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The Epic of Gilgamesh

SUMMARY:

Gilgamesh, a mighty king of Uruk who is one-third man and two-thirds god, abuses his power and oppresses his people. The gods create a wild man, Enkidu, to rival Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh has a prophetic dream about the coming of Enkidu. Enkidu opposes Gilgamesh; they fight but become friends. However, peaceful life causes them to grow lazy, so Gilgamesh proposes an adventure—a journey to the far-off cedar woods in order to fight a fearsome wood demon. On the journey to the woods, Gilgamesh has a series of dreams. Enkidu loses heart, and Gilgamesh begins to fight the wood demon alone. But Enkidu rallies and takes the lead in the epic battle with the wood demon, who curses Enkidu, predicting his life will be short. Enkidu and Gilgamesh cut down the forest to celebrate their victory. They realize that “standing together, two can prevail.”

After the two return to Uruk, Gilgamesh rejects the advances of the goddess Ishtar, who has her father send down a bull to destroy the royal city. Enkidu takes the lead in killing the bull. The gods decree vengeance on Enkidu, who falls ill and dies. Gilgamesh is devastated. He mourns the loss of Enkidu and builds him a monument. In his desolation, Gilgamesh decides to embark on a journey to the Underworld to seek the meaning of life and death. Gilgamesh encounters and surmounts various obstacles on his journey—scorpions, mountains, frightening dreams. But he finally meets a wise innkeeper who tells him that death cannot be avoided. He presses on in his travels until he meets the Lord of the Underworld, a survivor of the Great Flood. Gilgamesh hears his story and fails a test put to him. A snake also ruins his chance at immortality. He travels wearily back to the city of Uruk, with only the story of his adventures to comfort him.

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Tablet One: The Creation of Gilgamesh and Enkidu

This is the story of a man who knew all that could be known. He saw the hidden things from the time before the Flood. He built the walls of Uruk. Climb those walls. Examine their foundations; marvel at their brickwork. No other city can rival strong-walled Uruk. Within the city is a temple, and within the temple is a cedar box. Open the box. Take out the tablets and read the story of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh--the wild bull, perfect in strength, surpassing all others.

Gilgamesh, the hero--immense and terrible. Who other than Gilgamesh can say: "I am king without equal"? Gilgamesh was his name before birth. The great goddess Aruru designed his body. Two thirds god she made him, and one third man. Shamash the Sun gave him beauty. Adad the Storm gave him courage. Gilgamesh, strongest of all! Long was his journey, and arduous his labors. Weary, he returned to city of Uruk and inscribed this story.

Gilgamesh was unmatched in strength and power. Arrogant, he believed everything belonged to him. He ripped sons from their fathers and demanded virgins from their husbands on their wedding nights. His tyranny and savagery grew. The women and the old ones complained to the gods, "Shouldn't Gilgamesh be our shepherd, the protector of our people?" They called to Aruru: "You made this king of ours. Now make us another who is strong enough to withstand him." The goddess Aruru heard the cries of the people of Uruk, and out of clay she fashioned a wild man named Enkidu.

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Tablet One: The Creation of Gilgamesh and Enkidu

Enkidu's hair was long and matted; he grazed on the grasslands with the gazelles and joined the animals at the watering hole. A trapper and his son saw Enkidu among the animals and saw how he scared the creatures away from their traps. They thought of Gilgamesh and how he and this wild man might oppose each other. "Set both of them against each other," the trapper reasoned, "and my son and I can live in peace." So the father sent his son to consult with Gilgamesh in Uruk. Gilgamesh summoned Shamhat, a woman of the temple, so that she could return with the trapper's son and ensnare Enkidu. When Shamhat saw Enkidu at the watering hole, she tricked him into staying with her for seven days. After seven days, Enkidu sought the company of the animals once again, but now they fled from him. Shamhat counseled Enkidu: "Come with me to strong-walled Uruk, where Gilgamesh rules, like a wild bull. None can withstand him." Enkidu, longing for an equal and a companion, said, "Take me to strong-walled Uruk, where Gilgamesh rules like a wild bull. I will challenge him and say, 'I am the strongest of all.'" "Come with me to Uruk," said Shamhat. "Gilgamesh has already dreamed about you. Gilgamesh awoke one morning and told his mother, Ninsun, 'I dreamed that a star from heaven fell on the plain outside Uruk. And I dreamed that I could not lift it, but I was drawn to it as if to a woman.' And Ninsun said, 'the star that fell from heaven, the star you could not lift, the star you were drawn to like a woman, is your companion, a brother who will never forsake you.' 'Let it be so,' said Gilgamesh."

