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## What does the Epic of Gilgamesh Reveal about Mesopotamian Culture and Religion?

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*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, from the time it was rediscovered and reconstructed in the late nineteenth century, has created a sense of controversy and curiosity among historians of the ancient near east. A huge reason for the excitement was the incorporations of other stories and the evidence of the flood story from Genesis. With this, the Epic creates a parallel to the bible and the society of Mesopotamia nearly 4,000 years ago. Gilgamesh is known to be the first great hero, and the epic is known as the 'first great masterpiece of world literature'. With this story we can learn a lot about Mesopotamian culture and their religion, but what exactly? Throughout their culture, we find many examples of similar instances that continue for years to come. Some of these instances are the idea of a strong male leader and a council of city elders, but also the gender division, which is important throughout their religion too. There seems to be a concern with the rights of the citizens, as Gilgamesh is expected to be a just ruler, and being a ruler with outrage over his abuses actually leads to the creation of Enkidu in the story.

Religiously, Mesopotamians were a polytheistic society, meaning they were attached to natural phenomena with gods that were very heavily personified. They would have relationships with these gods and would pick their favorite or least favorite to guide or destroy. The idea of afterlife is created to be dark and gray, but since it is fragmented in the epic, it is difficult to form an accurate picture of their vision of the underworld. Since there are three different versions of the Epic, I will focus on the 11 translated tablets of the first millennium B.C., translated by Maureen Gallery Kovacs. Her translations point out tales of the Harlot, Gilgamesh's dreams, the strangling of the Lion and the hunter that is somewhat unrelated to the ultimate story, but finds itself creating a larger picture for the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.<sup>1</sup>

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* recounts the tale of the hero-king of ancient Mesopotamia. Gilgamesh has encounters with creatures, kings and gods and also provides a story of human relationships, feelings, loneliness, friendship, loss, love, revenge and the fear of death. He is the wisest, strongest, and most handsome of all mortals, and is two-thirds god and one-third man. He's the king of the city-state Uruk, and builds a huge wall around the city. In the process he overworks his citizens to the point they begin to pray to the gods for relief. The god Anu hears their prayers and called on the goddess Aruru to create another mortal/god like Gilgamesh. In order for peace in Uruk, the two will have to fight for the right to rule. Enkidu is created from clay and is sent to live among the animals. He is known as the equal to Gilgamesh, but is more native and primal.

The two enemies become inseparable best friends after an "earth-shaking" fight. After time, Gilgamesh proposes a dangerous adventure to the Cedar Forest, in which they will encounter the great and terrible guardian, Humbaba. The friends take off with special weapons and are under protection of the sun god. Once they reach the Cedar Forest, Enkidu tries to convince Gilgamesh to turn back, but the sun god urges them to continue and confront Humbaba. The exchanges

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<sup>1</sup> Tigay, Jeffrey H. *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.

between the warriors and Humbaba are not understood by the men, but Enkidu eventually persuades Gilgamesh to destroy him.

After the defeat and their return to Uruk, the hero, Gilgamesh, is pursued by the goddess, Ishtar. But knowing her past with lovers, Gilgamesh rejects her invitation, which only manages to irritate and anger her. In retaliation, Ishtar sends down the Bull of Heaven, which Gilgamesh and Enkidu are able to defeat. After this, the gods decide that one of the warriors must die in retribution for slaying Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. They end up deciding Enkidu is the one who must die. Gilgamesh is devastated by the loss of his friend and better half, and decides to rebel and set out to find the secret to eternal life.

Gilgamesh meets with Utanapishtim, who has received the gift of eternal life, to learn his secrets. Utanapishtim tests him by forcing Gilgamesh to go without sleep, a test that he fails and is sent away. Utanapishtim's wife urges that they give Gilgamesh something to reward him for his quest, and they decide on the "plant of rejuvenation", which will allow him to live his life over again. Unfortunately for Gilgamesh, he loses his plant to a snake and has to return home empty handed with no solution to eternity or a second chance at life.<sup>2</sup>

