



Build Background

What Is *The Epic of Gilgamesh*?

The Epic of Gilgamesh is one of the oldest works of literature in existence. The earliest versions of the story date back over 4,000 years to a time more than 1,000 years before the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* or the first books of the Bible. Yet the story is one that modern readers can understand and enjoy because it deals with concerns that still matter to people today: friendship, heroism, mortality, and the desire to control one's destiny.

Gilgamesh is two parts god and one part human. In the first half of the story, Gilgamesh explores his godlike side. Using superhuman powers, he performs amazing feats and even defies the gods. But along with his extraordinary abilities come extraordinary flaws. Gilgamesh is arrogant, boastful, selfish, and destructive; he represents both the best and the worst that a person can be.

In the second half of the story, Gilgamesh explores the human side of his character as he faces unexpected limitations of his power. These limitations not only show his human weaknesses; they also give him the opportunity to develop human strengths. This part of the epic also contains a flood story remarkably like the one in the Bible.

How the Epic Evolved *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, like most epics, is based to some degree on fact. Scholars believe that Gilgamesh was a Sumerian king who ruled over the city-state of Uruk around 2700 B.C. In the centuries following his death, stories about him circulated orally and tales of his adventures grew. Through this oral tradition of storytelling, Gilgamesh developed over time into a figure of legendary proportions.

The evolution of this oral tradition into the written epic that we have today was the work of nearly 1,000 years. Written stories about Gilgamesh existed in the Sumerian language by 2000 B.C. By then, however, the Sumerians had been invaded and defeated twice, first by the Akkadians and then by the Babylonians. The Babylonians put an end to Sumerian civilization. However, they valued the culture of the Sumerians and integrated it into their own. Using the older culture's cuneiform script, the Babylonians preserved and translated the Gilgamesh texts and continued to develop them. The "standard" version of the epic that we have today was put together and written down by a Babylonian scribe around 1300 B.C.

For a humanities activity, click on:



from The Epic of Gilgamesh

Translated by N. K. Sandars

CHARACTERS AND PLACES IN THE EPIC

- Anu** (ā'nōō): father of the gods, who had an important temple in Uruk
- Anunnaki** (ā-nōō-nā'kē): gods who judge the dead and control destinies
- Belit-Sheri** (bēl'ēt-shēr'ē): scribe and recorder of the underworld gods
- Dilmun** (dīl'mən): a paradise in the world of the gods
- Ea** (ā'ä): god of waters and of wisdom and one of the creators of mankind, toward whom he is usually well-disposed
- Enkidu** (ēn'kē-dōō): Gilgamesh's friend. Molded by Aruru, goddess of creation, out of clay, he is wild or natural man.
- Enlil** (ēn'līl): god of earth, wind, and spirit; carries out tasks for Anu
- Ereshkigal** (ē-rēsh'kē'gäl): queen of the underworld
- Gilgamesh** (gīl'gə-mēsh'): king of Uruk and the hero of the epic
- Irkalla** (īr-kā'lā): another name for Ereshkigal, the queen of the underworld
- Ishtar** (īsh'tär): goddess of love, fertility, and war, called the Queen of Heaven
- Nergal** (nēr'gäl): husband of Ereshkigal and coruler of the underworld
- Ninurta** (nə-nēr'tə): warrior and god of war, wells, and irrigation
- Shamash** (shā'māsh): sun god, judge and giver of laws
- Siduri** (sə-dōō'rē): divine winemaker and brewer, who lives on the shore of the sea in the garden of the sun
- Urshanabi** (ūr'shə-nā'bē): ferryman of Utnapishtim, who sails daily across the waters of death that divide the garden of the sun from the paradise where Utnapishtim lives
- Uruk** (ōō'rōök'): biblical Erech, modern Warka, in southern Babylonia between Fara and Ur; shown by excavation to have been an important city from very early times, with great temples to the gods Anu and Ishtar
- Utnapishtim** (ōōt'nə-pēsh'təm): friend of the god Ea, with whose help he survives the flood, together with his family and with "the seed of all living creatures." He and his wife are the only mortals to be granted the gift of eternal life.



Gilgamesh and Enkidu slaying Humbaba. Photograph courtesy of the Royal Ontario Museum, ©ROM.

GUIDE FOR READING

FOCUS In this section, Enkidu tells Gilgamesh about a dream of a visit to the underworld, the place where people go after they die. As you read, look for passages that help you understand what the ancient Mesopotamians expected the afterlife to be like.

