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## THE GILGAMESH EPIC AND HOMER

A reading of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, even a casual reading, seems naturally to suggest comparison with the Homeric epos, especially the *Odyssey*. Heidel calls the *Gilgamesh Epic* "the *Odyssey* of the Babylonians."<sup>1</sup> Its mood and tone is likened to the *Iliad* (Wolff, 393). Dhorme speaks of it as "cette oeuvre magistrale qui devance et annonce l'Odyssee."<sup>2</sup> The Babylonian epic in its overall significance is likened not, as one would suppose, to other Near Eastern works but rather to the Homeric poems. Often in these comparisons it is not a matter of specifics or the possibility of relatedness either direct or indirect but rather a general sense, an intuition, that the Homeric works and the Near Eastern epic stand out each from its time and background in a way to suggest a striking resemblance, whatever the explanation may be. This intuition I believe to be correct. The concern of this paper is to trace the basic factors behind this resemblance.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*<sup>2</sup> (1949; Chicago: Phoenix Bks, 1963) 1. I have found the following works, including Heidel's book just cited, particularly helpful: F.M.Th. de Liagre Böhl, *Opera Minora* (Groningen 1953); Thorkild Jacobsen, "Mesopotamia," in H. and H. A. Frankfort, Wilson, and Jacobsen, *Before Philosophy* (1946; rpt. Chicago: Pelican pb 1951 [originally *The Intellectual Adventure of Ancient Man*]); P. Garelli, ed., *Gilgameš et sa légende* (Paris 1960); Hugo Gressmann, "Erklärung" (= Zweiter Teil of A. Ungnad and Hugo Gressmann, *Das Gilgamesch-Epos, Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments* 14 (Göttingen 1911); S. N. Kramer, "The Epic of Gilgamesh and its Sumerian Sources," *JAOS* 64 (1944) 7-23; A. L. Oppenheim, "Mesopotamian Mythology II," *Orientalia* 17 (1948) 17-58; J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (Princeton 1950), cited hereafter as *ANET* (all translations unless otherwise noted are by E. A. Speiser from this work); A. Ungnad, *Gilgamesch-Epos und Odyssee, Kulturfragen* 4/5 (Breslau 1923); Hope Nash Wolff, "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Heroic Life," *JAOS* 89 (1969). For bibliography on the epic of Gilgamesh and related material see de Meyer in Garelli (7-27) and V. M. Masson, "Zur neueren Literatur über das Gilgameš-Epos," *BO* 21 (1964) 3-10. Abbreviations conform to those in L. L. Orlin, *Ancient Near Eastern Literature* (Ann Arbor 1969) xii-xx and the  *OCD*. Motif designations refer to Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature* (6 vols., Bloomington 1955-58).

<sup>2</sup>E. Dhorme, *Les religions de Babylonie et d'Assyrie* (Paris 1949) 315. The tone of the *GE* (*Gilgamesh Epic*) in particular is 'secular' rather than divine—a characteristic it shares with Homeric epos (N. K. Sandars, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* [Baltimore; Penguin pb, 1960] 30).

<sup>3</sup>I intend more particularly to point to the general causative factors behind the resemblance rather than a listing of specific details, important though these may be. Although almost every writer on the *GE* alludes by way of comparison to the Homeric works, no thorough treatment of this subject has yet appeared. There

In brief, I believe a line is traceable from the Sumerian materials from which the Akkadian epic was formed to the world of Homer. As often with lines of cultural derivation parts of this line are of greater importance than other parts; in particular, the period when these somewhat diverse materials were cast into epic unity was above all others the decisive moment for this tradition.<sup>4</sup> What has not generally been seen is that the creation of this unity—really the creation of heroic epic in the true sense—was not a fortuitous artistic discovery but the result of a new idea, that of the human hero as contrasted with an older, more divine or ‘shamanistic’ type of hero. The correctness of this analysis emerges when we see the deliberate, overt construction that the chief author of the epic, presumably the Old Babylonian author, has made of older, folkloristic material. It is a clear implication of this analysis that the essential meaning of the *Gilgamesh Epic* is not esthetic or psychological but rather historical and cultural. This is not to say that the epic is devoid of esthetic or psychological importance—clearly this is not the case—but simply that the clues to its form, development, and meaning are cultural; they were the product of cultural forces which remained operable into Homeric times and beyond.<sup>5</sup>