So let us start with the culture of Mesopotamia during the age of the Epic. Benjamin Foster puts forth evidence on the idea of sex and love in the culture and society of Mesopotamia. Foster argues that sex is a type of knowledge, in regards to the chapter on the seduction of Enkidu from Shamhat. He describes this as sex belongs to the lowest form of human knowledge, because it is what everyone must experience and understand in order for them to be recognized as human. Foster also conveys that sex is for fun and is non-productive, and emotionalizes the animal state. "Gilgamesh transcends such knowledge in a series of stages that leads him, by steps, to the highest knowledge, where the self is transcended and only accomplishments--e.g., a world of literature."<sup>3</sup> Knowledge of another creates unity, which is only apparent to those with greater knowledge, which is the goal for all men and is only achieved after all else has been discarded. Foster also puts forth the idea of knowledge as Knowledge of Humanity, Another, Beginnings of Self-Knowledge, Self, and the Transcendence of Knowledge beyond the Self. With this, there is difficulty dealing with the curse Enkidu, who endures because of the prostitute Shamash. Prostitutes were condemned for giving into seduction, and because Enkidu gave into them, he became more human. This shows that sex, an act that is far more prevalent today, is seen as a tool by women to humanize men while making them far more likely to fall into temptation. Other than this from Foster, he describes the Nineveh Gilgamesh epic, a complex Akkadian poem, and talks about how the Nineveh poet portrays sex and love as types of sex and knowledge.<sup>4</sup>

In the Nineveh Epic, which tells of the Nineveh poet portraying sex and love as a type of knowledge, portrays sex as an act belonging to the lowest common level of human knowledge and as a common experience everyone must have in order to become human. Once the knowledge of sex is attained, having sex for pleasure rather than production no longer results in the acquisition of knowledge, and instead becomes a characteristic of the street or change back to the animal state. The Nineveh Epic credits Enkidu's giving into the seduction of Shamash as the reason for his inferiority to Gilgamesh, and also states he no longer has his pristine physical condition because he is no longer a virgin. At this time Enkidu entered the first stage of knowledge; sexual awareness.

Besides Enkidu, Gilgamesh has an extensive history of sex in the epic, only proving how sex is a huge part of the culture in Mesopotamia during this time period.<sup>5</sup> Gilgamesh is known at the

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<sup>2</sup> Kovacs, Maureen Gallery. "Introduction." In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> Maier, John R. "Benjamin Foster: 'Gilgamesh: Sex, Love and the Ascent of Knowledge, 165'" In *Gilgamesh: A Reader*. Wauconda, Ill., USA: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, 163-164.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*.

beginning of the epic to have slept with all the pretty and even wed women of Uruk. This shows Gilgamesh viewed sex as a non-productive hobby and was actually an underlining reason of why Enkidu was created. When befriending Enkidu, Gilgamesh becomes more of a heroic figure and looks less to sex and pleasure than before. Instead, he seems to turn it down, especially when he turns down the sexual advances from the love and war goddess, Ishtar. In doing so, this shows his ability as a superior man to not be seduced, even by the great goddess, Ishtar. Of course, it is thought that Gilgamesh didn't want to be involved due to Ishtar's previous relationships, but it also proves him to be mentally strong.<sup>6</sup> The role of women is another large part of the culture in Mesopotamia during this time.

Men were known to be dominant at this time because women weren't able to control sex and love, which were not triggered by thought, but by emotion. And true men weren't said to make their decisions based on emotions. Women were not seen in a positive light unless they assisted Gilgamesh or Enkidu, and were expected to nurture and advise in "maternal fashion." Women in the Mesopotamian society did not live in a sexual society and their place was outside of the political sphere and the masculine military domain. Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, is given dedication to the city of Uruk. And because she controlled two aspects of human nature, which are ruled by emotion, is the reason Mesopotamians believed women were guided by this instinct and emotion, rather than reason of other gods and men. Rivkah Harris points out a "comic inversion {in} the switching of expected roles in the ambiguous figure of Ishtar..."<sup>7</sup> Harris states that since Gilgamesh is a sort of medieval poetry that was more than likely written by men for men, there was a certain attitude towards women and how they are supportive and subsidiary toward men. This may actually give a reflection of the lives of women in Mesopotamia at this time, although their primary role is not necessarily given. There are however a number of women involved in the Epic that are known as wise, such as Ishtar of course, Shamhat, and Ninsun; Gilgamesh's goddess mother. Harris describes how Ishtar reverses the role of goddess, because she is mocked by a mortal and therefore acts as a man. Another reverse of roles is the relationship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, in which they're marked as husband and wife, which shows that such a relationship can be seen like a man and woman, according to Harris. Lastly, Harris suggests that "the paradigmatic image of the mother should be considered in other Mesopotamian myths to determine certain features of interfamilial life in Mesopotamia."<sup>8</sup>