THE DEATH OF ENKIDU

The hero Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, is “two-thirds a god, one-third a man.” In this epic, we see him exploring both sides of his character.

Gilgamesh is first presented as a superhuman ruler who has let his power go to his head. He has begun taking advantage of his subjects rather than taking care of them. The gods hear the people’s complaints and create Enkidu, a “hairy-bodied wild man” equal in strength to Gilgamesh, to fight him. Instead of fighting, however, Enkidu and Gilgamesh become best friends. Together they fight and defeat Humbaba, a monster created by the gods to guard a sacred grove.

After the victory, the goddess Ishtar falls in love with Gilgamesh. When he rejects her, she has her father, Anu, send the Bull of Heaven to punish him. Together, Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the bull. For this and other offenses, the gods decree, one of the two heroes must die. Enkidu, who is not part god, is chosen. Before he dies, Enkidu has a dream of what waits for him in the afterlife.

As Enkidu slept alone in his sickness, in bitterness of spirit he poured out his heart to his friend. “It was I who cut down the cedar, I who leveled the forest, I who slew Humbaba and now see what has become of me. Listen, my friend, this is the dream I dreamed last night. The heavens roared, and earth rumbled back an answer; between them stood I before an awful being, the somber-faced man-bird; he had directed on me his purpose. His was a vampire face, his foot was a lion’s foot, his hand was an eagle’s talon. He fell on me and his claws were in my hair, he held me fast and I smothered; then he transformed me so that my arms became wings covered with feathers. He turned his stare towards me, and led me away to the palace of Irkalla, the Queen of Darkness, to the house from which none who enters ever returns, down the road from which there is no coming back.

“There is the house whose people sit in darkness; dust is their food and clay their meat. They

“THE DREAM WAS
MARVELOUS
BUT THE TERROR WAS
GREAT.”

are clothed like birds with wings for covering, they see no light, they sit in darkness. I entered the house of dust and I saw the kings of the earth, their crowns put away for ever; rulers and princes, all those who once wore kingly crowns and ruled the world in the days of old. They who had stood in the place of the gods like Anu and Enlil, stood now like servants to fetch baked meats in the house of dust, to carry cooked meat and cold water from the water-skin. In the house of dust which I entered were high priests and acolytes,¹ priests of the incantation and of ecstasy; there were servers of the temple, and there was Etana, that king of Kish whom the eagle carried to heaven in the days of old. I saw also Samuqan, god of cattle, and there was Ereshkigal the Queen of the Underworld; and Belit-Sheri squatted in front of her, she who is recorder of the gods and keeps the book of death. She held a tablet from which she read. She raised her head, she saw me and spoke: “Who has brought this one here?” Then I awoke like a man drained of blood who wanders alone in a waste of rushes; like one whom the bailiff has seized and his heart pounds with terror.”

Gilgamesh had peeled off his clothes, he listened to his words and wept quick tears, Gilgamesh listened and his tears flowed. He opened his mouth and spoke to Enkidu: “Who is there in strong-walled Uruk who has wisdom like this? Strange things have been spoken, why does your heart speak strangely? The dream was marvelous but the terror was great; we must treasure the dream whatever the terror; for the dream has shown that misery comes at last to the healthy man, the end of life is sorrow.” And Gilgamesh lamented, “Now I will pray to the great gods, for my friend had an ominous dream.”

This day on which Enkidu dreamed came to an end and he lay stricken with sickness. One whole day he lay on his bed and his suffering increased. He said to Gilgamesh, the friend on whose account he had left the wilderness, “Once I ran for you, for the water of life, and I now have nothing.” A second day he lay on his bed and Gilgamesh watched over him but the sickness increased. A third day he lay on his bed, he called out to Gilgamesh, rousing him up. Now he was weak and his eyes were blind with weeping. Ten days he lay and his suffering increased, eleven and twelve days he lay on his bed of pain. Then he called to Gilgamesh, “My friend, the great goddess cursed me and I must die in shame. I shall not die like a man fallen in battle; I feared to fall, but happy is the man who falls in the battle, for I must die in shame.” And Gilgamesh wept over Enkidu. . . .

PAUSE & REFLECT How would you describe the afterlife depicted in Enkidu’s dream?

1. acolytes (ăk’ə-līts’): assistants at religious services.

