are pitiable? Gilgamesh begins to dramatize the entire story from the beginning to the end (he will repeat the same story for Ur-Shanabi and Uta-napishti too), and adds: "my friend Enkidu, whom I loved, has turned to clay.\ Shall I not be like him, and also lie down\ never to rise

[165] Fiore, *Voices from the Clay*, 89.

again, through all eternity?" (X, 69-71). Shortly, he asks her to give him directions to Uta-Napishti's island. Shiduri attempts to dissuade Gilgamesh from continuing his journey:

O Gilgamesh, there never has been a way across,
nor since olden days can anyone cross the ocean.
Only Shamash the hero crosses the ocean:
apart from the Sun God, who crosses the ocean?
'The crossing is perilous, its way full of hazard,
and midway lie the Waters of Death, blocking the passage forward. (X, 79-84)

The fruits in the Jewel Garden are reminiscent of the jewels Inanna (the Sumerian Ishtar) leaves behind in her way to the Netherworld. In the old Sumerian poem, *Inanna's Descent to the Netherworld*, the goddess is given instructions at each gate by the chief gatekeeper, Neti, to leave behind some of her jewelry. Thus, the goddess is stripped from her clothes and jewelries at the time she enters the seventh and final gate. Nevertheless, at each gate the goddess would ask "What, pray, is this? And Neti would give her the same reply "Extraordinarily, O Inanna, have the decrees of the nether world been perfected, \ O Inanna do not question the rites of the nether world."[166] Observing the hanged jewels, then, provokes an impression of the presence of the goddess nearby. Jewels can therefore serve as vestiges of the goddess, which Gilgamesh now has to follow. Indeed, as Gilgamesh disregards the jewels and follows the track, he meets the goddess stripped of her immunity in her tavern.

The act of veiling and bolting the gate has several implications: both mythologically and historically. In the world of myth, for example, the act of covering one's self was usually performed by a supernatural figure, i.e. by a divine being as a precaution from coming into contact with the surrounding world, or, even more precisely, for avoiding the touch of mortals.[167] In the history of Mesopotamia, on the other hand, we can draw a connection between this act and the practice of prostitution that was pervasive at that time. All prostitutes were under the protection of the goddess Ishtar; in fact, a group among these prostitutes were called *ishtaritu* who derived their name from the goddess. The typical hubs

[166] Samuel Noah Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology,* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania, 1961), 91.
[167] See Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 191-194.

for prostitutes were: temples, brothels, but mostly taverns.[168] The women involved in this "free-love" profession had to distinguish themselves from married women with regard to their costume and hair style. Interestingly, married women were veiled with scarves, whereas prostitutes had their hair curled.[169] Accordingly, what we can confer from these two associations is the following: seeing the barbarous aspect of Gilgamesh, and especially all the offences he had committed against nature, this divine figure, Shiduri, insulates herself from the touch of the hero. Whereas, from a Mesopotamian standpoint—which is not very different from the mythical symbolic interpretation—the prostitute Shiduri, who is an incarnation of the goddess Ishtar, feels vulnerable. Therefore, she instantly covers her face so that the hero would not be able to recognize her, and would regard her as a married woman and not a prostitute. That is to say, Shiduri is concealing her real identity from Gilgamesh.

As Enkidu was a counterpart of Gilgamesh, Shiduri is, similarly, Shamhat's equal. Both women tempt the heroes on the privileges a culture life might afford.[170] Enkidu's curse of Shamhat in Tablet VII further strengthens this connection, when he associates the harlot with the tavern.[171] Furthermore, Shiduri's attempt to dissuade Gilgamesh is highly significant, for it will determine a turning point in the course of the hero's journey to meet with his symbolical father. If the goddess succeeds in changing the hero's mind, the entire journey will prove futile. Campbell classifies the mythical hero into two categories, namely The Hero of Action and The Supreme Hero. "The hero of action" the author illustrates "is the agent of the cycle, continuing into the living moment the impulse that first moved the world," whereas The Supreme Hero "is not the one who merely continues the dynamics of the cosmogonic round, but he who reopens the eye—so that through all the comings and goings, delights and agonies of the world panorama, the One Presence will be seen again."[172] According to Campbell, the journey of the Hero of Action always ends with marrying the bride, who symbolizes "life". On the other hand, the second type disregards the bride who is presented to him as a reward for

