

GILGAMESH

The Oldest Story in the World

Instructors Note: This presentation is secular.

Gilgamesh

- Note: Readings in the Slides refer to *Gilgamesh: A New English Version*. Translator Stephen Mitchell. 2004 The Free Press: A Division of Simon and Schuster. ISBN-13978-0-7432-6169-2(Pbk)



Deep Roots

- Neanderthal graves containing weapons, tools and the bones of a sacrificed animal suggest they had some kind of belief in a future world similar to their own.
- Humans are meaning, sensing creatures. They have invented stories that enabled us to place our lives in a larger setting.
- The human mind has the ability to have ideas and experiences that we cannot explain rationally.



Deep Roots 2

- Imagination produces mythology and religion, to invent new technology and to live more intensively in this world.
- Neanderthal graves tell us important things about myth. Myths are nearly always rooted in the experience of death and the fear of extinction.
- Burial was accompanied by sacrifice. Mythology is usually inseparable from ritual.

Deep Roots 3

- Myth is about the unknown. The most powerful myths force us to go beyond the limits of human experience.
- Myth is not a story told for its own sake. It shows us how we should behave.
- A belief in the invisible but more powerful reality, sometimes called the world of the gods, is a basic theme.



Gilgamesh

The Oldest Story in the World

- The world was starting to change from hunting and gathering to cultivated agriculture.
- Population gains depleted game, people learned how to irrigate, to plant seeds of grain and how to avoid starvation by storing harvested crops.

Gilgamesh Story

- The Epic of Gilgamesh is an **ancient poem** from Mesopotamia (present day Iraq) and is **among the earliest known works of literature**. It is a **thousand years older than the *Iliad* or the *Bible***.
- It likely originated as a **series of Sumerian legends and poems** about the hero king, which were fashioned into a longer Akkadian epic much later.

Gilgamesh Tablets

- The **earliest Sumerian Gilgamesh poems** are now considered to be **distinct stories** rather than constituting a single epic. They date from the Third Dynasty of Ur (**2150-2000 BCE**).
- The earliest Akkadian versions of Gilgamesh are dated to the early 2nd millennium, most likely in the 18th or 17th century BCE, when one or more scholars used existing library material to form the epic.
- The “**standard**” **Akkaidian version** consisting of **12 tablets** was edited by **Sin-liqe-unninni** sometime between **1300 and 1000 BCE**.

Gilgamesh Tablets 2

- As of now, with 73 fragments discovered, slightly fewer than **2,000 of the 3,000 lines** of the original text exist in readable, continuous form; the rest are damaged or missing, and there are many gaps in the sections that survived.
- The tablets were found in the ruins of the **library of Ashurbanipal**, last great king of the Neo-Assyrian Empire, 668 – ca. 627 BCE in Nineveh. Ashurbanipal established the first systematically organized library in the ancient Middle East.

Gilgamesh Tablets 3

- The library yielded tens of thousands of clay tablets that had been buried for 2000 years until their discovery in 1844 in Mosul, Iraq the site of the ancient city of Nineveh, capital of Assyria.

