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The Epic of Gilgamesh

(ca. 2000 B.C.E.)

The Epic of Gilgamesh, the best known of the Mesopotamian myths, is one of the world's oldest surviving pieces of literature. Only incomplete versions have come down to us, the longest of which is a copy written on 12 tablets found in the Royal Library of Nineveh. The epic tells the story of the wanderings of Gilgamesh, the part-human, part-divine king of Uruk. Around 2000 B.C.E., Uruk, one of the most important of the Mesopotamian city-states, was ruled by a King Gilgamesh, but it is impossible to be certain that the events recounted in the epic derive from his reign.

The peoples of the ancient Near East lived precariously, always at the mercy of nature. Flood and drought were the most common natural disasters, and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* contains echoes of the great flood narrated in the Bible. Gilgamesh's travels are motivated by a search for the survivors of this great flood, who supposedly know the secret of everlasting life. The twin themes of the unpredictability of the gods and the inevitability of death dominate the epic.

Siduri, she the divine cup-bearer,
Sits there by the rim of the sea.
Sits there and looks afar off . . .
She is wrapped in a shawl . . .
Gilgamesh ran thither and drew nigh unto her.
He is clad in skins,
His shape is awesome,
His body godlike,
Woe is in his heart.
He is like a wanderer of far ways.
The face of her, the cup-bearer, looks afar off,
She talks to herself and says the word,
Takes counsel in her heart:
"Is he yonder one who deviseth ill?
Whither is he going in the wrath of his heart?"
As Siduri saw him, she locked her gate,
Locked her portal, locked her chamber. . . .

Gilgamesh says to her, to the cup-bearer:
"Cup-bearer, what ails thee,
That thou lockest thy gate,
Lockest thy portal,
Lockest thy chamber?
I will crash the door, I will break the lock.". . .

The cup-bearer says to him, to Gilgamesh:
"Why are thy cheeks so wasted,
Thy visage so sunken,
Thy heart so sad,
Thy shape so undone?
Why is woe in thy heart?
Why art thou like a wanderer of far ways?
Why is thy countenance
So destroyed with grief and pain?
Why hast thou from wide-away
Made haste over the steppes?"

Gilgamesh says to her, to the cup-bearer:
"Why should my cheeks not be so wasted,
My visage so sunken,
My heart so sad,
My shape so undone?
How should woe not be in my heart?
Why should I not be like
A wanderer of far ways?
Why should not my countenance
Be destroyed with grief and pain?
Why should I not to the far-away
Make haste over the steppes?

My belovèd friend, the panther of the steppes,
Engidu, my belovèd friend,
The panther of the steppes who could do all things,
So that we climbed the mountain,
Overthrew Khumbaba,
Who housed in the cedar-forest,
So that we seized and slew the bull-of-heaven,
So that we laid lions low
In the ravines of the mountain,
My friend,
Who with me ranged through all hardships,
Engidu, my friend, who killed lions with me,
Who with me ranged through all hardships,
Him hath the fate of mankind overtaken.
Six days and six nights have I wept over him,
Until the seventh day
Would I not have him buried.
Then I began to be afraid . . .
Fear of death seized upon me.
Therefore I make away over the steppes.
The fate of my friend weighs me down.
Therefore I make haste
On a far way over the steppes.
The fate of Engidu, my friend,
Weigheth me down.
Therefore I make haste on a long road over the steppes.
Why should I be silent thereon?
Why should I not cry it forth?
My friend, whom I love,
Hath turned into earth.
Must not I too, as he,
Lay me down
And rise not up again
For ever and for ever?—
Ever since he is gone, I cannot find Life,
And rove, like a hunter, round over the fields.
Cup-bearer, now I behold thy face;
But Death, whom I fear, I would not behold."

The cup-bearer, she says to him, to Gilgamesh:
"Gilgamesh, whither runnest thou?
Life, which thou seekest, thou wilt not find.
When the gods created mankind,
They allotted to mankind Death,
But Life they withheld in their hands.
So, Gilgamesh, fill thy body,
Make merry by day and night,
Keep each day a feast of rejoicing!
Day and night leap and have thy delight!
Put on clean raiment,
Wash thy head and bathe thee in water,
Look cheerily at the child who holdeth thy hand,
And may thy wife have joy in thy arms!"