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[168] Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia, Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 189.
[169] ibid. Also, see Lambert, *Ancient Mesopotamian Religion and Mythology,* 24.
[170] Shiduri's famous carpe diem sermon extant in the Old Babylonian Gilgamesh, was omitted by the late author. However, enough has been preserved to grasp her attitude in relation with Gilgamesh's desire to visit Uta-napishti.
[171] A closer version of Enkidu's curse is cited by Boterro (1995), 194.
[172] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 296.

his adventures, and proceeds to meet the father who is the “invisible unknown”.[173] Therefore, by refusing Ishtar’s proposal and Shiduri’s advise, it can be suggested that Gilgamesh fits into the second category, that is to say, the Supreme Hero.

Having observed the obstinacy of Gilgamesh, Shiduri at last succumbs. She directs the hero to a small woodland close to the sea shore, wherein he can find Ur-shanabi, the ferry-man of Uta-napishti. Ur-shanabi—the tavern-keeper informs Gilgamesh—has been sent on an errand by his master to cut some timber, and load it on his ferry back to the island. Hearing this report, Gilgamesh grows thrilled; he rushes to Ur-shanabi, and out of sheer folly he grapples with him. In addition, Gilgamesh breaks the Stone Ones, the only means that propelled Ur-shanabi’s boat over the Waters of Death. Gilgamesh, now has to cut plenty of wood, and fashion them into punting poles that they can toss them into the Waters of Death to avoid contact with these mysterious waters. In this fashion, Ur-shanabi commands the hero:

Take Up, O Gilgamesh, your axe in [your] hand,
go down to the forest and [cut three hundred] punting-poles,
each five rods in length.
Trim them and furnish them each with a boss,
then bring [them here into my presence.]' (X, 158-161)

Rashness obscures the hero's perception from handling an opportunity, which in all probability might be granted only once. Gilgamesh's response reflects a frailty of composure resulting from an inexperience to face certain challenges that are not harsh, in essence. Inexperience, in itself, is the outcome of lack of awareness. Nevertheless, it is one lesson in a series of others that will contribute in mending the character of the hero. This is not perhaps the only main point. Through such incorporations the author, presumably, generated some sort of identification among his audience. This is not uncommon in world literature; in fact, there are instances in the life of almost every hero in which these characters are driven deliberately by the author into similar circumstances, in order for the readers to identify with them. In his analysis of Homer’s Ulysses, Hentsch remarks:

[173] ibid.

> Action and manner in which man behaves in the face of necessity are of the highest importance. Whether or not nobility has been inscribed in the hero's fate, it is in action that his greatness or his pettiness will be made manifest. But the stature conferred upon him by his prominent place in the story does not make him immune to meanness, to stupidity, to baseness… The hero must stand out from the crowd, must always be visible from all directions, even in his absence, in order for the reader, or the listener, to identify with him.[174]

What is even more outstanding to note in this particular encounter is the way the author manipulates character roles: we witness a role reversal in terms of the status of both characters featuring in this episode. In the beginning, Gilgamesh tyrannizes his citizens, but later he is frightened by animals in the wilderness. He ordered his subjects to build for him the great Wall of Uruk, but now Gilgamesh who is a king is reduced into an ordinary man. He is commanded by a servant to cut timber and bring it into his presence, so that the latter can examine its finish. And, shortly, we will observe how Gilgamesh who used to challenge the men of his city into wrestling matches is now being challenged by a clever immortal, and sadly he is defeated. This proves, more than ever, that the epic is a masterpiece of irony.