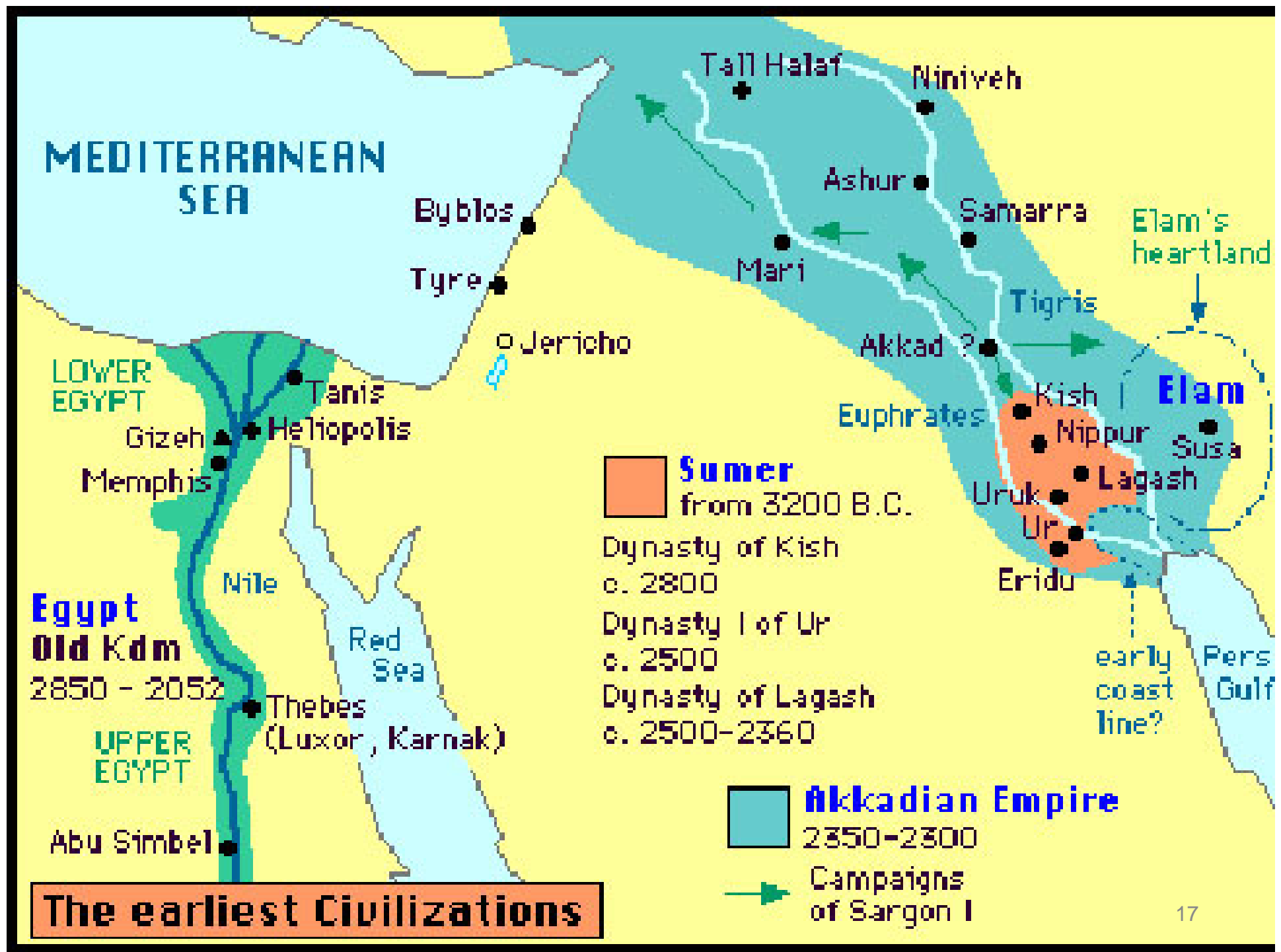
Gilgamesh Story

- The **semi-mythical king or king-priest Gilgamesh**, according to the chronology presented in the Sumerian king list, ruled Sumer from it's capital Uruk in the 26th century BCE.
- Uruk, which saw a swift change from a small agricultural village (4000-3200 BCE to a **larger urban center** with a full time bureaucracy, military and stratified society.



Uruk

- Uruk was located in the alluvial plain area of southern Mesopotamia.
- Through the gradual and eventual domestication of native grains from the **Zagros foothills** and extensive **irrigation techniques**, the area supported a vast variety of edible vegetation.





Garden of Eden

- **The Eden motif itself, and the biblical tale of the flood** date back at least to the civilization of Sumer and perhaps **5000 to 6000 BCE**. *Edin* is the Sumerian word for an uncultivated plain, and simply describes lowland geography like the present-day southeast Iraq where the Tigris and Euphrates meet. Professor Zarins and other experts believe that the **Garden of Eden lies presently under the waters of the Persian Gulf**, and they further believe that the story of Adam and Eve in—and especially *out*—of the Garden of Eden is a highly condensed and evocative account of the **shift from hunting and gathering to agriculture**.