WORDS TO KNOW

incantation (ɪn’kăn-tă’shən) *n.* a set of words chanted or sung as part of a religious ritual

lament (lə-měnt’) *v.* to express grief or sorrow

ominous (ŏm’ə-nēs) *adj.* threatening; signaling evil to come

FOCUS In this section, Gilgamesh goes in search of Utnapishtim. As you read, notice whom and what he meets on his journey, how these encounters help or hinder him, and what he must do each time in order to proceed.

• THE SEARCH FOR EVERLASTING LIFE •

Enkidu dies. For the first time, Gilgamesh is faced with a situation he cannot control. He also experiences for the first time the human emotions of grief and fear.

Bitterly Gilgamesh wept for his friend Enkidu; he wandered over the wilderness as a hunter, he roamed over the plains; in his bitterness he cried, “How can I rest, how can I be at peace? Despair is in my heart. What my brother is now, that shall I be when I am dead. Because I am afraid of death I will go as best I can to find Utnapishtim whom they call the Faraway, for he has entered the assembly of the gods.” So Gilgamesh traveled over the wilderness, he wandered over the grasslands, a long journey, in search of Utnapishtim, whom the gods took after the deluge;² and they set him to live in the land of Dilmun, in the garden of the sun; and to him alone of men they gave everlasting life.

At night when he came to the mountain passes Gilgamesh prayed: “In these mountain passes long ago I saw lions, I was afraid and I lifted my eyes to the moon; I prayed and my prayers went up to the gods, so now, O moon god Sin, protect me.” When he had prayed he lay down to sleep, until he was woken from out of a dream. He saw the lions round him glorying in life; then he took his axe in his hand, he drew his sword from his belt, and he fell upon them like an arrow from the string, and struck and destroyed and scattered them.

So at length Gilgamesh came to Mashu, the great mountains about which he had heard many things, which guard the rising and the setting sun. Its twin peaks are as high as the wall of heaven and its paps reach down to the underworld. At its gate the Scorpions stand guard, half man and half dragon; their glory is terrifying, their stare strikes death into men, their shimmering halo sweeps the mountains that guard the rising sun. When Gilgamesh saw them he shielded his eyes for the length of a moment only; then he took courage and approached. When they saw him so undismayed the Man-Scorpion called to his mate, “This one who comes to us now is flesh of the gods.” The mate of the Man-Scorpion answered, “Two thirds is god but one third is man.”

Then he called to the man Gilgamesh, he called to the child of the gods: “Why have you come so great a journey; for what have you traveled so far, crossing the dangerous waters; tell me the reason for your coming?” Gilgamesh answered, “For Enkidu; I loved him dearly, together we endured all kinds of hardships; on his account I have come, for the common lot of man has taken him. I have wept for him day and night, I would not give up his body for burial, I thought my friend would come back because of my weeping. Since he went, my life is nothing; that is why I have traveled here in search of Utnapishtim my father; for men say he has entered the assembly of the gods, and has found everlasting life. I have a desire to question him concerning the living and the dead.” The Man-Scorpion opened his mouth and said, speaking to Gilgamesh, “No man born of woman has done what you have asked, no mortal man has gone into the mountain; the length of it is twelve leagues³ of darkness; in it there is no light, but

2. **deluge** (dél'yōōj): an unusually heavy, destructive flood.

3. **twelve leagues**: roughly thirty-six miles.



Sumerian bull-headed lyre. The British Museum, London.

the heart is oppressed with darkness. From the rising of the sun to the setting of the sun there is no light.” Gilgamesh said, “Although I should go in sorrow and in pain, with sighing and with weeping, still I must go. Open the gate of the mountain.” And the Man-Scorpion said, “Go, Gilgamesh, I permit you to pass through the mountain of Mashu and through the high ranges; may your feet carry you safely home. The gate of the mountain is open.” . . .

Gilgamesh must walk 12 leagues in total darkness to pass through the mountain. But at last he reaches a wonderful world no mortal has seen.

There was the garden of the gods; all round him stood bushes bearing gems. Seeing it he went down at once, for there was fruit of carnelian with the vine hanging from it, beautiful to look at; lapis lazuli leaves hung thick with fruit, sweet to see. For thorns and thistles there were

haematite and rare stones, agate,⁴ and pearls from out of the sea. While Gilgamesh walked in the garden by the edge of the sea Shamash saw him, and he saw that he was dressed in the skins of animals and ate their flesh. He was distressed, and he spoke and said, “No mortal man has gone this way before, nor will, as long as the winds drive over the sea.” And to Gilgamesh he said, “You will never find the life for which you are searching.” Gilgamesh said to glorious Shamash, “Now that I have toiled and strayed so far over the wilderness, am I to sleep, and let the earth cover my head for ever? Let my eyes see the sun until they are dazzled with looking. Although I am no better than a dead man, still let me see the light of the sun.”