2.2.3 Meeting with the Father Figure

Gilgamesh and Ur-shanabi embark on a perilous voyage. Through Gilgamesh's inexhaustible efforts, they avoid being swallowed by The Waters of Death. Uta-napishti and his wife are watching the ferry from their island as it nears the shore. Uta-napishti is not pleased with his servant by bringing Gilgamesh to his island. After some time of questioning the hero of the reason for his showing up on his island, Gilgamesh gets somewhat disappointed by what he realizes about Uta-napishti. He was expecting to find Uta-napishti unlike men so that he could challenge him into battle. Refrained, the hero asks Uta-napishti to disclose his secret of immortality to him. The latter then begins narrating the entire story

[174] Thierry Hentsch, *Truth or Death: The Quest for Immortality in the Western Narrative Tradition,* Trans. Fred A. Reed, (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2004), 49.

of the Deluge: how was it planned and agreed upon by the gods to extinct mankind, how one of these gods, Enki, divulged the gods' scheme to Uta-napishti. Whispering through a reed-wall, Enki forewarned Uta-napishti: "O man of Shuruppak, son of Ubar-Tutu, \ demolish the house, and build a boat! \ Abandon wealth, and seek survival!" (XI, 23-25). Uta-napishti was heedful. He did exactly as he was bidden: he built a gigantic ark, boarded in it his family and one pair of animals from each species of the entire animal kingdom, he "spurn[ed] property, and [sought] life" (X, 26), stayed inside the ark until the seventh day arrived when the gale relented and the flood receded. Finding survivors on this ark, the high-tempered god, Enlil, became infuriated and started to interrogate other gods to find out who exposed his plan. Enki intervened and defended Uta-napishti from Enlil's wrath; whereupon, the latter made Uta-napishti and his wife immortals, and sent them faraway on this island. After he finishes his story, Uta-napishti apprises Gilgamesh that his case was an exceptional event that will not recur another time. Subsequently, he proposes a challenge for Gilgamesh: he should resist sleep[175] for "six days and seven nights" (X, 209). Gilgamesh fails the sleep test, whereon Uta-napishti says to his wife: "See the fellow who so desired life! \ Sleep like a fog already breathes over him." (XI, 213-214). On the seventh day, Gilgamesh awakes and finally admits his failure. His words convey signs of defeat and despair:

> 'O Uta-napishti, what should I do and where should I go?
> A thief has taken hold of my [flesh!]
> For there in my bed-chamber Death does abide,
> and wherever [I] turn, there too will be Death.' (XI, 243-46)

The island is the final destination in the hero's journey to meet his forefather, who represents superiority and beyond him nothing else exists. The island is a counterpart of the primal Mesopotamian mound that surfaced from beneath the ocean, or "undifferentiated water", to create the universe.[176] Hence, the island can be perceived as the centerpiece of

[175] Death, in ancient Mesopotamia, was likened to sleep; Mesopotamians often used this metaphor when addressing death: "the treacherous sleep." This explains why Uta-napishti preferred this type of challenge; it suggests that if Gilgamesh is not able to resist sleep, he cannot overcome death as well. For Death and Lamentation texts, see Jacobsen, (1976).

[176] For an illustration of the Babylonian creation myth, *Enuma Elish,* See Lloyd Dickie and Paul Boudreau, *Awakening Higher Consciousness: Guidance from Ancient Egypt and Sumer,* (Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2015), 22-27.

the cosmos from which all life phenomena of birth and death generates. “The hero’s first task” Campbell suggested “is to experience consciously the antecedent stages of the cosmogonic cycle; to break back through the epochs of emanation. His second then is to return from that abyss to the plane of contemporary life, there to serve as the human transformer of demiurgic potentials.”[177] For such reasons, probably, the author utilizes the literary device of a story within a story to underline a stage after the creation of mankind and their extinction caused by the great Deluge. The story is narrated by the knower, who is the hero of a past event (Uta-napishti) to the one who comes to know, the hero of present (Gilgamesh).