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Tablet Two: Enkidu and Gilgamesh meet, fight, and become friends; Gilgamesh invites Enkidu on a journey

On their way to Uruk, Shamhat and Enkidu came to a shepherd's camp. There Shamhat clothed Enkidu and taught him how to eat bread and drink ale. The shepherds remarked how like he was to Gilgamesh in strength and stature, how like a star fallen from the heavens. A traveler stopped at the camp, on his way to a wedding feast in Uruk, and complained bitterly that Gilgamesh would ravish the bride first. Angered, Enkidu proclaimed, "I will go to Uruk. I will challenge Gilgamesh."

When Enkidu arrived in Uruk, the people whispered, "This is the wild man. He is the only one who can stop Gilgamesh." The traveler's bridal bed was prepared. When Gilgamesh arrived to take the bride, Enkidu stood in his way. Like two bulls they fought. The door post splintered. The walls shook. The floor trembled. Gilgamesh wrestled Enkidu to the ground. "You are the strongest," Enkidu gasped. Then the two embraced. "This is the star that fell from the heavens," said Ninsun, "the companion who will never forsake you."

Then an idea came to Gilgamesh. "I need to increase my fame. I will obtain wood from the distant cedar forest. Come with me. The god Enlil has made the monster Humbaba the guardian of the cedar forest. It is written that I must slay this demon." "The cedar forest is sacred to Enlil," replied Enkidu. "Humbaba's voice is like the roar of the Flood, his breath is like deathly fire. Who would risk his wrath?" "Has your strength left you, Enkidu? Even lions were once afraid of you. No man can live forever. If I die in this battle, at least my children will be able to say that I fought Humbaba."

Gilgamesh sought the blessings of the elders of Uruk, who echoed, "Humbaba's voice is like the roar of the Flood, his breath is like deathly fire. Who would risk his wrath?"

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Tablet Three: Preparations for the journey to the Cedar Forest

Gilgamesh scorned the fearful elders and ordered armor to be made for himself and Enkidu. Gilgamesh sought the blessings of his mother Ninsun. "I do not know the road I am about to travel or the kind of battle I am about to fight," he admitted. Ninsun implored Shamash, the sun god, "Why did you give my son a restless heart? Do not desert him during the dark of night." She embraced Enkidu: "You are my son now too. Bring my son back to me."

"Gilgamesh, Enkidu knows the wild places," the elders added. "Let Enkidu be your guide." Enkidu agreed. "Since your mind is set, I know the way. I will go with you and be your guide." "We cannot sit at home for the rest of our days," Gilgamesh concluded. "This is my destiny. Standing together, we two can prevail."

Tablet Four: The Journey to the Cedar Forest

Gilgamesh and Enkidu set out for the cedar forest atop Mount Lebanon. They traveled fifty leagues a day, resting only at nightfall as the dark and wooded mountain loomed ahead. Each night they dug a well and prepared a shelter against the wind. They sacrificed grain to the Dream god, and Enkidu kept watch while Gilgamesh slept. Each night, Gilgamesh dreamt: He dreamt of a huge mountain falling, of a fearsome bull bellowing, of a wild storm crashing, of a fierce eagle soaring. Each night, Enkidu interpreted the dream: "Shamash the sun will shine upon you, and you will slay Humbaba. Standing together, we two will prevail." When they arrived at the dark forest, Gilgamesh fell asleep once more. "Awake," urged Shamash. "Hurry." "Take my hand, friend," said Gilgamesh. "Shamash, protect us. Our names will be remembered for generations." The two companions gazed silently at the path before them.