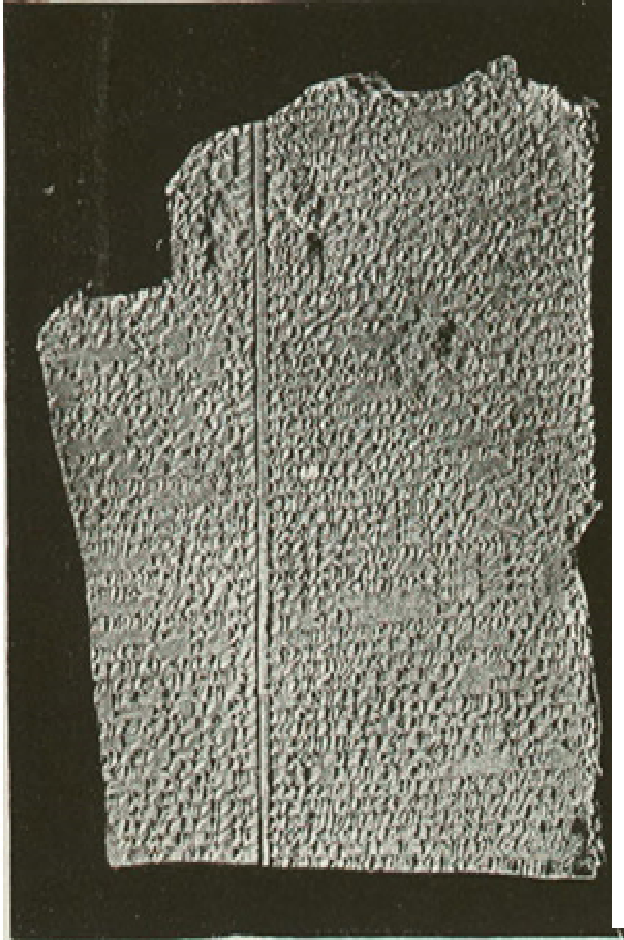
Uruk 2

- Evidence from excavations including extensive **pottery** and the earliest known tablets of **writing** support Uruk as a center of **agricultural surplus, trade**, specialization of crafts and the **evolution of writing**.
- At its height c. 2900 BCE, Uruk probably had **50,000 to 80,000 residents** living in four square miles of walled area, the **largest city in the world at the time**.

Cuneiform Script

- The earliest known writing system in the world.
- **Cuneiform writing** emerged in the Sumerian civilization of southern Iraq around **34th century BCE** during the middle Uruk period, beginning as a pictographic system of writing.
- Clay tokens had been used for some form of record-keeping in Mesopotamia since perhaps as early as c. 8,000 BCE, according to some estimates. Cuneiform documents were written on clay tablets, by means of a **reed stylus**.

Cuneiform script



Epic Poetry, Ancient Mesopotamia

- Epic poetry is a lengthy narrative poem concerning details of heroic deeds and events significant to a culture or nation.
- **Oral poetry** can qualify and makes it feasible to remember and pass along mythologies and stories from generation to generation.

Gilgamesh: The Story

- The story revolves around a relationship between **Gilgamesh** and his close companion, **Enkidu**.
- Enkidu is a wild man created by the gods as Gilgamesh's equal to distract him from oppressing the citizens of Uruk.
- Together they undertake **dangerous quests** that incur the displeasure of the gods.

Gilgamesh: The Story 2

- First, they journey to the **Cedar Mountain to defeat Humbaba**, its monstrous guardian. They **kill Humbaba, against the will of the gods.**
- Later they kill the **Bull of Heaven** that the goddess Ishtar has sent to punish Gilgamesh for spurning her advances.
- The latter part of the epic focuses on Gilgamesh's distressed reaction to **Enkidu's death**, which takes the form of a **quest for immortality.**

Gilgamesh: The Story 3

- Gilgamesh attempts to learn the **secret of eternal life** by undertaking a long and perilous journey to meet the immortal flood hero Utnapishtim.
- Ultimately the poignant words addressed to Gilgamesh in the midst of his quest foreshadow the end result: “**That life that you are seeking you will never find.** When the gods created man they allocated to him death, but eternal life they retained for their own keeping.”

Prologue

- The prologue written by “**Sin-liqe-unninni**” tells of a hero’s journey with its huge uninhibited mythic presences moving through a landscape of dream.
- Gilgamesh shows how a man becomes civilized, how he learns to rule himself and therefore his people and to act with temperance, wisdom and piety.
- The poem begins with the city and ends with it.

He had seen everything, had experienced all emotions, from exaltation to despair, had been granted a vision into the great mystery, the secret places, the primeval days before the Flood. He had journeyed to the edge of the world and made his way back, exhausted but whole. He had carved his trials on stone tablets, had restored the holy Eanna Temple and the massive wall of Uruk, which no city on earth can equal. See how its ramparts gleam like copper in the sun. Climb the stone staircase, more ancient than the mind can imagine, approach the Eanna Temple, sacred to Ishtar, a temple that no king has equaled in size or beauty, walk on the wall of Uruk, follow its course around the city, inspect its mighty foundations, examine its brickwork, how masterfully it is built,

observe the land it encloses: the palm trees, the gardens, the orchards, the glorious palaces and temples, the shops and marketplaces, the houses, the public squares. Find the cornerstone and under it the copper box that is marked with his name. Unlock it. Open the lid. Take out the tablet of lapis lazuli. Read how Gilgamesh suffered all and accomplished all.