This encounter transmits the great secret from the father to the son. Usually, mysteries are unfolded to the next generations by means of storytelling. The story of Uta-napishti offers, from its point of view, an answer to the perennial question as to why mankind dies.

Nevertheless, the story also reveals how Uta-napishti and his wife overcame death. Revealing this secret, we suggest, is the chief objective from the inclusion of the Flood myth by the author of the late version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The myth answers the question—we formulated in the beginning of our study—as to why the sun god, Shamash, disallows Ninsun from making her son, Gilgamesh, an immortal. Three lessons can be derived from Uta-napishti’s story. First, the hero should learn to be obedient to his personal god, which can be referred to as the god of consciousness. In other words, a mortal should listen to the voice that whispers to him; even though, a god may not reveal himself to man, but like a wind sends signals through—in the case of Uta-napishti—the reed wall. The second lesson the hero has to learn is the renunciation of the material world; as Enki urges Uta-napishti to abandon his property and save his life, because materials cannot stand in the face of the threatening gale. The final lesson is that the god always comes to your rescue in times of adversity.

Mesopotamian literature tells us that there is always a rebellious god who tries to save mankind. Enki saved Uta-napishti by divulging the gods’ plot to annihilate human beings. Shamash saved Gilgamesh in the assembly of the gods who sat judging on the transgression of both: Gilgamesh and Enkidu. However, from the early conduct of Gilgamesh, we can

[177] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 276.

establish that the hero's character was far from fully developed, in order to deserve the position of a god. Shamash, the god of consciousness, is leading Gilgamesh on his course to find light and gain wisdom. The god spurs the hero to shatter his fetters, and journey towards the discovery of the imperishable truth: the truth that physical death is inevitable, and the fact that the death of the old is replaced by the birth of the new. Having come to terms with this fact, the durable essence dissolves with its original source. Hence, the hero and the god become one. In the same way, Uta-napishti merged with Enki in his Eden, to be his representative and his voice.

Interestingly, the island where Uta-napishti and his wife live is akin to the Sumerian Dilmun. Dilmun was the Mesopotamian version of Eden. It was founded by the god of wisdom, Enki, for his wife, Ninhursaga (also called Ki). The god furnished the land with all the delights that a human imagination could absorb. And besides, he brought freshwater to it. The Sumerians described it in this manner: in Dilmun, everything is clean and bright, the raven would not make its disturbing sounds, the lion would not prey on other animals, there were no cases of stillborn children caused by the "kid-killing dogs", there was no disease, no famine, no sorrows, and no lamentations. People enjoyed an everlasting life.[178]

Moreover, the nature of the challenge proposed by Uta-napishti further strengthens this association between him and his patron, Enki. Uta-napishti does not rely on his strength, but on his wisdom. Using his intelligence, he beats and ridicules the hero who killed the ferocious Humbaba, and Ishtar's Bull of Heaven. This instance conforms with an episode extant in the Sumerian myth, *Ninurta and the Anzu Bird,*[179] in which Ninurta, the warrior and the god of thunderstorm, falls in a pit dug by Enki's giant turtle. Ninurta finds himself powerless before the ruse of Enki. Hence, Enki derides him: "Bragging upstarts I put down or let rise (at will) …/ Where has your might gone, where is your valor?"[180] In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Uta-napishti mocks Gilgamesh's inability to forebear sleep; prompting his wife to observe how easily sleep fell on Gilgamesh, the one who aspired for life so desperately (cited

[178] Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology,* (1961), 55.
[179] Several translations are available to this myth, such as those of Kramer (1984); B. Alster (1971); Bottero and Kramer (1989). Noteworthy, this myth should not be confused with the Babylonian *Anzu* myth, translated by Dalley (2001) in its two versions, the Standard and the Babylonian version.
[180] These lines are cited with a brief commentary by Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness,* 133.

above). What can be concluded from all these depictions is that Enki, who is the god of wisdom, embodies the immortal Uta-napishti. Wisdom was communicated to Uta-napishti through the numinous power of Enki. In brief: immortality can be achieved through wisdom.