Gilgamesh says again to her, to the cup-bearer:
"Go to, cup-bearer!
Where is the way to Utnapishtim?
What is his sign? Give it to me!
If it can be done,
I will pass over the sea;
If it cannot be done,
I will make away over the steppes."
Ur-Shanabi says to him, to Gilgamesh:
"What is thy name? Say forth!
I am Ur-Shanabi,
Man-servant of Utnapishtim, the far one."

Gilgamesh speaks to him, to Ur-Shanabi:
"My name is Gilgamesh,
I have come from long away . . .
At last, Ur-Shanabi, I behold thy face.
Let me look on Utnapishtim, the far one."

Ur-Shanabi says to him, to Gilgamesh:
"Why are thy cheeks so wasted,
Thy visage so sunken,
Thy heart so sad,
Thy shape so undone?
Why is woe in thy heart?
Why art thou like a wanderer of far ways?
Why is thy countenance
So destroyed with grief and pain?
Why hast thou from long away
Come ahaste over the steppes?"

Gilgamesh says to him,
To Ur-Shanabi, the shipman:
"Why should my cheeks not be so wasted,
My visage so sunken,
My heart so sad,
My shape so undone?

Gilgamesh and Ur-Shanabi boarded the ship,
They headed the ship into the flood,
And sailed forth,
A way of one month and fifteen days.
As he took his bearings on the third day,
Ur-Shanabi had reached the water of death.
Ur-Shanabi says to him, to Gilgamesh:
"Quick, Gilgamesh, take a pole!
For thy hands must not touch
The waters of death."

Utnapishtim descrieth his face afar;
Talks to himself and saith the word,
Takes counsel in his heart:
"Why are the stone-coffers
Of the ship all to-broken?
And one who belongs not to me
Sails in the ship!
He who comes yonder, he cannot be man!. . .
I gaze thither, but I understand it not.
I gaze thither, but I grasp it not.". . .

Utnapishtim says to him, to Gilgamesh:
"What is thy name? Say forth!
I am Utnapishtim who hath found Life."
Gilgamesh says to him, to Utnapishtim:
"My name is Gilgamesh.
I have come from wide-away . . .
Now I behold thee, Utnapishtim, thou far one."
Gilgamesh says again to him, to Utnapishtim:
"Methought, I will go and see
Utnapishtim, of whom men tell.
So I betook me through all lands to and fro,
So I betook me over the mountains
That are hard to cross over,
So I fared over all seas.
With good have I not been glutted . . .
I filled my body with pain;
Ere ever I got to Siduri, the cup-bearer,
Was my clothing gone . . .
I had to hunt all the wild of the fields,
Lions and panthers,
Hyenas, and deer, and ibex.
Their flesh do I eat,
With their skins do I clothe me.". . .

And whilst Gilgamesh sits there in a posture of rest,
Sleep bloweth upon him like a stormwind.
Utnapishtim says to her, to his wife:
"Look at the strong one
Who longed after Life—
Like a stormwind, sleep bloweth against him!"
His wife speaks to him, to Utnapishtim,
To the far one:
"Touch him, that the man may wake up!
Let him, on the way whence he came,
Safe and sound return home.
Through the gate, through which he went,
May he return back to his land!"
Utnapishtim says to her, to his wife:
"Oh, thou hast pity upon the man!
Go to, bake loaves for him,
And lay them at his head!
And the days which he sleeps

Do thou mark on the house-wall."
She baked loaves for him and laid them at his head.
And the days which he slept she marked on the wall.
Utnapishtim announced to him:
"One is dry, a loaf for him,
A second is kneaded, a third damp,
A fourth is become white, a roasted loaf for him,
A fifth is become old,
A sixth is baked, a seventh—"
Then of a sudden he touched him,
And the man awoke.
Gilgamesh says to him,
To Utnapishtim, the far one:
"I was benumbed by the sleep that fell on me.
Then didst thou touch me quick and awaken me."
Utnapishtim says to him, to Gilgamesh:
"Go to, Gilgamesh, thy loaves are counted . . .
One was dry, a loaf for thee,
A second was kneaded, a third damp,
A fourth was become white, a roasted loaf for thee,
A fifth was become old,
A sixth was baked, a seventh—
Then of a sudden I touched thee,
And thou awokest!"

Gilgamesh says to him,
To Utnapishtim, the far one:
"What shall I do, Utnapishtim?
Whither shall I go,
Now that the Snatcher hath laid hold on my body?
In my sleeping-chamber dwells Death,
And whithersoever I flee, is he, is Death, there."