It has been this tendency to read the *Gilgamesh Epic* psychologically or in a narrowly esthetic way that has led to the rather numerous negative or pessimistic judgments on the meaning and intention of the author. For instance, a recent opinion (Landsberger in Garelli [above, note 1])

are P. Jensen’s uncritical “Das Gilgameš-Epos und Homer,” (*ZA* 16 [1902] 125-34) and Ungnad’s little work (above, note 1) in which very little space (29-32) is given to a comparison of the two epics. Heubeck in Garelli (above, note 1) 185-92 does not really treat the matter of comparison. Franz Dirlmeier in his general survey, “Homerisches Epos und Orient,” (*RhMus* 98 [1935] 18-37) devotes a few pages (31-35) to the Akkadian and Homeric poems. A. M. Frenkian, “L’épopée de Gilgameš et les poèmes homériques,” *Studia et Acta Orientalia* II (Budapest 1960) 89-105 rightly criticizes the credulity of those who accept specious parallels but his conclusions are in my opinion equally uncritical in their complete negativism (104). The present paper does not purport to make a complete and detailed comparison—a task obviously requiring much more space—but the intention of this paper is to establish a basis and general framework of comparison.

<sup>4</sup>If the epic can be said to have had one author whose mind more than any other gave it an overall unity and plan he would seem to be the *OB* (Old Babylonian) author. For some argumentation on this matter see Böhl (above, note 1) 224, 248; Kupper (above, note 1) 102; and Wolff (above, note 1) 393 n. 1. Although the flood episode is extant only in the Assyrian version it would seem to have been in the *OB* version (Matouš in Garelli (above, note 1) 90; Gressman (above, note 1) 145; but cf. Landsberger in Garelli 34).

<sup>5</sup>There is a parallel case in the rise of monotheism. Ordinarily one would think that monotheism is of multilocal origin, due to psychological and general cultural factors. But Pettazzoni has shown persuasively (“The Formation of Monotheism,” 34-39, in Lessa-Vogt, ed., *Reader in Comparative Religion*<sup>2</sup> [first ed. 1958; New York 1965]) that monotheism is unique and purely historical in origin. I shall argue that the origin of heroic epic with its peculiar form and philosophy is similarly unique and historical.

33) is that "Die Antwort (i.e. to "die Frage nach dem Werte des Lebens") ist völlig pessimistisch. . . . Freundschaft . . . und Glaube an das Schicksal . . . stellen die einzigen positiven Punkte in der trüben Atmosphäre des Epos dar." Wolff ([above, note 1] 392) maintains that Gilgamesh is "defeated in his demand for a better life"; and that our author did not understand heroism or "he showed himself a poor artist at this point, as perhaps at others, by failing to carry out the epic design." (393-94) In his "Introduction" to *The Epic of Gilgamesh* Sandars ([above, note 2] 22) writes of Gilgamesh's "constantly pessimistic, and only partially resigned attitude to life and the world. This attitude is a consequence of the Mesopotamian psychology, and of those 'overtones of anxiety' which Frankfort described as being due to 'a haunting fear that the unaccountable and turbulent powers may at any time bring disaster to human society'." Heidel ([above, note 1] 137) maintains that the "central theme of the Gilgamesh Epic . . . is the problem of death." Böhl ([above, note 1] 250-51) says that the epic as we have it is "ein Torso; daher der unbefriedigende Schluss." The original ending which was more satisfying was struck and the present Tablet XII set in its place. Gressman ([above, note 1] 170) writes, "Die Stimmung des Epos ist düster and schwer. Mit tieftraurigem Pessimismus betrachtet der Dichter das Los der Menschheit, deren höchstes Sehnen keine Erfüllung findet." Perhaps the most sweeping condemnation is that of Jacobsen. His view ([above, note 1] 224) is that the theme of the epic is death and that the hero Gilgamesh "has but one thought, one aim, to find everlasting life" (226). His conclusion (227), however, is that the epic "does not come to an harmonious end; the emotions which rage in it are not assuaged; nor is there, as in tragedy, any sense of catharsis, any fundamental acceptance of the inevitable. It is a jeering, unhappy, unsatisfactory ending. An inner turmoil is left to rage on, a vital question finds no answer."

Reading these judgments on the meaning of the *Gilgamesh Epic* one cannot help wondering how it is that a work which is universally recognized to be the greatest epic before Homer can in the end be so dissatisfying. It is not however an unknown situation that a work of art is widely accepted as a masterpiece but opinions of its meaning are diverse, confused, uncertain, or even disparaging. Some Greek plays are perhaps examples of great artistic achievements victimized by undeserved interpretations. That is, in the present instance, the dramatic situations, the moving speeches, the pathos of the *Gilgamesh Epic* are apparent esthetically to every reader, but the author's argument remains to this day obscure and baffling.