Book I

- Surpassing all kings, powerful and tall...
- Two thirds divine, one third human
- **But to begin with, he is manic and a tyrant**
- **He oppresses young men**, perhaps with forced labor or military service

Book I Continued

- **Oppresses the young women**, perhaps with his ravenous sexual appetite.
- Because he is an **absolute monarch**, no one dares to criticize him.
- **Gilgamesh**, the man of unsurpassable courage and inexhaustible energy, has become a **monster of selfishness**.



The people call out to heaven and their
cry is heard

- Anu, father of the gods, asks the great mother goddess Aruru to reenact her first creation of human beings:

“Now go and create a double for
Gilgamesh, his second self,
a man who equals his strength and
courage,

Aruru Creates Enkidu

a man who equals his stormy heart,
Create a new hero, let them balance
each other perfectly, so that Uruk has
peace.”

- Thus begins—a thousand years before Achilles and Patroclus,—**the first great friendship in literature.**
- Aruru creates a man, a warrior, a hero; Enkidu the brave and fierce, friend of the animals.



The Trapper Complains

- A trapper complains to Gilgamesh about the wild man, Enkidu who lives among the animals, eats grass with the gazelles, and when he is thirsty he drinks clear water from the waterholes.

Enkidu

- Where Gilgamesh is arrogant, Enkidu is childlike; where Gilgamesh is violent, Enkidu is peaceful, a naked herbivore among the herds.
- He is the original animal activist, setting his animal friends free from human pits and traps.

**The king said, "Go to the temple of Ishtar,
ask them there for a woman named Shamhat,
one of the priestesses who give their bodies
to any man, in honor of the goddess.
Take her into the wilderness.
When the animals are drinking at the waterhole,
tell her to strip off her robe and lie there
naked, ready, with her legs apart.
The wild man will approach. Let her use her love-arts.
Nature will take its course, and then
the animals who knew him in the wilderness
will be bewildered, and will leave him forever. The trapper
found Shamhat Ishtar's priestess, and they went off into
the wilderness.**

Shamhat

- Shamhat, Ishtar's priestess, leads Enkidu into the glories of sexuality, the intimate understanding of what a woman is and self-awareness as a human being.
- There is no serpent in this garden, no anxious deity announcing prohibitions and punishments.

Enkidu

- In knowing Shamhat sexually, his mind has been enlarged, he has begun to know himself.
- He can understand human language; Shamhat gives him human clothing, teaches him to eat human food, acts as a patient, loving mother and guides him through rites of passage.

Shamhat and Enkidu

- Shamhat: “Let me take you to great – walled Uruk, to the temple of Ishtar, to the palace of Gilgamesh the mighty king, who in his arrogance oppresses the people trampling upon them like a wild bull.”

She finished, and Enkidu nodded his head. Deep in his heart he felt something stir, a longing he had never known before, the longing for a true friend. Enkidu said, "I will go, Shamhat. Take me with you to great-walled Uruk, to the temple of Ishtar, to the palace of Gilgamesh the mighty king. I will challenge him. I will shout to his face: I am the mightiest! I am the man who can make the world tremble! I am supreme!

Book II

- Enkidu and Shamhat travel to Uruk.
- **Enkidu's heart sang** with joy and he became fully human. **He had his hair cut.**
- Enkidu meets a man who was on his way to a wedding.
- The man indicates the priest will bless the young couple, but Enkidu learns it is **Gilgamesh, king of the great-walled city** Uruk who **mates first with the lawful wife**. This is the order the gods have decreed.

Book II continued

- **Enkidu's face went pale with anger. I will challenge him!**
- He stood like a boulder at the door of the bride. **Gilgamesh and Enkidu fought like wild bulls**, doorposts trembled, they careened through the streets.
- Finally **Gilgamesh threw the wild man** and with his right knee pinned him to the ground. Gilgamesh's **anger left him.**

Book II Continued 3

- Enkidu said to Gilgamesh: “Your mother, the goddess Ninsun, made you stronger and braver than any mortal. You are destined to rule over men.”