An impressive element adopted by the author of the epic, which deserves a short comment, is that of the number seven. Apparently, judging from all the examples extant in the epic, this number denotes a change; a cessation of an old state. Hence, in his portrayal of the flood event, Uta-napishti, states that on the "seventh day" the tempest relented. Seven, Shcimmel points out, was also a sacred number, and it signifies an alteration in world status;[181] as is evident in the four phases of the lunar change, in which the moon assumes a new shape every seventh day.[182] After failing the sleep test, a transformation in Gilgamesh's attitude toward death takes place on the seventh day. Consequently, he begins to make a confession of his fear of death in front of his symbolical father.

"The problem of the hero going to meet the father" Campbell remarked "is to open his soul beyond terror to such a degree that he will be ripe to understand how the sickening and insane tragedies of this vast and ruthless cosmos are completely validated in the majesty of Being."[183] Uta-napishti's unwillingness to sooth Gilgamesh reflects this validation of birth and death. Instead, we witness a moment of purgation; by confessing to his symbolical father, the hero is cleansed from his fear of death. The rite of purification is initiated when Uta-napishti orders his man to take Gilgamesh to the washtub (see below). The act of bathing and putting on new clothes that is usually associated with sacred rites, indicates a discharge of an older state after having suffered humiliation and loss, thus a rebirth.

3. Return

Uta-napishti orders his ferryman to take Gilgamesh to a bath, cleanse the dirt on his body, clothe him with new robes that befit his kingly status, and send him back to his city, Uruk. While the two were boarding the ferry, Uta-napishti's wife sympathizes with Gilgamesh;

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[181] Noteworthy, the Tower of Babel—a well-known mythical edifice in Mesopotamia, and sometimes confused with the Babylonian ziggurat— wherein a variation of human languages first originated, had seven storey.
[182] Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers*, 129.
[183] Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces,* 124-125.

she urges her husband to reward the hero with a parting gift as a token for all his toils. Uta-napishti reveals the location of a thorny plant, which grows under the ocean water and has the potential of rejuvenation. Hearing this, Gilgamesh dives to the corals, uproots the plant, and together with Ur-shanabi sail back home. Thrilled with joy, Gilgamesh describes the plant to his friend: "This plant, Ur-shanabi, is the 'Plant of Heartbeat', \ with it a man can regain his vigor." (XI, 294-295). On their way, Gilgamesh stops to bath in a refreshing pool. Meanwhile, the scent of the overlooked plant attracts a snake which creeps stealthily, eats it, sloughs its skin, and withdraws. Gilgamesh mourns and mocks his lot in the presence of his new friend:

'[For whom,] Ur-shanabi, toiled my arms so hard,
for whom ran dry the blood of my heart?
Not for myself did I find a bounty,
[for] the "Lion of the Earth" I have done a favour! (XI, 311-314)

Finally, when the two approach closer to Uruk, Gilgamesh points his city walls to Ur-shanabi. He urges him to climb and inspect the magnificent work of his hands.

The empathy of Uta-napishti's wife is intriguing; it further delineates the distinction drawn by the author between the married women and those who are single with relation to their traits. Married women are depicted as the paradigm for motherly love, whose compassion is like a womb that protects the hero from the world of sufferings, and nurtures him with vitality,[184] whereas unmarried women drag the hero to the tomb by seducing him and withdrawing his vitality. Even so, the Plant of Rejuvenation, which is awarded to Gilgamesh as a result of the intercession of Uta-napishti's wife, does not have the potential of immortality. On the contrary, the plant is ephemeral: it is a sedative that can sooth