PAUSE & REFLECT What quality or behavior do you think is most helpful to Gilgamesh in overcoming obstacles on his journey?

FOCUS As you read the next section, look for the paragraph in which Siduri offers advice to Gilgamesh. Then look for the paragraph in which Gilgamesh responds to this recommendation.

Beside the sea she lives, the woman of the vine, the maker of wine; Siduri sits in the garden at the edge of the sea, with the golden bowl and the golden vats that the gods gave her. She is covered with a veil; and where she sits she sees Gilgamesh coming towards her, wearing skins, the flesh of the gods in his body, but despair in his heart, and his face like the face of one who has made a long journey. She looked, and as she scanned the distance she said in her own heart, “Surely this is some felon; where is he going now?” And she

4. carnelian (kär-něl'yən) . . . lapis lazuli (läp'is läz'ə-lē) . . . haematite (hē'mə-tīt') . . . agate (äg'īt): gemstones of various colors. Carnelian is red or reddish-brown, lapis lazuli is deep blue, haematite is a dull metal shade, and agate often has multicolored stripes.

barred her gate against him with the cross-bar and shot home the bolt. But Gilgamesh, hearing the sound of the bolt, threw up his head and lodged his foot in the gate; he called to her, “Young woman, maker of wine, why do you bolt your door; what did you see that made you bar your gate? I will break in your door and burst in your gate, for I am Gilgamesh who seized and killed the Bull of Heaven, I killed the watchman of the cedar forest, I overthrew Humbaba who lived in the forest, and I killed the lions in the passes of the mountain.”

Then Siduri said to him, “If you are that Gilgamesh who seized and killed the Bull of Heaven, who killed the watchman of the cedar forest, who overthrew Humbaba that lived in the forest, and killed the lions in the passes of the mountain, why are your cheeks so starved and why is your face so drawn? Why is despair in your heart and your face like the face of one who has made a long journey? Yes, why is your face burned from heat and cold, and why do you come here wandering over the pastures in search of the wind?”

Gilgamesh answered her, “And why should not my cheeks be starved and my face drawn? Despair is in my heart and my face is the face of one who has made a long journey, it was burned with heat and with cold. Why should I not wander over the

pastures in search of the wind? My friend, my younger brother, he who hunted the wild ass of the wilderness and the panther of the plains, my friend, my younger brother who seized and killed the Bull of Heaven and overthrew Humbaba in the cedar forest, my friend who was very dear to me and who endured dangers beside me, Enkidu my brother, whom I loved, the end of mortality has overtaken him. I wept for him seven days and nights till the worm fastened on him. Because of my brother I am afraid of death, because of my brother I stray through the wilderness and cannot rest. But now, young woman, maker of wine, since I have seen your face do not let me see the face of death which I dread so much.”

She answered, “Gilgamesh, where are you hurrying to? You will never find that life for which you are looking. When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping. As for you, Gilgamesh, fill your belly with good things; day and night, night and day, dance and be merry, feast and rejoice. Let your clothes be fresh, bathe yourself in water, cherish the little child that holds your hand, and make your wife happy in your embrace; for this too is the lot of man.”

But Gilgamesh said to Siduri, the young woman, “How can I be silent, how can I rest, when Enkidu whom I love is dust, and I too shall die and be laid in the earth. You live by the seashore and look into the heart of it; young woman, tell me now, which is the way to Utnapishtim, the son of Ubara-Tutu? What directions are there for the passage; give me, oh, give me directions. I will

“NO MORTAL MAN
HAS GONE THIS WAY
BEFORE, NOR WILL,
AS LONG AS THE WINDS
DRIVE OVER THE SEA.”

WORDS TO KNOW

allot (ə-lŏt') *v.* to give as a share or portion

cross the Ocean if it is possible; if it is not I will wander still farther in the wilderness.” . . .

Siduri tells Gilgamesh that he must cross the ocean with the boatman Urshanabi. When she hints that Urshanabi might refuse to take him, Gilgamesh loses his temper. He smashes Urshanabi's sacred stones and the tackle and mast of his boat. Urshanabi explains that Gilgamesh has destroyed the very things that would protect them both from the waters of death. To make up for his actions, Gilgamesh must cut poles and push the boat himself. Eventually, he has to use his own body and clothing for a sail.