What many have done is to assume first of all that the epic must have intended an answer to the problem of death or eternal life or the worth of existence or the like, that it should have had an epic design, that it should have exhibited certain characteristics such as *hybris*, heroism, catharsis which we find later in Greek literature, and then find fault with

the author of the Akkadian epic for not fulfilling these expectations. Now, any or all of these assumptions may in the final analysis turn out to have been correct and perhaps the author did fail in carrying out his design; but it seems best, if we can, to determine what he intended not simply by assumption and intuition but systematically. In the case of the *Gilgamesh Epic* I think it is possible to demonstrate what must have been the author's intention, his design, in composing the epic. The method of demonstration I propose to follow is posited on the ways in which folklore and traditional materials are used by authors of a later time, living in a time usually that has broken in some measure with the past. It is a truism, of course, that writers use traditional material to create from. But their arrangement and selection of this material, the pattern and employment of it often reveal, almost in schematic form, their comment upon the past and their times. As examples let me cite Goethe's *Faust* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*, both clearly founded on folklore materials and both having a message superimposed, as it were, on the folklore material. Folklore and myth supply the incidents and story-structure; by manipulating these the author on a higher level conveys his thought. In the case of Sophocles, for instance, he is demonstrably saying something about his times, in particular against the Sophists; but all this, the meaning of the *Oedipus*, has in itself really little to do with the legend of Oedipus. I might observe that this literary structure of traditional forms or building blocks and superimposed meaning is merely one type of the general anthropological observation that functions change but forms remain. The aetiology or reinterpretation so often found at the end of folktales and myths is another instance of the same process. I should here remark further that not all authors who use traditional materials necessarily superimpose a message, at least consciously. Homer and Shakespeare, for instance, I would say, are content to tell, or re-tell, their story; they are not, shall we say, 'intellectuals,' they have no axe to grind. This is not the case with the author of the Babylonian epic, however; he has a message to deliver, and by observing his selection, arrangement, and handling of his materials I think it can be demonstrated what this message was.

It is well-known that the Akkadian epic is based upon Sumerian materials whose ultimate origin must be very remote, extending beyond the written tradition to a time of oral transmission. It is well-known also that though we speak of the epic of Gilgamesh it is curious that what is perhaps the most important section of the poem, the eleventh or Flood Tablet, is not in origin connected with the Gilgamesh legend at all. It is conceivable that other episodes in the epic could have been left out or shifted; without the Utnapishtim episode, however, there would be no Gilgamesh epic as we know it. It might conceivably be a fine adventure story but would lose its heroic and epic significance. In other words, this was the decisive act of creativity that turned various old myth and folklore materials into an heroic epic with a basic unity of

theme and structure. There are different versions and stages of development in the long history of the epic<sup>6</sup> but the author who combined the Gilgamesh legend with the story of the flood and Utnapishtim must be regarded as the author who was the creator of the Gilgamesh epic. We all feel the preponderant dramatic force of this episode; analysing its meaning, type and structure may help us to focus on the overall intention the author had in writing his poem.

First of all, the folklore basis of Gilgamesh's journey across the waters of death to the wondrous isle of the immortalized Utnapishtim is widely distributed and well-known. In outline, the tale type tells of a hero (or heroes) who venture, usually by ship, through hazardous waters (i.e., with monsters, temptations, Symplegades motif, etc.) to a marvellous island (or a succession of such islands) where there are people who are in various ways marvellous. One thinks first perhaps of Odysseus' journey to the Phaeacians, or of various Irish heroes such as Bran, Cormac, Ossian, of the Greek (but non-Homeric) tradition of Achilles immortalized on the isle of Leuce in the Euxine, the legends of the Hyperboreans etc.<sup>7</sup> It would be difficult to say what was the origin of this general type; that is, independent development, borrowing, cultural transmission or whatever. In assessing the author's intentions we should note that he has deliberately added a myth in which its hero (Utnapishtim) has gained immortality in a place called Dilmun.<sup>8</sup> More than that,

<sup>6</sup>For a convenient summary of the various stages and versions down to the Ninivite recension see the prefaced remarks to Speiser's translation (*ANET* 73 and 97 [above, note 1]); Matouš (Garelli [above, note 1]) 93-94; Kupper (Garelli) 100-01.

<sup>7</sup>For Achilles immortalized on Leuce see Pind. *Nem.* 4. 49-50. According to an Attic scolion (894; Campbell, *Greek Lyric Poetry* [New York 1967]) and Pind. *Ol.* 2. 79 Achilles is in the Isles of the Blest. Other Greek poets placed him in the Elysian Fields (Campbell *ad loc.*). Homer (*Od.* 11. 467) typically puts him in the Underworld (an equivalent of *irsit lā tāri*, the Land of No Return). In spite of the time relation, Homer's formulation represents a more secularized view compared with the other, more mythological view. For the general distribution of this motif see Index, F 111 Journey to earthly paradise and A692 Islands of the Blest. For two articles that say something of this myth type in the *GE* see Ch. Virolleaud, "Le voyage de Gilgamesh au paradis," *RHR* 101 (1930) 202-15 and Fr. Böhl, "Die Fahrt nach dem Lebenskraut," *ArOr* 18 (1950) 107-22. I might note in anticipation that Dilmun (note 8, below), the Cedar Forest, and the Garden of the Gods are mythologically much the same place.