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Tablet Five: The Battle with Humbaba

The cedar forest stood ahead, cool, green, and fragrant. Gilgamesh and Enkidu entered; they felled a cedar tree with their axes. "Who has entered my forest?" roared Humbaba. In a swirl of confusion, the demon surrounded them, changing faces, changing places, now here, now there. The heroes were frightened. "The forest is dark," trembled Enkidu. "Shamash the sun has abandoned us." "Standing together, we two can prevail," countered Gilgamesh. "All men must die, but I am not ready to die yet. Shamash, protect us." Rallying, Enkidu responded, "Attack, son of Uruk."

Shamash heard the prayers of the two heroes and sent seven winds to buffet Humbaba, winds from the North, South, East and West, frost-winds, fire-winds, whirlwinds. Humbaba could not move. "Enkidu, I knew you in the wild. Tell Gilgamesh to spare my life. I will serve you, Son of Uruk. The cedar forest will be yours." "Do not listen to this demon, Gilgamesh," said Enkidu. "He will block your way back to Uruk. He will rob you of your fame." Humbaba cursed Enkidu. "Neither of you will grow old; Gilgamesh will bury you." But Gilgamesh struck the monster, cutting off his head.

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Tablet Six: Gilgamesh, Ishtar, and the Bull of Heaven

Gilgamesh and Enkidu returned, triumphant, to the city of Uruk. Gilgamesh washed and perfumed his hair, put on his purple cloak and his crown. And the goddess Ishtar was stunned by his beauty. "Be my bridegroom, Gilgamesh," she begged, on fire with longing. "I will give you riches in abundance, chariots of lapis lazuli with wheels of gold. Princes will kneel to you; kings will send you tribute from far and wide." "You are the Queen of Love. What can I give you?" Gilgamesh replied. "My mother did not raise a broken-winged bird; you will use and discard me as you have all of your lovers."

Furious, Ishtar went to heaven, to complain to her father Anu that Gilgamesh had insulted her. Anu shrugged. "Maybe you gave him reason, daughter." "Give me the Bull of Heaven, father," she insisted. "I want to trample Gilgamesh, the arrogant one." "The Bull of Heaven will not only trample Gilgamesh," warned Anu. "The city of Uruk will suffer seven years of drought." Ishtar assured her father that she would prepare the city for the coming drought, so Anu released the Bull of Heaven to his angry daughter.

With each stamp of the huge bull's hoof, the ground in Uruk opened up, swallowing its people. "I'll grab him by the tail," called Enkidu to Gilgamesh. "You slit his throat. Standing together, we two can prevail." And so the two heroes slew the Bull of Heaven. Ishtar stood on the walls of Uruk, wailing, "Gilgamesh has killed the Bull of Heaven." Enkidu cut off one of the bull's haunches and threw it with contempt toward Ishtar. "I would do the same to you." "I am the strongest here," Gilgamesh exulted, and the people of Uruk rejoiced with their king. But that night, Enkidu had a foreboding dream.

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Tablet Seven: The Death of Enkidu

This was Enkidu's dream: The gods of the heavens held a council. Anu and Enlil blamed Shamash the Sun. "You helped Gilgamesh, and he killed Humbaba, guardian of my cedar forest," claimed Enlil, the ruler of the earth. "And now he has killed my Bull of Heaven," added Anu, father of the gods. "One of these two must die." "Let it be Enkidu," Enlil decreed.

Enkidu began to waste away. Neither brother wanted to lose the other. Enkidu cursed the trapper who found him, and Shamhat who seduced him. But Shamash reminded him. "Did Shamhat not bring you to Uruk? Did she not lead you to Gilgamesh? To Gilgamesh--a king without rival and your friend." Enkidu grew calm, but his sleep was troubled. In his dreams, he journeyed to the dark Underworld, to the House of Dust. Day after day, he withered. On the twelfth day, he begged Gilgamesh: "Do not forget how we stood together. Alas, I do not die in battle. I am cursed. Who will remember my name?"