They embraced and kissed. They held hands like brothers.

They walked side by side. They became true friends.

Book II Continued 4

- **Gilgamesh knows that what he dreamed has come true.**
- **The dear friend and mighty hero has appeared, the longed for companion of his heart, the man who will stand at his side through the greatest dangers.**

Books III to V

- **Time passed quickly.**
- Gilgamesh and Enkidu became true friends.
- **Uruk can have peace.** The sons can return to their fathers, the young women can return to their mothers. For the time being, **all's right with the world.**

Books III to V

- **Out of the blue, Gilgamesh says
“Now we must travel to the Cedar
Forest,
where the fierce monster Humbaba
lives.
We must kill him and drive evil from
the world.”**

Books III to V

- Thus begins the fatal adventure that provides the shape for the rest of the epic: an **ascent to an ambiguous victory**, followed by a **plunge into death**, **unassuageable grief**, and the **futile search for immortality**.
- We do not know the reason for the preemptive attack.

Books III to V

- Ancient readers, like many contemporary Americans, would have considered it to be unquestionably heroic.

**We are not gods, we cannot ascend
to heaven. No, we are mortal men.
Only the gods live forever. *Our* days
are few in number, and whatever we achieve ^A is
a puff of wind. Why be afraid then,
since sooner or later death must come? * Where
is the courage you have always had?**

Fame and Legacy

- But the poem leaves us with no moral certainties or solid ground to stand on.
- **The desire for fame** is at the heart of the ancient heroic traditions, Babylonian, Greek, Germanic. It is one of the nobler delusions, and it can produce great art—and great havoc.

Fame and Legacy 2

- Human nature hasn't changed much from Gilgamesh—or Enkidu to the current time.
- The poet makes it impossible to see Humbaba as a threat to the security of Uruk or as part of any “axis of evil.”
- It is all too easy to see ourselves fighting on the side of the gods and to justify preemptive attacks.

Fame and Legacy 3

- **Projecting evil onto the world makes me unassailably right**—a position as dangerous in politics as in marriage.
- The goddess Ninsun mentions Gilgamesh's **“restless heart.”** What Pascal, 17th century French mathematician and philosopher, called the cause of all human misery: **The inability to sit contentedly alone in a room.**

Fame and Legacy 4

- Book IV. They walk east, in three-day marches. It is no disgrace to feel fear. Gilgamesh is frozen in his tracks but Enkidu urges him not to retreat and **they walk on to the monster's den** in the Cedar Forest..
- Book V. The battle is over quickly. Humbaba is about to overwhelm the two heroes.



Fame and Legacy 5

- Shamash, the sun god and god of justice, sends mighty winds that pin Humbaba down and paralyze him. Shamash wants Humbaba defeated but not destroyed.
- **Humbaba begs both heroes for mercy.** Gilgamesh hesitates; Enkidu has no doubts, even though he is aware that killing Humbaba will enrage not only Enlil, chief deity, Lord of the Open, Lord of the Wind, but their own protector Shamash as well.

Enkidu said:

“Dear friend, quickly before another moment goes by, kill Humbaba, don’t listen to his words, don’t hesitate, slaughter him, slit his throat, before the great god Enlil can stop us.

Before the great gods can get enraged, Enlil in Nipper, Shamash in Larsa. Establish your fame, so that forever men will speak of brave Gilgamesh, who killed Humbaba in the Cedar Forest.”

Fame and Legacy 6

- Enkidu is morally responsible for persuading his friend not to spare the monster's life; therefore his own life becomes forfeit.
- When Gilgamesh kills Humbaba, the poet says, **“a gentle rain falls unto the mountains, as if the heavens themselves are weeping for the consequences of that act.”**

Book VII

Death and Departure

- Enkidu dream one, they have offended the gods, one must die.
- Enkidu Page 141-142

**Beloved brother," Enkidu said,
"last night I had a terrifying dream.
I dreamed that we had offended the gods,
they met in council and Anu said,
'They have slaughtered the Bull of Heaven and killed
Humbaba, watchman of the Cedar Forest.
Therefore one of the two must die/
Then Enlil said to him, 'Enkidu,
not Gilgamesh, is the one who must die/ "**

**Enkidu fell sick. He lay on his bed, sick at heart, and his
tears flowed like streams. He said to Gilgamesh, "Dear
friend, dear brother, they are taking me from you. I will
not return. I will sit with the dead in the underworld,
and never will I see my dear brother again."**

Book VII

Death and Departure

- Enkidu dream two, how Mesopotamians imagine the dead.
- The day that Enkidu had his dreams, his strength began failing. For twelve long days he was deathly sick.
- When he heard the death rattle, Gilgamesh wept.