So Urshanabi the ferryman brought Gilgamesh to Utnapishtim, whom they call the Faraway, who lives in Dilmun at the place of the sun's transit, eastward of the mountain. To him alone of men the gods had given everlasting life.

Now Utnapishtim, where he lay at ease, looked into the distance and he said in his heart, musing to himself, “Why does the boat sail here without tackle and mast; why are the sacred stones destroyed, and why does the master not sail the boat? That man who comes is none of mine; where I look I see a man whose body is covered with skins of beasts. Who is this who walks up the shore behind Urshanabi, for surely he is no man of mine?” So Utnapishtim looked at him and said, “What is your name, you who come here wearing the skins of beasts, with your cheeks starved and your face drawn? Where are you hurrying to now? For what reason have you made this great journey, crossing the seas whose passage is difficult? Tell me the reason for your coming.”

He replied, “Gilgamesh is my name. I am from Uruk, from the house of Anu.” Then Utnapishtim said to him, “If you are Gilgamesh,

why are your cheeks so starved and your face drawn? Why is despair in your heart and your face like the face of one who has made a long journey? Yes, why is your face burned with heat and cold; and why do you come here, wandering over the wilderness in search of the wind?” . . .

Gilgamesh explains that he is grieving over the death of his friend and afraid of dying himself. He has come to Utnapishtim to learn the secret of everlasting life.

Utnapishtim said, “There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand for ever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time? Do brothers divide an inheritance to keep for ever, does the flood-time of rivers endure? It is only the nymph of the dragon-fly who sheds her larva and sees the sun in his glory. From the days of old there is no permanence. The sleeping and the dead, how alike they are, they are like a painted death. What is there between the master and the servant when both have fulfilled their doom? When the Anunnaki, the judges, come together, and Mammetun the mother of destinies, together they decree the fates of men. Life and death they allot but the day of death they do not disclose.”

Then Gilgamesh said to Utnapishtim the Faraway, “I look at you now, Utnapishtim, and your appearance is no different from mine; there is nothing strange in your features. I thought I should find you like a hero prepared for battle, but you lie here taking your ease on your back. Tell me truly, how was it that you came to enter the company of the gods and to possess everlasting life?” Utnapishtim said to Gilgamesh, “I will reveal to you a mystery, I will tell you a secret of the gods.”

PAUSE & REFLECT Why doesn't Gilgamesh take Siduri's advice?

WORDS TO KNOW

transit (trăn'sīt) *n.* passage

musing (myōō'zīng) *adj.* thoughtfully questioning or meditating **muse** *v.*

FOCUS As you continue to read, look for passages that help you understand why the gods treat Utnapishtim as they do.

THE STORY OF THE FLOOD

You know the city Shurrupak, it stands on the banks of Euphrates? That city grew old and the gods that were in it were old. There was Anu, lord of the firmament,⁵ their father, and warrior Enlil their counselor, Ninurta the helper, and Ennugi watcher over canals; and with them also was Ea. In those days the world teemed, the people multiplied, the world belowered like a wild bull, and the great god was aroused by the clamor. Enlil heard the clamor and he said to the gods in council, ‘The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer possible by reason of the babel.’⁶ So the gods agreed to exterminate mankind. Enlil did this, but Ea because of his oath warned me in a dream. He whispered their words to my house of reeds, ‘Reed-house, reed-house! Wall, O wall, hearken reed-house, wall reflect; O man of Shurrupak, son of Ubara-Tutu; tear down your house and build a boat, abandon possessions and look for life, despise worldly goods and save your soul alive. Tear down your house, I say, and build a boat. These are the measurements of the barque as you shall build her: let her beam⁷ equal her length, let her deck be roofed like the vault that covers the abyss;⁸ then take up into the boat the seed of all living creatures.’

‘When I had understood I said to my lord, ‘Behold, what you have commanded I will honor and perform, but how shall I answer the people, the city, the elders?’ Then Ea opened his mouth and said to me, his servant, ‘Tell them this: I have learned that Enlil is wrathful against me, I dare no longer walk in his land nor live in his city; I will go down to the Gulf to dwell with Ea

my lord. But on you he will rain down abundance, rare fish and shy wild-fowl, a rich harvest-tide. In the evening the rider of the storm will bring you wheat in torrents.’