<sup>8</sup>It is true that the term Dilmun is not actually used in the text of the *GE* but *GE* XI. 195, "Utnapishtim shall reside far away at the mouth of the waters" means Dilmun (Kramer, *BASOR* 96 [1944] 27). Essentially it represents A692 Islands of the Blest. This is indicated by the lines of the Sumerian poem "Enki and Ninhursag" quoted by Kramer (above, note 1) 25 n. 28. It is a land where there is no sickness, old age, or death; and it lies across water (probably the Styx motif, A672). Dilmun has been identified with various real geographical localities but, as Cornwall says (*BASOR* 103 [1946] 3-4), in Sumerian literary compositions as against historical documents, "it is a fabulous land, a strange antechamber to the spirit world." All folklorists recognize that in myth a locality

he has placed his hero in the sharpest contrast to the successful Utnapishtim, making his hero fail where the ancient hero had succeeded. It would seem to be quite clear that he was not compelled by the story-line of any Gilgamesh myth to have his hero fail. In fact, the model for our author's construction of the second half of the epic must be the Sumerian "Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living";<sup>9</sup> yet, it must be noted, here in the Sumerian poem, Gilgamesh's quest is, as an adventure, successful. That is, it is just this, the ending, that the Akkadian author deliberately alters. This alteration on his part was not, however, an isolated one; it forms a part of his overall pattern of reinterpretation. In this connection I would like to call attention to a minor episode near the end of the epic. I am referring to the loss of the Plant of Youth. This motif (D1338.2) is structured as the typical parting-gift heroes bring with them when returning from the Otherworld or such-like places. But quite in keeping with the author's intention, Gilgamesh is not allowed to keep this prize either; the serpent gets it. That is, for the second time here near the close of the epic Gilgamesh has been cheated of a supernatural gift, a plant that renews one's youth. There is more to it than this, however. An old and very widely distributed myth is that of the snake who, one way or another, gets the plant of (eternal) life. It is very often connected with a more general myth motif (A1335, Origin of Death).<sup>10</sup> The gist of this myth type is that the snake has got the gift of immortality originally intended for mankind. This, it seems to me, was clearly the original significance of this plant called 'Man becomes young in old age' (XI. 282) in the text. Since there is no indication from the Sumerian material that this motif was part of the Gilgamesh legend; and, indeed, since its general folklore spread indicates that it was added to the story of Gilgamesh, we must ask what was the author's intention in adding it, in the form he has used it, to his poem. The reason for changing it to a Plant of Youth seems obvious: Gilgamesh has just failed getting immortality; it wouldn't do dramatically to repeat this theme. But by changing it to a Plant of Youth the author can construct a dramatically viable episode and at the same time reinforce his message, Gilgamesh's failure to attain these mysterious, divine 'secrets' (cf. XI. 226) he is in search of. We should be very clear about the fact that the author was in no way compelled by the story-line of the Gilgamesh legend to make

can be both actual and mythical (e.g., Olympus, Styx, Ganges); such thinking is typical of myth-makers.

<sup>9</sup>Translated by Kramer in *ANET* 47-50 (above, note 1); and see Kramer, *JCS* 1 (1947) 3-46 and van Dijk (Garelli [above, note 1]) 69-81 who says (81), "Ainsi notre drame est à la racine du développement du récit de la mort d'Enkidu et de la quête de la vie éternelle par Gilgamesh." It is within this elaborated myth structure that the Akkadian author inserts the account of the flood.

<sup>10</sup>See James Frazer, *Folk-lore in the Old Testament* (abr. ed., New York 1923) 26-33. He says (32), "The story of the Fall of Man in the third chapter of Genesis appears to be an abridged version of this savage myth."

this addition to the tale; the addition was designed.<sup>11</sup> Not only does our hero fail to gain the magic gift of immortality on some distant island but he fails even to retain hold of the Plant of Youth, and that too when he is all but on his front doorstep.