[184] We do not possess detailed evidence on the role of mothers in ancient Mesopotamia, due to scarcity in historical and literary data. From the meager inscriptions that come to us at this moment, we realize that mothers were instrumental in the management of the household, and—at the same time—were respected by their children. Proverbs and wisdom sayings advice children to show respect to their parents; for example, a Sumerian proverb exhorts that "A child should behave with modesty toward his mother. He should take old age into consideration." (cited by Marten Stol, *Women in Ancient Near East,* 2016, 156). Today, in Mesopotamia, mothers occupy an elevated status in a family; they are revered to an incredible extent. It is common to see grown up sons bending down to kiss the heels of their mothers as a sign of appreciation. Taking account of this fact, it could change our outlook when treating the nature of the bond between a mother and her child, whose customs differ from the ones we are familiar with. In other words, some of Freudian theories cannot be applicable in such contexts, in which the relation between mothers and their children is intimate.

Gilgamesh's discomfort. Paradoxically, the plant does not prolong life and make it eternal, rather it will reverse the age of the hero to his youth. Ultimately, the plant can be considered as a delusion that delays the death of the hero.

Much focus has been placed on the loss of the Plant of Rejuvenation to the serpent than on other aspects existing in this particular episode. For example, Jacobsen criticized Gilgamesh's inattentiveness in preserving the plant, thus he stated "It is Gilgamesh's own human nature that reasserts itself; it is a basic human weakness, a moment of carelessness, that defeats him… And it is perhaps this very lack of heroic stature in his failure that brings him to his senses."[185] There can be no doubt to this claim, because we witness the hero's frailty of character who is indifferent to cherish the plant. Such an immersion, however, has led us to overlook the functions of the pool in which the hero is swimming. From earlier instances, we came to realize that bathing is implemented to denote a sense of releasing someone from his previous state. We also perceived that washing was associated with sacred rites, such as purification. Hence, we suggest that a serpent, which symbolizes wisdom, has reappeared to cleanse the hero from his desire to live an everlasting life. In fact, Gilgamesh's final words mirror his disinterestedness of ever pursuing a physical immortality again.

Gilgamesh is standing dismayed outside the protective walls of Uruk, a subtle indication that the hero is not immune against nature. He fully understands that he is exposed to the threats which in any moment can infect his life. Eventually, the hero realizes that nothing was helpful in his endeavor to transcend death; not even the fortified walls from which at any time he can be expelled, falling outside of their protection. His wrestling contests with men and his indulgence into sacred marriages with women did not afford him with the kind of vitality he desperately sought for. Confronting ferocious monsters and undertaking perilous adventures bring him closer with the risk of death, and the glory derived from them can only benefit him after his death. Nevertheless, it is the experience and knowledge the hero gains along his journeys that mature his character and broaden his wisdom to appreciate life and its surroundings.

It is true that family is fundamental to one's life, but apparently, the author of this version—through omitting Shiduri's famous speech—gives more value to wisdom than to

[185] Jacobsen, *The Treasures of Darkness*, 218.

life's social aspect. Learning how to cope with one's life and be resourceful to others, and how to become enlightened with knowledge, like the god Enki and his representative, Uta-napishti— the writer seems to tell us—is the ideal solution to an eternally blissful life. Water, in which the numinous power of Enki dwells, does not break but bends and always creates new paths to flow into.

Walls are built, destroyed, and renovated, but it is their foundation which stands despite detrimental forces. A foundation, as we learned, was laid by the Seven Sages, envoys of the god Enki. At this point, we should ask: was Gilgamesh content with his lot? At the outset, the author states that the hero returned to Uruk, wrote his story and found peace. We are convinced that Gilgamesh achieved a certain level of wisdom; however, the author does not disclose any further information about the new conduct of his protagonist. Although there are traces of despair hanging around his character, nonetheless despair expressed in sadness stands in sharp contrast with the agitation he suffered throughout. This realization eases the hero's pain and accompanies him along his gradual growth of consciousness. At the end, the poem evokes the similar impression we receive from reading an inspiring tale that this is just a beginning to another story.