‘In the first light of dawn all my household gathered round me, the children brought pitch and the men whatever was necessary. On the fifth day I laid the keel and the ribs, then I made fast the planking. The ground-space was one acre, each side of the deck measured one hundred and twenty cubits,⁹ making a square. I built six decks below, seven in all, I divided them into nine sections with bulkheads between. I drove in wedges where needed, I saw to the punt-poles,¹⁰ and laid in supplies. The carriers brought oil in baskets, I poured pitch into the furnace and asphalt and oil; more oil was consumed in caulking, and more again the master of the boat took into his stores. I slaughtered bullocks for the people and every day I killed sheep. I gave the shipwrights wine to drink as though it were river water, raw wine and red wine and oil and white wine. There was feasting then as there is at the time of the New Year’s festival; I myself anointed my head. On the seventh day the boat was complete.

‘Then was the launching full of difficulty; there was shifting of ballast¹¹ above and below till two thirds was submerged. I loaded into her all that I had of gold and of living things, my family, my kin, the beast of the field both wild

5. **firmament:** the vault of the heavens; the sky.

6. **babel:** loud, unpleasant noise.

7. **beam:** the width of a ship.

8. **vault that covers the abyss:** the sky as it stretches across the depths below.

9. **cubits:** ancient units of measure, originally equal to the length of the forearm from the elbow to the tip of the middle finger. Length ranges from 17 to 22 inches.

10. **punt-poles:** poles that are pushed against the bottom of a body of water in order to propel a boat.

11. **ballast** (bāl’əst): heavy material placed into the bottom of a boat to enhance stability.

WORDS TO KNOW

teem (tēm) v. to be filled to overflowing

**"I DARE NO LONGER
WALK IN HIS
LAND NOR LIVE
IN HIS CITY."**

and tame, and all the craftsmen. I sent them on board, for the time that Shamash had ordained was already fulfilled when he said, 'In the evening, when the rider of the storm sends down the destroying rain, enter the boat and batten her down.' The time was fulfilled, the evening came, the rider of the storm sent down the rain. I looked out at the weather and it was terrible, so I too boarded the boat and battened her down. All was now complete, the battening and the caulking; so I handed the tiller to Puzur-Amurri the steersman, with the navigation and the care of the whole boat.

"With the first light of dawn a black cloud came from the horizon; it thundered within where Adad, lord of the storm was riding. In front over hill and plain Shullat and Hanish, heralds of the storm, led on. Then the gods of the abyss rose up; Nergal pulled out the dams of the nether¹² waters, Ninurta the war-lord threw down the dikes, and the seven judges of hell, the Annunaki, raised their torches, lighting the land with their livid flame. A stupor of despair went up to heaven when the god of the storm turned daylight to darkness, when he smashed the land like a cup. One whole day the tempest raged, gathering fury as it went, it poured over the people like the tides of battle; a man could not see his brother nor the people be seen from heaven. Even the gods were terrified at the flood, they fled

to the highest heaven, the firmament of Anu; they crouched against the walls, cowering like curs. Then Ishtar the sweet-voiced Queen of Heaven cried out like a woman in travail:¹³ 'Alas the days of old are turned to dust because I commanded evil; why did I command this evil in the council of all the gods? I commanded wars to destroy the people, but are they not my people, for I brought them forth? Now like the spawn of fish they float in the ocean.' The great gods of heaven and of hell wept, they covered their mouths.

"For six days and six nights the winds blew, torrent and tempest and flood overwhelmed the world, tempest and flood raged together like warring hosts. When the seventh day dawned the storm from the south subsided, the sea grew calm, the flood was stilled; I looked at the face of the world and there was silence, all mankind was turned to clay. The surface of the sea stretched as flat as a roof-top; I opened a hatch and the light fell on my face. Then I bowed low, I sat down and I wept, the tears streamed down my face, for on every side was the waste of water. I looked for land in vain, but fourteen leagues distant there appeared a mountain, and there the boat grounded; on the mountain of Nisir the boat held fast, she held fast and did not budge. One day she held, and a second day on the mountain of Nisir she held fast and did not budge. A third day, and a fourth day she held fast on the mountain and did not budge; a fifth day and a sixth day she held fast on the mountain. When the seventh day dawned I loosed a dove and let her go. She flew away, but finding no resting-place she returned. Then I loosed a swallow, and she flew away but finding no resting-place she returned. I loosed a raven, she saw that the waters had retreated, she ate, she flew

12. **nether**: lower.