I should like to return now for a closer look at the whole meaning of the Utnapishtim episode. First of all, this so-called flood myth is in actuality the conflation of two myths. The conflation must be very old, since it is found in the Sumerian material; but the so-called flood myth is a flood myth first of all with a paradise translation myth added to it. This can be demonstrated by examining the Sumerian flood myth (*ANET* 42-44 [above, note 1]), the pertinent parts of the *Gilgamesh Epic* (XI. 8-196), and the Akkadian epic material going under the name "Atrahasis" (*ANET* 104-06). This work doesn't contain any translation nor, though much of it is lost, does it read as though it would have had such an end. In addition, by their general nature flood myths have as a canonical end—you could say it is built into them—the replenishment of the earth with mankind and animals. Only by distortion or conflation can they be turned into otherworld translation myths. The internal evidence of the Sumerian and Akkadian materials indicates as much. All of these versions refer to a huge boat or ark the purpose of which, of course, is to transport the human beings and animals that will replenish the earth. In the *Gilgamesh* epic, however, after Utnapishtim has told Gilgamesh about the construction of the ark and the flood we have a strange scene. Instead of learning, as we might expect, about the saving of mankind—which was certainly the original intention of this myth<sup>12</sup>—we have a curious scene where Enlil, the erstwhile enemy

<sup>11</sup>The author of the *GE*, like Homer, works often in doublet scenes, episodes much alike that reinforce the same meaning. According to Oppenheim's translation ([above, note 1] 49) of *GE* X vi. 30-32 our Akkadian author has already said the same thing using the analogy of the dragonfly: "Only the dragon-fly sheds his cocoon / Only he will see again the light of the sun! / From the days of old there has existed no other living / being which could do this!" Further (48), the Garden of the Gods episode duplicates that of the Cedar Forest; and, more importantly in the present argument, according to Oppenheim (55), Utnapishtim offered Gilgamesh "perhaps even three times" the gift of immortality: the waking-test, the washing place (Waters of Life), and the magic plant. All of these episodes say the same thing and in all of them Gilgamesh fails.

<sup>12</sup>Cf. *GE* XI. 28 where Utnapishtim is told by Ea to take aboard his ark "the seed of all living things." Cf. also XI. 133 where we are told that "all mankind had returned to clay" because of the flood; and XI. 172, the anger of Enlil, the chief architect of the flood, on finding that someone has been saved. The Sumerian material is very fragmentary. We do learn (260) that Ziusudra was "the preserver of the name (i.e. existence) of mankind," and that (211) he took animals with him. However, he was given immortality in Dilmun (last line of our text); but this was probably, as the previous line indicates, after the true climax of the tale, the saving of mankind in this world. In the *GE* this true climax is eclipsed in favor of the translation motif. Gressman (above, note 1) has already pointed out many of the *Unstimmigkeiten* (200) of this episode in the *GE*. He notes



of mankind, in a sort of 'knighting' ceremony, confers immortality in Dilmun on Utnapishtim and his wife. There is no compelling reason that I can see in our text for such a turnabout in mood and action on the part of Enlil. Mankind must have survived; but of this we hear nothing. I submit that what we have here is a truncated flood myth with a paradise translation myth added on. The significance of this, however, for the *Gilgamesh* epic is that it would not have suited the intention of the author to have reproduced a true flood myth, such as the "Atrahasis," and to have pictured Utnapishtim simply as the savior of mankind; rather, it was to his purpose to play down that canonical aspect of the traditional flood hero and emphasize a conflated ending where the hero achieves immortality and is transported to paradise.

Utnapishtim has frequently been compared with the figure of Alcinous in the *Odyssey*.<sup>13</sup> But the whole pattern here is interesting and instructive. Alcinous lives on a remote island with his wife and queen Arete. He is not said by Homer to be immortal but since he possesses a pair of Hephaestus' immortal, magic dogs (*Od.* 7.91-94) and since he possesses an orchard that fails not winter or summer (117-18), and since the Phaeacians are near-kin to the gods (205), it is reasonable to assume that in pre-Homeric tradition the king and his Phaeacians were immortal too. Homer tends to secularize as does the author of the *Gilgamesh Epic*. Like Utnapishtim Alcinous has a transport service to take stranded mortals back home. In both epics this is accomplished by means of a magic ship (see note 18, below). Both the island of Utnapishtim and that of Alcinous can be approached only across difficult and dangerous waters. Both heroes arrive in somewhat disheveled and fatigued condition, and both go soon to sleep, though in the case of Odysseus it is pictured as perfectly natural. More than this, in the account found in Berossus, the Babylonian historian writing in Greek, not only does Xisouthros (i.e., Ziusudra, the Sumerian name) go "to live with the gods" (. . . *meta tōn theōn oikēsonta*) but he takes along besides his wife and the boatman also his daughter, matching Nausicaa and completing the pattern.<sup>14</sup> The others aboard the ark go back to Babylon, and, one supposes, replenish the earth. Two things about Berossus' account are worth noting. First, his version is closer to what one would suppose the original flood myth must have said. It explains the wife and