CONCLUSION

In treating our subject, we commenced in Chapter 1 by offering an overview of the geographical features of the Mesopotamian plain, and a brief history of Sumer, Babylon, and Assyria. This great civilization, we realized, left behind an immense number of literature, of which *The Epic of Gilgamesh* constitutes only a fraction. The epic's reconstruction process was nothing like we have imagined, it took nearly more than a century of incessant work of Assyriologists in examining, arranging, and finally deciphering all the relevant tablets and fragments that were unearthed in various locations.

Subsequently—with some evidence—attempts were made to demonstrate that the epic's city, Uruk, and its famous walls were not mythical, but in fact actual. Also, it has been demonstrated that the protagonist, Gilgamesh, was a historical King of that city at some time in the early Sumerian age. Moreover, the etiology of the name Gilgamesh, being a variant of the Sumerian prototype Bilgamesh, and his parentage were also discussed. After his death, we learnt that Gilgamesh was deified, worshipped, and offerings were made to him in ritualistic ceremonies and festivals.

The circulation of the epic within Mesopotamia and its transmission outside to the neighboring regions was briefly illustrated. Apparently, this process made a significant impact on the literature of the community and that of other cultures.

In the following sections, we tracked down the origins of *The Epic of Gilgamesh,* and its evolutionary stages during one millennia to finally reach its Standard version. The early Sumerian poems celebrating the life and the heroic deeds of Gilgamesh, it has been noted, set the foundation for the Babylonian author(s) to present a consistent story about the king Gilgamesh in the Old-Babylonian period. Later in the Middle-Babylonian period, the epic was edited and expanded by a certain Babylonian scholar called Sin-leqi-unnini. This came to be known as the Standard Babylonian version, the most complete edition of *The Epic of*

Gilgamesh. All in all, this section underlined major and minor alterations that were introduced to the Old and the late Babylonian version of the story with regard to structure, style, character roles, and themes. One prominent example that became evident in the late version was the addition of the prologue and the mythical flood story. The content of the prologue was analyzed in the following section, that was dedicated to examining the structure of the Standard version of the epic. The tradition of assimilation of the contemporaneous motifs, folktales, wisdom sayings, etc. in the story was dealt with as well.

We established our side in the debate on the attribution of the epic to the exorcist, Sin-leqi-unnini, and the appendage of Tablet XII. The evidence and presumptions that we proposed favor Sin-leqi-unnini as the probable author of the late version. However, it is quite difficult to ascertain whether Tablet XII was his own working or inserted into the eleven tablets story by later editors. In any way, it became clear that this tablet does not belong to the rest of the story, because of its inconsistency with the main plot, structure, style, and language of the preceding eleven tablets.

For the first time, as far as we are informed, we endeavored to address Mesopotamian religion in relation to *The Epic of Gilgamesh.* Accordingly, the third section presented a distinctive view of the Mesopotamian pantheon and peoples' concepts on aging and afterlife. What lied at the core of this tremendous religion, nevertheless, was the belief that the gods were the personification of the powers and aspects of the cosmos. The most essential principle for our study, it can be said, was that of the tradition of the personal god, on whom Mesopotamians in general—and Gilgamesh in particular—depended for prosperity in their lives. At the same time of religious prevalence—we became acquainted—scholars were constantly seeking to find answers to the mysteries of the universe and on the brevity of human life.

In Chapter 2, the main topic for our study, we were interested in outlining the hero's journey in his quest for immortality, and in underlining the three objectives from such a pursuit, namely the achievement of immortality through fame, physical perpetuity, and, lastly, immortality through wisdom. The sketching of the sections of this chapter, as we saw, was informed by Campbell's theory of the Monomyth. What was more crucial, nevertheless, was that of an original method we adopted throughout. Thus, we persevered to provide an authentic reading of the story, and simultaneously to highlight the indication of several

symbols, and elements; and, interpreting motifs according to our modern perspective and that of ancient Mesopotamians as well. This line of approach drew us to compare elements in certain episodes in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* with other Sumero-Babylonian literature. Riddles, esoteric numbers, and symbols were carefully inspected, through limiting ourselves to the Mesopotamian outlooks. Ultimately, the results were remarkable.