Beyond sex and gender, nature is important to the culture of Mesopotamia, as well as the Epic. Nature is discussed in the Epic when describing Enkidu and his primitive ways before he finds his friendship with Gilgamesh. Enkidu is created from clay and the ground and lives in the desert wastes. "His whole body is shaggy with hair, and his head-hair is like woman's (which was unusual in the third millennium B.C.). He feeds on grass with the gazelles and drinks at their watering-place; he is a wild man."<sup>9</sup> David Damrosch, in "Gilgamesh and

Genesis" also describes Enkidu and the World of Nature. Stating as most historians that Enkidu begins life as an image of a primitive human being, and his adventurous primitive life. He roams naked across the steppe and is always in the company of animals. He is known for tearing down traps and untying animals that have been caught and seems to be hostile and against the human culture. Damrosch describes the same that Enkidu was perhaps made more fully in Gilgamesh's image than the gods had planned and "as Gilgamesh disturbs civil order in Uruk,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 79-94.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 79.

<sup>9</sup> Kirk, G. S. "Nature and Culture: Gilgamesh, Centaurs and Cyclopes." In *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*,. Cambridge [England: University Press], 1970.

Enkidu disturbs the pastoral order in the countryside” (Damrosch, pg.195-196).<sup>10</sup> Besides Enkidu, Gilgamesh is brought back to signs of nature when in the near end of the Epic, he goes to see Utnapishtum, and instead of his clean clothes and crown, he is wearing animal skins because his clothes are worn out. His wearing of animal skins seems to be a reference to Enkidu and how he lived before he had met Gilgamesh and was given clothes. Another instance of nature in the epic is the plant of rejuvenation. Nature, as it is a plant, but also shows how nature in their culture is important because it gives possibilities of rejuvenation, and reliving one’s life. The plant however is taken by a snake, which is ironically the symbol of deceit, treachery, and evil in the Old Testament, and the Creation Story.<sup>11</sup>

Death is another symbol that is relative to culture and the Epic. Death in the culture of Mesopotamia portrays a strange image that the underworld is dark and dangerous, and that all the deceased souls appear to be trapped underground. Death in the Epic occurs with Gilgamesh killing Humbaba and when Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the Bull of Heaven, which ultimately leads to the death of Enkidu. After the death of his best friend, Gilgamesh acts like a madman and doesn’t believe it until worms take over his body and Enkidu turns to dust. “Death was a part of the scheme of things, so, since you had to die anyway, let it be a glorious death in the battle with a worthy foe so that your name and fame would live.”<sup>12</sup> After this, Gilgamesh struggles with his sense of mortality and looks for a way to defeat the inevitable. In the end, after being unable to find immortality and a way to relive his life, Gilgamesh finds peace with death. Death in the culture of Mesopotamia is inevitable, as it is in the culture of all lives.<sup>13</sup> Death in the Epic is seen through the story and seems to help Gilgamesh grow up and look it in the face as well. Gilgamesh searches for ways to stay immortal, but eventually finds peace in death with the hope that he will someday be reunited with his friend and marital lover, Enkidu. “The loss of the plant stands thus for the loss of illusion that one can go back to being a child. It brings home the necessity for growing up, for facing and accepting reality. And in the loss Gilgamesh for the first time can take himself less seriously, even smile ruefully at himself; he has at last become nature.”<sup>14</sup>

When it comes to religion in Mesopotamia, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* shows a similar presentation of what the Greek and Roman authors would write a thousand years later. Being a polytheistic society, the gods were attached to natural phenomena and occurrences. Ishtar, as stated before, is the goddess of love and war; Ea, the god of water and the arts; Shamash, the god of the sun and his wife; the goddess of the moon. The Gilgamesh Epic compares to the Homeric epics. Gerald K. Gresseth, states that a line is “traceable from the Sumerian materials from which the Akkadian epic was formed to the world of Homer. As often with lines of cultural derivation parts of this line are of greater importance than other parts: in particular, the period when these somewhat diverse moment for this tradition. What has not generally been seen is that the creation of this unity--really the creation of heroic epic in the true sense-- was not a fortuitous artistic discovery but the result of a new idea, that of the human hero as contrasted with an older, more divine or ‘shamanistic’ type of hero.”<sup>15</sup> G.S. Kirk also describes the influence of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* on the Greek myths. He states that the Mesopotamian myths are better understood as

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<sup>10</sup> Maier, John R., David Damrosch. “Gilgamesh and Genesis.”195-196,” In *Gilgamesh: A Reader*. Wauconda, Ill., USA: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 138-139.