Book VIII Grief

- Gilgamesh's lament:
 - "My beloved friend is dead, he is dead, my beloved brother is dead, I will mourn as long as I breathe, I will sob for him like a woman who has lost her only child.
 - Beloved friend, swift stallion, wild deer, leopard ranging in the wilderness— together we crossed the mountains, together we slaughtered the Bull of Heaven, we killed Humbaba, who guarded the Cedar Forest."

Book VIII Grief

- Gilgamesh as a great warrior has seen and caused many deaths. But now for the first time, death is an intimate reality, and he can barely recognize it.

Gilgamesh and Grief

- Finally, it's over. He goes through all the **necessary rituals** to ensure that the gods of the underworld will welcome Enkidu and help him to “**be peaceful and not sick at heart.**”
- This is poor comfort. So abandoning all his privileges and responsibilities, Gilgamesh **puts on an animal skin and leaves the city.** He feels compelled, like Buddha, to search for the secret of life and death.

Searching

- He searches for Utnapishtim, whom the gods made immortal. At the edge of the ocean after days of hardship and roaming the tavern keeper Shirduri advises that he will never find the eternal life. Page 168-169

**Enkidu, my brother, whom I loved so dearly, who
accompanied me through every danger the fate of
mankind has overwhelmed him. For six days I would
not let him be buried, thinking, 'If my grief is violent
enough, perhaps he will come back to life again/
For six days and seven nights I mourned him,
until a maggot fell out of his nose. Then I was
frightened, I was terrified by death, and I set out to
roam the wilderness. I cannot bear what happened
to my friend— I cannot bear what happened to
Enkidu— so I roam the wilderness in my grief. How
can my mind have any rest?
My beloved friend has turned into clay--
My beloved enkidu has turned into clay. And won't I
too lie down in the dirt like him, and never rise
again?"**

But until the end comes, enjoy your life, spend it in happiness, not despair. Savor your food, make each of your days a delight, bathe and anoint yourself, wear bright clothes that are sparkling clean, let music and dancing fill your house, love the child who holds you by the hand, and your wife pleasure in your embrace. That is the best way for a man to live.

Book IX Gilgamesh Searching

- Fear is the reverse of the cool warrior ethos. **“Our days are few in number,” Gilgamesh had said, imperturbably. “Why be afraid then, / since sooner or later death must come?” Why indeed?**
- Love has changed everything; it has made Gilgamesh absolutely vulnerable. He thought he knew that only the gods live forever.
- **“Must I die too?”**

Book X Gilgamesh Searching

- Gilgamesh wants **to find one exception to the rule of mortality**, his ancestor Utnapishtim, who joined the assembly of the gods and was granted eternal life and dwells somewhere at the edge of the eastern world. There may be a second exception.
- A long run through 12 hours of darkness.
- He is standing face to face with the man who is his last hope. The old and wise Utnapishtim listens and says:



**"Yes: the gods took Enkidu's life.
But man's life *is* short, at any moment
it can be snapped, like a reed in a canebrake.
The handsome young man, the lovely young woman-
in their prime, death comes and drags them away
Though no one has seen death's face or heard
death's voice, suddenly, savagely, death
destroys us, all of us, old or young.
And yet we build houses, make contracts, brothers
divide their inheritance, conflicts occur—
as though this human life lasted forever.
The river rises, flows over its banks
and carries us all away, like mayflies
floating downstream: they stare at the sun,
then all at once there is nothing.**

XI. When there is no way out, you just follow the way in front of you

- The wise man says Gilgamesh should realize how fortunate he is, that **life is short and death is final. Accept things as they are.**
- But we can't accept things as they are, so long as we think things should be different.
- But author Mitchell suggests, "There is **no consolation in platitudes**, and for Utnapishtim to tell Gilgamesh that he is going to die seems as tactless as it was for St. Paul to tell the Thessalonians that they were not going to die."