Thus, in the first section, Departure, the early stage in the initiation and instigation of the hero by a supernatural helping force to take a journey to the unknown, the concept of the personal god crystalized. This concept helped us to make an attempt in solving the riddle of Gilgamesh’s queer genealogy: two-thirds god and one-third human. It has been already established that Gilgamesh’s parents, Ninsun and Lugalbanda, were divine and human, respectively. However, there remained one divine third, whose identity was unknown. Basing our assumption on the Mesopotamian consideration of the personal god, we suggested that Gilgamesh acquired this divine third from his patron, the sun god, Shamash.

Furthermore, Gilgamesh’s impulsive nature and his treatment of his people, we argued, was not unjustified. In fact, it was revealed that his anxiety was the result of an internal preoccupation with the ways to transcend death. We supported our argument with multiple examples, such as the exercise of the sacred marriage, wrestling contests, slaughtering of animals; and further until Enkidu’s death, when the hero’s fears were articulated loudly. Our aim from this approach was to redefine the conventional view that states the hero becomes aware of his death only after seeing the death of his friend, Enkidu.

The process of civilizing Enkidu was likewise fundamental, for within it we came across the rather awkward formula, “six days and seven nights,” that is broadly deployed in the epic. Analyzing the times during which this formula was incorporated, we claimed that it should have been expressed in reverse: seven days and six nights. However, this was probably executed by the author to function as a mathematical puzzle, whereby the sum of the two numbers (13) foreshadowed the proceedings. The implication of this number and instances in which this formula was utilized were discussed in detail.

Repetition of specific passages were—in the same manner—not regarded as excessive, rather we discovered that they were deployed as a poetic device that influenced the plot. For example, the five dreams formula that begins with identical passages, but different dream

content, in Tablet IV was admittedly an ancient custom used to evade risks during travels. It has been emphasized that number five was associated with the element of life and the goddess, Ishtar, by ancient Mesopotamians.

The two heroic feats, namely the slaying of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, in the second section, Initiation, disclosed considerably much about the true motives and the character of the hero. In the Cedar Forest, where Gilgamesh was contending to make a name eternal, we saw his fearful side when faced with a life-threatening counterforce. His rejection of Ishtar, on the other hand, reflected the hero's fear of death. Because, Gilgamesh conceived that if he had accepted the goddess's marriage proposal he would have suffered death, like the rest of her former lovers.

The death of Enkidu was a bitter reality for the hero that death is inevitable. This realization urged him to further press beyond his potentials, and wander in the wilderness in a hunt for physical immortality. The obstacles, humiliations, and failures that the hero suffered along the way contributed towards expanding his wisdom. During this journey, more symbols and elements were analyzed; for instance, the association of the sun with the principle of life, the motif of the threshold guardians, the jewel garden, the mother and the father figure, etc.

Again, despite its length, we argued that the story of the flood was inserted in the epic on purpose, whereby the hero learns from an immortal what it takes for someone to transcend death, and becomes acquainted with the state of the universe before the Deluge.

The bathing scenes, the one after failing the sleep test and the other during losing the plant of rejuvenation were connected, as we stated, to the ancient purification rites; through which the initiate is cleansed from his former state. We suggested that the hero at this point in *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was first purged from his fear of death and secondly from his desire of physical perpetuity.

In the final section, Return, we witnessed the transformation that took place in the hero's character. The travails in his expeditions certainly increased his experience; consequently, the hero disrobed himself from his ego and gained a sense of empathy towards people. Gilgamesh, eventually, became wise.

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