13. **travail** (trə-vāl'): the pain of childbirth.

WORDS TO KNOW

ordain (ôr-dân') *v.* to establish by decree or law

stupor (stōō'pər) *n.* a dazed condition, almost without sense or feeling

around, she cawed, and she did not come back. Then I threw everything open to the four winds, I made a sacrifice and poured out a libation¹⁴ on the mountain top. Seven and again seven cauldrons I set up on their stands, I heaped up wood and cane and cedar and myrtle. When the gods smelled the sweet savor, they gathered like flies over the sacrifice. Then, at last, Ishtar also came, she lifted her necklace with the jewels of heaven that once Anu had made to please her. ‘O you gods here present, by the lapis lazuli round my neck I shall remember these days as I remember the jewels of my throat; these last days I shall not forget. Let all the gods gather round the sacrifice, except Enlil. He shall not approach this offering, for without reflection he brought the flood; he consigned my people to destruction.’

“When Enlil had come, when he saw the boat, he was wroth and swelled with anger at the gods, the host of heaven, ‘Has any of these mortals escaped? Not one was to have survived the destruction.’ Then the god of the wells and canals Ninurta opened his mouth and said to the warrior Enlil, ‘Who is there of the gods that can devise¹⁵ without Ea? It is Ea alone who knows all things.’ Then Ea opened his mouth and spoke to warrior Enlil, ‘Wisest of gods, hero Enlil, how could you so senselessly bring down the flood?’

*Lay upon the sinner his sin,
Lay upon the transgressor¹⁶ his transgression,
Punish him a little when he breaks loose,
Do not drive him too hard or he perishes;
Would that a lion had ravaged mankind
Rather than the flood,
Would that a wolf had ravaged mankind
Rather than the flood,
Would that famine had wasted the world
Rather than the flood,
Would that pestilence had wasted mankind
Rather than the flood.*

It was not I that revealed the secret of the gods; the wise man learned it in a dream. Now

take your counsel what shall be done with him.’

“Then Enlil went up into the boat, he took me by the hand and my wife and made us enter the boat and kneel down on either side, he standing between us. He touched our foreheads to bless us saying, ‘In time past Utnapishtim was a mortal man; henceforth he and his wife shall live in the distance at the mouth of the rivers.’ Thus it was that the gods took me and placed me here to live in the distance, at the mouth of the rivers.”

PAUSE & REFLECT What would you say is the main reason Utnapishtim is favored by the gods?

FOCUS As you read on, notice places in the text that show how Utnapishtim responds to the visit from Gilgamesh.

THE RETURN

Utnapishtim said, “As for you, Gilgamesh, who will assemble the gods for your sake, so that you may find that life for which you are searching? But if you wish, come and put it to the test: only prevail against sleep for six days and seven nights.” But while Gilgamesh sat there resting on his haunches, a mist of sleep like soft wool teased from the fleece drifted over him, and Utnapishtim said to his wife, “Look at him now, the strong man who would have everlasting life, even now the mists of sleep are drifting over him.” His wife replied, “Touch the man to wake him, so that he may return to his own land in peace, going back through the gate by which he came.” Utnapishtim said to his wife, “All men are deceivers, even you he will attempt to deceive;

14. **libation**: liquid given as an offering to a god.

15. **devise** (dī-vīz’): plan or think out.

16. **transgressor**: a person who breaks a command or law.

WORDS TO KNOW

prevail (prī-vāl’) v. to hold out; triumph

therefore bake loaves of bread, each day one loaf, and put it beside his head; and make a mark on the wall to number the days he has slept.”

So she baked loaves of bread, each day one loaf, and put it beside his head, and she marked on the wall the days that he slept; and there came a day when the first loaf was hard, the second loaf was like leather, the third was soggy, the crust of the fourth had mold, the fifth was mildewed, the sixth was fresh, and the seventh was still on the embers. Then Utnapishtim touched him and he woke. Gilgamesh said to Utnapishtim the Faraway, “I hardly slept when you touched and roused me.” But Utnapishtim said, “Count these loaves and learn how many days you slept, for your first is hard, your second like leather, your third is soggy, the crust of your fourth has mold, your fifth is mildewed, your sixth is fresh and your seventh was still over the glowing embers when I touched and woke you.” Gilgamesh said, “What shall I do, O Utnapishtim, where shall I go? Already the thief in the night has hold of my limbs, death inhabits my room; wherever my foot rests, there I find death.”