(202) that our expectations of the canonical ending of this myth are disappointed. He further notes (200) the curiosity that Utnapishtim and company leave the ark on its landing to sacrifice to the gods (XI. 156), but then Utnapishtim and his wife re-enter the ark (XI. 189-90) for their installation as immortals—surely a sign of conflation. That is, the ceremony with Enlil is part of a translation myth; the sacrifice ceremony is part of the flood myth. I might note that to be taken from the mortal world to Dilmun does not require an ark. We may further ask what Mrs. Utnapishtim is doing there. She is apparently a hold-over from the canonical flood myth where, of course, she has a meaningful function.

<sup>13</sup>First by P. Jensen (above, note 3) 128.

<sup>14</sup>F. Jacoby, *FGrH*, III C, No. 680, Frag. 4. 15.

the boatman. Secondly, Berossus' account, in including a daughter, is closer to the *Odyssey*. A contemporary of Alexander, Berossus was the priest of Bēl at Babylon and may have had access to a version going back to oral tradition. This may be indicated further by Berossus' statement that Ziusudra went to live with the gods. In the *Gilgamesh Epic* Utnapishtim lives by himself (with wife and boatman) in Dilmun; Siduri and Huwawa too live by themselves (Gressmann [above, note 1] 164 and n. 3). This sort of thing is mythologically anomalous. Sumerian tradition made Dilmun and the Cedar Forest (mythologically the same place) a dwelling place of the gods (Kramer, *BASOR* 96 [1944] 25 n. 28). Berossus then goes back to an older tradition than the *Gilgamesh Epic*; and, if there is a relation, so does the *Odyssey*, amazingly enough.

There is another curious episode in the eleventh tablet of the Akkadian epic. No sooner has Utnapishtim told Gilgamesh of the flood and his gift of immortality in Dilmun than Gilgamesh falls asleep even as Utnapishtim is telling him not to do so. He sleeps for six days waking on the seventh declaring, as Utnapishtim foretells, that he has just dozed off. Obviously there is something more here than a good sleep induced by the rigors of his trip. Gilgamesh's own words on realizing the nature of his sleep (XI. 230-33):

What then shall I do, Utnapishtim, Whither shall I go,  
 Now that the Bereaver has laid hold on my members?  
 In my bedchamber lurks death,  
 And wherever I set my foot there is death.

imply that he has failed some sort of test (cf. Oppenheim [above, note 1] 55-56). If he could have held out he might have achieved what he was searching for. The scene here is reminiscent of certain shamanistic traditions and rites.<sup>15</sup> The origin of this scene apparently comes from the Sumerian "Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living." In this work also (*ANET* p. 49, lines 71-83 [above, note 1]) Gilgamesh falls suddenly and mysteriously asleep; Enkidu speaks to him and touches him but cannot rouse him. Whatever the meaning of this obscure passage<sup>16</sup> the use of this mysterious sleep in the Assyrian fragment seems clear enough: Gilgamesh is unworthy or incapable of attaining the condition of eternal life that his ancestor Utnapishtim has attained to. If this is

<sup>15</sup>The shaman initiate is sometimes required to go without sleep; and shamans are noted also for their long sleeps. Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (1951; Engl. trans., New York: Bollingen Series 76, 1964) mentions (313) the shamanistic ordeal of keeping awake and compares Gilgamesh's test (n. 69); cf. *ibid.* 225 n. 26 for the "long sleep" (i.e., ritual death) of the Hungarian shaman. Cf. further E. R. Dodds, *The Greeks and the Irrational* (1951; rpt. Boston 1957) 142 on the long sleep of the Cretan shaman Epimenides, and *ibid.* 164 n. 46 for other cases.

<sup>16</sup>Note also the parallel in the Cedar Forest episode with the Utnapishtim episode in that like Utnapishtim Huwawa apparently does not sleep (Oppenheim [above, note 1] 30-31). It is further apparent that the author of the *GE* was fascinated by the relation of sleep and death; cf. VIII ii. 13 and X vi. 33.

granted, then there is obviously a contradiction in our text and a further proof to my mind of conflation. Earlier in the text (XI. 197-98) Utnapishtim has said to Gilgamesh:

But now, who will for thy sake call the gods to Assembly  
That the life which thou seekest thou mayest find?