When there is no way out 2

- Utnapishtim proposes a test. If Gilgamesh can overcome sleep for seven days—sleep being the likeness of death—perhaps he will be able to overcome death, too. But Utnapishtim knows from the start that Gilgamesh, “**worn out and ready to collapse,**” will fail the test and indeed he does.
- Gilgamesh sat there, with his chin on his knees, and **sleep overcame him, as it does all men.**

When there is no way out 3

- Gilgamesh recognizes his failure on the test.
 - “What shall I do, where shall I go now?
Death has caught me, it lurks in my
bedroom, and everywhere I look,
everywhere I turn, there is only death?”

A Return to the Beginning

- The opening lines of the poem point us: It is clear that Gilgamesh has completed the final stage of the archetypal hero's journey, in which the hero gives new life to his community, returning to them with the gifts he has discovered on his adventure.

A Return to the Beginning 2

“He brought back the ancient forgotten rites, restoring the temples that the flood had destroyed.

Renewing the statutes and the sacraments for the welfare of the people and the sacred land.”

A Return to the Beginning 3

- We know that for the first time he is acting as a responsible, compassionate king, a benefactor to his people and their descendants.
- Out of the depths, somehow Gilgamesh has managed to “close the gates of sorrow;” he has learned to rule himself and his city without violence, selfishness or the compulsions of restless heart.

A Return to the Beginning 4

- **Gilgamesh has become wise.**
- He has absorbed the deeper wisdom of the poem's narrative voice, a voice that is impartial, humorous, civilized, sexual, irreverent, skeptical of moral absolutes, delighted with the things of this world and supremely confident in the power of its own language.



Book VI

- The mystery of humiliating the goddess – how does it tie to the story.
- Book VI is a separable episode that could be omitted without any loss of continuity. It is a comic interlude, vulgar, high-spirited, irreverent and rambunctious, letting loose energies but with twists and some sense of **put-downs of the feminine** that seems out of context.

Book VI

- Almost all the female characters in *Gilgamesh* are portrayed as admirable: intelligent, generous, compassionate. The one exception is Ishtar, goddess of love and patron deity of Uruk, known in Mesopotamian culture as Inanna, the Queen of Heaven.
- She is rejected, insulted, threatened and humiliated by both Gilgamesh and Enkidu. This is surprising in a poem that mentions her Eanna Temple in Uruk with reverence and makes one of her priestesses, Shamhat, a central character in the initial drama.

Ishtar

- But there is another side. Ishtar is also the goddess of war, and she **can be selfish, arbitrary and brutal.**
- We just do not know why the abusive portrayal of our heroes toward Ishtar. Is it symptomatic of a religious movement among first the Sumerians and later the Babylonians to displace her with a male deity?
- Why the metaphorical insults, the catalogue of several black-widow affairs in which she turned against her lover and harmed him?
- Is Gilgamesh's response a frightened male reaction to a woman who takes the sexual initiative?

Ishtar 2

- Is Ishtar a murderous spoiled brat, exploding with tears of rage and frustration and throwing a tantrum until Anu lends her the Bull of Heaven to kill Gilgamesh and destroy his palace?
- **The Bull of Heaven is the constellation we call Taurus.**
- **Gilgamesh and Enkidu easily kill the Bull of Heaven.**
- Read Page 38, 39 40
- Enkidu rips off one of the Bull's thighs and flings it in Ishtar's face; she has no one to avenge her.





Stephen Mitchell on the Oldest Story in the World

- Mitchell comments “Part of the fascination of *Gilgamesh* is that, like any great work of literature, **it has much to tell us about ourselves.**”
- In giving **voice to grief and the fear of death**, perhaps more powerfully than any book written after it, in portraying love and vulnerability and the quest for wisdom, it has become a personal testimony for millions of readers in dozens of languages.

Stephen Mitchell on the Oldest Story in the World 2

- But it also has a **particular relevance in today's world** with its **polarized fundamentalism**, each side fervently believing in its own righteousness, **each** on a crusade, or **jihad**, **against what it perceives as an evil enemy.**"
- “The hero of this epic is an antihero, a superman (a superpower, one might say) who doesn't know the difference between **strength and arrogance.**

Stephen Mitchell on the Oldest Story in the World 3

- The epic has **extraordinary sophisticated moral intelligence**. In its emphasis on balance and in its **refusal to side with either hero or monster**, it leads us to **question our dangerous certainties about good and evil.**
- “Gilgamesh is a work that in the **intensity of its imagination stands beside the great stories of *Homer* and the *Bible*.**”