Tablet Eight: The Lament of Gilgamesh

Gilgamesh pulled the veil over the face of his friend. The King of Uruk raised this lament: "Enkidu, may the gazelles of the grassland mourn you, and the animals at the watering hole. May the path that winds through the cedar forest mourn you, by day and by night. May the elders of strong-walled Uruk mourn you. May Shamhat mourn you in the Temple of Ishtar. Hear me: The young men, who cheered for us, weep for you now. The rivers weep for you, and the mountains too." Gilgamesh tore at his hair and his clothing. Grave goods he gathered-- sheathed in precious ivory, gold, and lapis lazuli--to accompany his friend to the Underworld.

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Tablet Nine: Gilgamesh Journeys through the Mountains

Gilgamesh wandered the wild plains outside the walls of Uruk. Howling his grief, he chased the wind and would not be comforted. "Where are you going?" asked Shamash. Gilgamesh replied, "How can I rest? I am stalked by death. Alone, I can never prevail. I must find Uta-napishti, he who survived the Flood. Only Uta-napishti can tell me how to escape death."

Gilgamesh resolved to find Uta-napishti. After a long and wearisome journey, he finally arrived at the great mountains where the sun rises and sets. Two scorpions guarded the mountain pass. With a terrible gaze, they doled out death. And yet, Gilgamesh mustered his courage and walked toward them. "Only a god would dare approach us," said one of the scorpions. "Two thirds god," corrected the other. "One third man." "Why have you traveled so far," demanded the first scorpion. "I need to question Uta-napishti about the secret of life and death," answered Gilgamesh. "No mortal has ever crossed these mountains," warned the scorpions. "No light shines within them, and the darkness is dense." "I must cross these mountains. Let me pass," the king replied. The scorpions stepped aside. "You may go, Gilgamesh. May the mountains allow you to pass safely."

Gilgamesh entered the mountain pass alone. Utter darkness pressed him from all sides. He traveled many long and weary leagues alone in profound darkness. "If I had a companion," he muttered. "We two . . ." But darkness swallowed his words, and still he pressed on blindly. At ten leagues, the blessed wind played over his face. At eleven leagues, welcome dawn streaked the horizon. At twelve leagues, the sun finally rose on a glistening garden. Beyond the garden stretched the sea.

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Tablet Ten: Gilgamesh Travels to Find Uta-napishti

Siduri the tavern keeper lived by the sea. She had seen Gilgamesh from a distance, his face etched in sorrow, despair in his heart. Fearful, she barred her gate against him. But Gilgamesh begged entry, insisting, "I am Gilgamesh, King of Uruk--He who killed Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven." "If you are Gilgamesh, slayer of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, why are your cheeks so hollow and your clothing so wild?" Siduri retorted. "Why shouldn't I have hollow cheeks? I grieve for Enkidu, my companion. Death has stalked every step of my long journey." Siduri spoke softly: "Gilgamesh, did you not know that all men must die? The gods keep immortality for themselves. Wash yourself, put on new clothes. Fill your stomach with good food and fine wine. Hold your wife and your child. Cherish the life you have."

Silencing the tavern keeper, Gilgamesh insisted, "I must cross the ocean to find Uta-napishti." "Only Shamash the Sun can cross the ocean," said Siduri. "The waters of death are treacherous. And once you have crossed the ocean, what will you do then? Ah, Gilgamesh. Uta-napishti has a boatman named Urshanabi. Seek him down by the water. Let him see your sorrow-etched face. Maybe he will ferry you across the waters. If he won't, then you must go back."

Enraged, Gilgamesh crept down to the water and took an axe to the boat rigging. "Who are you," shouted Urshanabi? "I am Gilgamesh, the King of Uruk." "Why are your cheeks so hollow?" asked Urshanabi, "and your heart so heavy?" "My cheeks are hollow and my heart is heavy because my brother is dead. Enkidu, my beloved companion, is dead. And I am tormented by one question: Must I die too? I have journeyed this long way to find Uta-napishti and to learn the secret of life and death." Pointing to the broken rigging, Urshanabi explained that Gilgamesh had destroyed the only way across the ocean. But together, they fashioned poles to ferry across the waters of death.