Utnapishtim says to him,
To Ur-Shanabi, the shipman:
"Ur-Shanabi, the landing-place
Shall no more desire thee;
The crossing-spot shall hate thee . . .
The man whom thou leddest hither,
Whose body filth covers,
From whom beast-skins have taken
The beauty of the body,
Escort him, Ur-Shanabi,
And bring him to the bathing-place;
Let him wash clean as snow
His filth in the water!
Let him cast off his skins
That the sea bear them away!
His body shall again show beautiful!
Be the band round his head made new!
Let him be clad in a robe,
In a shirt for his nakedness!
Until he comes again to his city,
Until he gets to his journey's end,
The robe shall not grow old,
Shall always be made new."

Gilgamesh and Ur-Shanabi boarded the ship,
They headed the ship into the flood,
And sailed away.
Then said his wife to him,
To Utnapishtim, the far one:
"Gilgamesh hath set forth;
He hath worn himself out, and suffered torments.
What wilt thou give him,
That with it he may reach his homeland?"

And Gilgamesh has already lifted the pole,
And brings the ship again near the shore:
Utnapishtim says to him, to Gilgamesh:
"Gilgamesh, thou hast set forth;
Thou hast worn thyself out, and suffered torments.
What shall I give thee
That with it thou reachest thy homeland?
I will lay open before thee
Knowledge deep-hidden;
About a plant of life will I tell thee.
The plant looks like the prick-thorn . . .
Its thorn like the thorn of the rose
Can prick the hand hard.
When thou gettest this plant in thy hands,
Eat thereof and thou wilt live."

When Gilgamesh learned of this . . .
He bound heavy stones on his feet;
These drew him down deep in the sea.
He himself took the plant,
And it pricked his hand hard.
He cut off the heavy stones . . .
And laid the plant beside him.
Gilgamesh says to him,
To Ur-Shanabi, the shipman:
"Ur-Shanabi, this plant
Is a plant-of-promise,
Whereby a man obtains his desire.
I will bring it to ramparted Uruk;
I will make the warriors eat thereof . . .
Its name is: 'The-old-man-becomes-young-again.'
I myself will eat thereof,
And return back to my youth."

After twenty miles they took a little food,
After thirty miles they rested for the night.
Then Gilgamesh saw a pit with cool water;
He stepped into it and bathed in the water.
Then a serpent savoured the smell of the plant;
She crept along and took the plant . . .
When he returned, he shrieked out a curse.

Gilgamesh sat himself down and weeps,
His tears run over his face.
He speaks and says to Ur-Shanabi, the shipman:
"For whom, Ur-Shanabi,
Have my arms worn themselves out?
For whom hath been spent the blood of my heart?
I worked good not for myself—

For the worm of the earth have I wrought
good. . . ."

After twenty miles they took a little food,
After thirty miles they rested for the night.
At last they reached ramparted Uruk.
Gilgamesh says to him,

To Ur-Shanabi, the shipman:
"Mount up, Ur-Shanabi,
Go up along the walls of ramparted Uruk,
Observe the bricks, behold the ground-work,
If the bricks are not firm and lasting,
And if the foundations were not
Laid by the seven wise-men. . . ."

1. What does Gilgamesh run from and what is he searching for?
2. Life in Mesopotamia was very hazardous. Describe some of the dangers Gilgamesh faced.
3. How do gods such as Siduri and Utnapishtim intervene in the lives of mortals?
4. What can you say about the Mesopotamian view of life as illustrated by the epic? What answers to the problems of survival does it offer?

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Code of Hammurabi

(early 18th century B.C.E.)

Hammurabi (d. 1750 B.C.E.) was a ruler of the Old Babylonian or Amorite dynasty from 1792 to 1750 B.C.E. His principal achievement was unifying his Mesopotamian kingdom by controlling the Euphrates River. Though little is known about either his family life or the events of his reign, Hammurabi's military achievements are undoubted.

Discovered in the early twentieth century, the *Code of Hammurabi* was hailed as the first law code in Western history. Its severe punishments for criminal offenses and its explicit statement of the doctrine of "an eye for an eye" also led to its connection with the Mosaic code. It is now clear that Hammurabi's *Code* is a compendium of earlier laws rather than an innovation of this Babylonian ruler. Its influence on Hebrew law is also less direct than was once thought. What remains significant about Hammurabi's *Code,* however, is what it tells us about the importance of writing and literacy among the elites of Babylonian society and about their well-developed notions of law and justice.