That is, as the curious 'knighting' ceremony indicated, Utnapishtim and his wife received immortality as a special, unique dispensation of the higher gods, especially Enlil. Here, however, in what we may call Gilgamesh's waking-test, we evidently have a different and earlier tradition. That is, this motif reflects a stage where the hero won immortality not by special fiat of deity but by his own efforts.<sup>17</sup> This situation in the Akkadian epic is reminiscent of the *Odyssey*. In the Aeolus episode (*Od.* 10. 28-31) Odysseus and his crew have been sailing for nine days and in this time Odysseus has not slept. On the tenth they sight home when suddenly Odysseus falls asleep with disastrous consequences. Had he stayed awake just a little longer he would have been home safe. In the Phaeacian episode (*Od.* 13. 86-95, 113-15) on the evening that Odysseus is to be escorted to his homeland he is brought aboard ship with his parting gifts; the ship departs and Odysseus falls suddenly and mysteriously asleep remaining so even after the crew have deposited him on the shores of Ithaca. There are several curious correspondences here between the two epics that cannot be the result of mere chance. It is curious, for one thing, that there is a prediction in both cases of just what the hero will do. Utnapishtim says (XI. 199) to Gilgamesh: "Up, lie not down to sleep for six days and seven nights." There has been no indication that he is immediately going to go to sleep. And how does Utnapishtim know he will sleep exactly that long? Similarly in the *Odyssey* Alcinous tells (*Od.* 7. 318) Odysseus that when the Phaeacians take him home he will be asleep. Another correspondence between the two epics here is the use of the Magic Ship motif.<sup>18</sup>

The whole complex of motifs here and their patterning: an Other-world journey, a magic ship, a magic sleep, a waking test, a visit to an immortalized human—all these motifs indicate clearly that the original meaning of these materials was completely different—the very opposite,

<sup>17</sup>This would seem to be implied also by the etymology of the name Ziusudra, 'life for distant days,' presumably, that is, after death. Assyrian Utnapishtim translates Sumerian Ziusudra. Speiser (*ANET* 90 n. 164 [above, note 1]) says, "Assyrian Utnapishtim. Perhaps 'I have found life,' . . . in contrast to the warning . . . 'life thou shalt not find,' with which Gilgamesh is confronted." I might note too the use of the phrase 'quest of life' in the *GE* (e.g., at XI. 7). The Akkadian title, its opening words, is "He who saw everything." It is evident that the Sumerian and Akkadian element translated 'see' is used in an occult sense (cf. I. 5, "the hidden he saw").

<sup>18</sup>D1123. The ship of Urshanabi accomplishes a journey of a month and a half in three days (X iii. 49). The ships of the Phaeacians have minds of their own and do not need helmsmen (*Od.* 8. 556-63).

in fact—from the meaning imposed on this material by the Akkadian author. This is true, not only in the basic reinterpretation of Tablet XI, but in much of the rest of the epic as well. The Expedition to the Cedar Forest (Tablets III-V), for instance, which is a sort of doublet of the journey to Utnapishtim, is, as we have it, simply an heroic adventure ending in the slaying of a monster (Huwawa/Humbaba). The original meaning was evidently quite different. The Cedar Forest is apparently just another designation of Dilmun (Kramer [above, note 1] 13-14; *id.* [above, note 8] 23-25). Therefore, the hero's original intention was to seek life (i.e. true life, immortality) and not simply to make a name for himself.<sup>19</sup> But it is quite in keeping with the central thought of the Akkadian author that he who seeks life (Gilgamesh) should kill the man of life. This symbolism is carried out further in having Gilgamesh, who seeks life, find Utnapishtim whose name apparently means 'life for distant days' (above, note 17), and then in having Gilgamesh lose it twice. While noting the Akkadian author's symbolic use of traditional material to reinforce his main thought, I may note that we have an interesting transformation of the nature of the two heroes Gilgamesh and Enkidu, and in both cases in the same direction. Gilgamesh was said to be two-thirds god (II ii.1) and the *dingir* or god-determinative is used in other cuneiform material before his name.<sup>20</sup> But in our epic he is wholly humanized. Similarly, Enkidu, the *Tiermensch* at the be-