The old man Uta-napishti saw them from a distance and wondered who could be traveling with Urshanabi, his face etched in sorrow, despair in his heart. Disembarking, Gilgamesh told Uta-napishti his story--how he and Enkidu became companions and vanquished many a foe together, how Enkidu had angered Ishtar and died, how he, Gilgamesh, King of Uruk, had journeyed through the dark mountains to Siduri's tavern, how Urshanabi had taken pity on him and ferried him across the waters of death.

"Ah Gilgamesh," sighed Uta-napishti. "Stop chasing sorrow. Death takes all--the handsome young man and the old one as well. But no one sees the face of Death or hears his voice. Life and death the gods have established."

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Tablet Eleven: Uta-napishti Tells Gilgamesh the Story of the Flood

“How are you different?” challenged Gilgamesh. “Why did the gods grant you immortality?” So Uta-napishti told this story: “A long time ago, the gods lived in the city of Shuruppak, on the banks of the Euphrates river. But they left the city because it grew too crowded and too noisy. The gods decided to send a Flood to destroy the city. But Ea, the ocean god, whispered their plans to me. Ea told me to build a boat and gave me the dimensions. I followed his directions. When the time came, I sealed myself inside my boat, along with everything that I owned and all my household people. Adad the Storm God came riding on a black cloud, stirring up a terrible storm. For six days and six nights, the storm raged, and the flood waters swept my boat away. On the seventh day, the storm calmed, and my boat grounded on the top of a mountain. The waters stretched endlessly all around us. I set loose a bird and it returned, for there was no place to land. I kept sending out birds until one did not return, for it had found dry land. I sacrificed to the gods, but Enlil, ruler of the earth, was angry. ‘How is it that this man survived?’ Ea defended me, but Enlil condemned me and my wife to live forever in this faraway place.”

“If you think you deserve immortality,” said Uta-napishti to Gilgamesh, “let’s see if you can stay awake for a week.” But as soon as Gilgamesh sat down, sleep crept over him like a fog. The wife of Uta-napishti baked a loaf of bread for every day that Gilgamesh slept, seven in all. Discouraged, Gilgamesh prepared to return to Uruk. As the King and the ferryman were leaving, the wife of Uta-napishti said, “Gilgamesh journeyed a long and weary distance to find you. Can’t you give him something to take back with him.” Uta-napishti told Gilgamesh how to dive under the water to find a plant that would restore his youth, and Gilgamesh was able to find the plant. However, on the way back to Uruk, Gilgamesh rested, soaking his feet in a cool pond. A snake slithered out and stole the plant. Gilgamesh wept. “Oh, Urshanabi, for all my labors I have achieved nothing.”

When Gilgamesh and Urshanabi arrived back in Uruk, Gilgamesh showed Urshanabi the city he had built. He and Urshanabi climbed the city walls, examined their foundations, and marveled at their brickwork. Weary from journeying, Gilgamesh the King surveyed his city and inscribed his story.

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Tablet Twelve: Epilogue–Gilgamesh Speaks to the Shade of Enkidu

Enkidu asked Gilgamesh, “Why do you weep? What have you lost? I will go down to the Underworld for you.” “Don’t wear new clothes,” warned Gilgamesh, “for they will know you are a stranger there.” Enkidu ignored Gilgamesh’s instructions, and the gods of the Underworld knew Enkidu was a stranger and kept him there. Enlil would not help bring him back, but Shamash the Sun opened a hole in the roof of the Underworld and the spirit of Enkidu floated up. Enkidu and Gilgamesh tried to clasp each other. “Tell me what the Underworld is like,” pressed Gilgamesh. “I cannot tell you,” Enkidu replied, “for you will weep. The body that you loved to hold is rotting there now.” Horrified, Gilgamesh asked about this person or that. “Have you seen the man who died suddenly? The famous warrior? The unburied corpse?” Enkidu had seen them all. “How about the man who had no one to mourn for him?” “No dog would eat the scraps that the unmourned man must eat.”