Then Utnapishtim spoke to Urshanabi the ferryman: “Woe to you Urshanabi, now and for ever more you have become hateful to this harborage; it is not for you, nor for you are the crossings of this sea. Go now, banished from the shore. But this man before whom you walked, bringing him here, whose body is covered with foulness and the grace of whose limbs has been spoiled by wild skins, take him to the washing-place. There he shall wash his long hair clean as snow in the water, he shall throw off his skins and

let the sea carry them away, and the beauty of his body shall be shown, the fillet¹⁷ on his forehead shall be renewed, and he shall be given clothes to cover his nakedness. Till he reaches his own city and his journey is accomplished, these clothes will show no sign of age, they will wear like a new garment.” So Urshanabi took Gilgamesh and led him to the washing-place, he washed his long hair as clean as snow in the water, he threw off his skins, which the sea carried away, and showed the beauty of his body. He renewed the fillet on his forehead, and to cover his nakedness gave him clothes which would show no sign of age, but would wear like a new garment till he reached his own city, and his journey was accomplished.

Then Gilgamesh and Urshanabi launched the boat on to the water and boarded it, and they made ready to sail away; but the wife of Utnapishtim the Faraway said to him, “Gilgamesh came here wearied out, he is worn out; what will you give him to carry him back to his own country?” So Utnapishtim spoke, and Gilgamesh took a pole and brought the boat in to the bank. “Gilgamesh, you came here a man wearied out, you have worn yourself out; what shall I give you to carry you back to your own country? Gilgamesh, I shall reveal a secret thing, it is a mystery of the gods that I am telling you. There is a plant that grows under the water, it has a prickle like a thorn, like a rose; it will wound your hands, but if you succeed in taking it, then your hands will hold that which restores his lost youth to a man.”

PAUSE & REFLECT Do you think Utnapishtim treats Gilgamesh fairly?

17. fillet (fil'it): narrow cloth or ribbon worn as a headband.

FOCUS As you read to the end, look for passages that show how Gilgamesh feels about the way his adventure concludes.

When Gilgamesh heard this he opened the sluices so that a sweet-water current might carry him out to the deepest channel; he tied heavy stones to his feet and they dragged him down to the water-bed. There he saw the plant growing; although it pricked him he took it in his hands; then he cut the heavy stones from his feet, and the sea carried him and threw him on to the shore. Gilgamesh said to Urshanabi the ferryman, “Come here, and see this marvelous plant. By its virtue a man may win back all his former strength. I will take it to Uruk of the strong walls; there I will give it to the old men to eat. Its name shall be ‘The Old Men Are Young Again’; and at last I shall eat it myself and have back all my lost youth.” So Gilgamesh returned by the gate through which he had come, Gilgamesh and Urshanabi went together. They traveled their twenty leagues and then they broke their fast; after thirty leagues they stopped for the night.

Gilgamesh saw a well of cool water and he went down and bathed; but deep in the pool there was lying a serpent, and the serpent sensed the sweetness of the flower. It rose out of the water and snatched it away, and immediately it sloughed¹⁸ its skin and returned to the well. Then Gilgamesh sat down and wept, the tears

ran down his face, and he took the hand of Urshanabi; “O Urshanabi, was it for this that I toiled with my hands, is it for this I have wrung out my heart’s blood? For myself I have gained nothing; not I, but the beast of the earth has joy of it now. Already the stream has carried it twenty leagues back to the channels where I found it. I found a sign and now I have lost it. Let us leave the boat on the bank and go.”

After twenty leagues they broke their fast, after thirty leagues they stopped for the night; in three days they had walked as much as a journey of a month and fifteen days. When the journey was accomplished they arrived at Uruk, the strong-walled city. Gilgamesh spoke to him, to Urshanabi the ferryman, “Urshanabi, climb up on to the wall of Uruk, inspect its foundation terrace, and examine well the brickwork; see if it is not of burnt bricks; and did not the seven wise men lay these foundations? One third of the whole is city, one third is garden, and one third is field, with the precinct of the goddess Ishtar. These parts and the precinct are all Uruk.”

This too was the work of Gilgamesh, the king, who knew the countries of the world. He was wise, he saw mysteries and knew secret things, he brought us a tale of the days before the flood. He went a long journey, was weary, worn out with labor, and returning engraved on a stone the whole story. ❖

18. *sloughed* (slūft): cast off; shed.