<sup>12</sup> Jacobsen, Thorkild. "Second Millennium Metaphors. "And Death the Journey's End": The Gilgamesh Epic." In *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*, 202. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

<sup>13</sup> Tigay, Jeffrey H. *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982.

<sup>14</sup> Jacobsen, Thorkild. "Second Millennium Metaphors. "And Death the Journey's End": The Gilgamesh Epic." In *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*, 219. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

<sup>15</sup> Gresseth, Gerald. "The Gilgamesh Epic and Homer." *The Classical Journal* 70, no. 4 (1975).

their influence overwhelmingly appears and is therefore revealed by details of non-folktales, but that also have obvious meanings.<sup>16</sup>

Beyond Greek and Roman myths, religion in Mesopotamia and the Epic is heavily personified. The gods have relationships in which they choose their favorite mortals to guide and sometimes choose their least favorite mortals to destroy. Such as when Enlil chooses to destroy mankind in the Flood, and Ea saves Utnapishtim by guiding him to build a boat, this leads to Utnapishtim finding divine mortality and being the one that Gilgamesh looks to for the possibility of becoming immortal. The Flood Story, which is found in the Epic of Gilgamesh, is a similar story to the Flood Story of Noah's Ark in Genesis of the Old Testament. In "Gilgamesh and Genesis", David Damrosch states there is certainly a parallel to Genesis, but it could also represent a "historicizing extension into human history of primordial conflicts depicted among the gods in Enumaelsih."<sup>17</sup> Damrosch states we do not have enough evidence to say whether an older tradition developed human-history analogues in the Sumerian times of the late Third Millennium. Damrosch describes four fundamental story elements that appear in the creation-flood epics. The creation of humans, the cataclysm of the flood, and the establishment of the post-Flood human order and the creation of the world. All these elements are in Genesis 1-11, but have major alterations. "If Genesis 1-11 develops away from this ancient paradigm, the Gilgamesh Epic develops toward it. In the process, the text loses its former exclusive emphasis on the problem of death and becomes a wider meditation on the lines from the problem of mortality to the theme of knowledge in Genesis 1-11."<sup>18</sup> The significance of the Flood Story when it comes to Mesopotamian culture and religion is the citizens and folks rely on the gods to have control over the rivers and the rain that they receive. When something such as a flood happens, it is seen as a punishment from the gods, because natural events in the Mesopotamian culture are said to have stemmed from gods.

From the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, we see that religion and culture in Mesopotamia shines through. We see a masculine identity with a gender divide pervade through the culture. Sex and religion play major roles, and are important to the future of cultures and Empires. We see that the masculine identity is important in their culture just by looking at the description of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. We see that a leader/king is someone who is masculine and strong, who towers over the rest. The role of women and gender is also seen in the Epic. We don't have a definitive description of the role of women at this time in Mesopotamia, but we do know they are not on the same level as men, nor are they looked at as respectable. Women are thought to have made decisions based on emotion and their rational instinct, but men are thought to have a mindset which is the total opposite. This is where a goddess like Ishtar is a huge example to the gender division; although she is a woman, she is seen to use her mind more like a man. The role of the mother is not necessarily pointed out throughout their culture, but in the Epic there are references to the mother, who is a divine goddess, who gives Gilgamesh his two-thirds god. Sex is a huge role in the culture and even in the religion of Mesopotamia during this time period. Sex, an emotional and instinctive act, is what makes a man mortal in this culture. It's also seen as a form of pleasure, especially when it is non-productive, making it even more of a mortal act. Sex plays a role in religion too, because when a man takes part in the act, it rids him of the possibility of becoming immortal, and is also a way for the gods to guide or hate a mortal such as Ishtar and Gilgamesh. Religion in the culture of Mesopotamia is seen everywhere. It is seen in the roles gods play in everyday lives and also gives

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<sup>16</sup> Kirk, G. S. "Nature and Culture: Gilgamesh, Centaurs and Cyclopes." In *Myth: Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures*, Cambridge [England: University Press; 1970. 132.

<sup>17</sup> Maier, John R. "David Damrosch. "Gilgamesh and Genesis." 193" In *Gilgamesh: A Reader*. Wauconda, Ill., USA: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1997

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

reference to the Greeks and their mythology. Overall, culture and religion is extremely influential and relevant in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.