<sup>19</sup>See, however, Kramer (above, note 9) 35 n. 214 and Matouš in Garelli (above, note 1) 85-87. Quite frankly, there is a contradiction here that must be squarely faced. On the one hand, the text says clearly (*ANET* p. 48 line 31 [above, note 1]) "I would enter the land, I would set up my name." One supposes, quite obviously, that this means the hero seeks glory not immortality. But since the designation of the Cedar Forest is 'the mountain of the man of life' (*kur-lú-ti-la*, Kramer [above, note 1] 13), this phrase cannot be separated from the etymology of the name Ziusudra (above, note 17) or from the general idea of the 'quest for life' and the mythological idea of Dilmun (above, note 8). Much in the Sumerian poem is obscure; even "setting up one's name" is not obvious. That is, it is not obvious that it has the same meaning as in the *GE* (e.g., III v. 7) where there is no obscurity. In the Sumerian poem Gilgamesh speaks not only of setting up his name but also of raising the names of the gods (*ANET* p. 48 line 7) and this will be done "in places where the names have not been raised up" (line 33). In the Sumerian poem, "The Deluge" (*ANET* 42-44), the word 'name' can apparently mean 'existence' (*ibid.* n. 58). If this meaning is assigned to the passage under discussion, then there is no contradiction and 'name' here means 'life' in the sense of immortal life. To me this interpretation is borne out by Gilgamesh's speech to Utu (23ff.), "In my city man dies . . ."—that is, as contrasted with the 'land of the living' where they do not.

<sup>20</sup>For instance in the Sumerian poem "Gilgamesh and the Land of the Living," as *abilgameš*. Lambert (Garelli [above, note 1]) 39 writes "the earliest occurrence of the name Gilgamesh is in a list of gods and it was particularly in his divine capacity that he enjoyed the respect of Babylonians and Assyrians in the late period." We meet him especially as god of the netherworld. One text (*ibid.*) says Gilgamesh is Nergal (Babylonian Hades). See, further, the rest of Lambert's article (Garelli 39-52) and Kramer, "Death and the Nether World according to the Sumerian Literary Texts," *Iraq* 22 (1960) 59-68. One mythological aspect

gining of the epic (purely Babylonian), becomes in the course of it a complete human being. It may even be, as Kramer suggests ([above, note 1] 19), that the use of the courtesan is to emphasize this humanizing process; that is, that sex-experience, implying not only Siduri's *carpe diem* advice but also wife, family, and home, is part of the true, human, civilized mode of life. Further, in this connection, it is noteworthy that in the Sumerian material (Kramer, *ibid.*) "Enkidu did not die at all in the ordinary sense of the word; he was seized and held by Kur." Later Enkidu returns from the realm of the dead through a hole opened for him by Utu (n. 20). That is, Enkidu's trip and return is of the typical shaman type, as also in the Orpheus myth. In the Akkadian epic, however, Enkidu dies in the usual human sense. All of these episodes seem to me to be deliberately reinterpreted in accordance with one central idea: to emphasize again and again the essentially human nature of the hero in contrast with supernatural types of the past.

It is often said that Gilgamesh failed in his quest for immortal life—which, as far as it goes, is true enough. But there is more to it than this. Sometimes the shamanistic type of hero fails.<sup>21</sup> It is not his failure that is unique. What is unique is his returning home as the same human being who started out on his wondrous quest. So Odysseus returns and takes up his family life much where he left it, older but one can hardly say wiser. Neither hero, at any rate, returns as the successful initiate into divine mysteries. But this was clearly in the tradition of the two epics. We are told at the outset of the *Gilgamesh Epic* that there are secrets the hero discovered.<sup>22</sup> But as it turns out in the case of Gilgamesh, these

of these two articles that may seem at first sight surprising is the prominence of the sun-god in the underworld (e.g., Kramer 62, "Utu, the great lord of Hades"). It is Utu who opens up a hole in the underworld for the 'shaman' Enkidu to return to this world "in the flesh" (64). Kramer hints at the explanation (63); but it has long been well-known to folklorists that sun-gods are often also gods of the underworld. So in a Babylonian prayer (Heidel [above, note 1] 157) a person possessed by a ghost addresses Shamash. See further Jane Harrison, "Helios-Hades," *CR* 22 (1908) 12-16. This is the reason for the prominence of Utu/Shamash in the Gilgamesh legend and not Böhl's *Sonnentheologie* ([above, note 1] 227, 236-37, 256).

<sup>21</sup>The cases of Bellerophon, Theseus, Maui, and perhaps Perseus may serve as examples. For a vivid description of the bones of unsuccessful shamans and a topography generally similar to Gilgamesh's quest in the second half of the *GE* (steppe, difficult mountains, dangerous water passage) see Czaplicka, *Aboriginal Siberia* (Oxford 1914) 241.

<sup>22</sup>Cf. *GE* I. 5, "the hidden he saw," and XI. 9, 187-88, 266. For the general mythological significance of Gilgamesh's 'quest for life' see above, notes 7 and 19. Similarly, as A.B. Lord says (Ch. v, "Homer and other Epic Poetry," in Wace and Stubbings, ed., *A Companion to Homer* [London 1962] 204), "Odysseus' journey to the realm of Hades may be said to symbolize a search for life, it has parallels in the ancient Gilgamesh epic, the *Kalevala*, and elsewhere." The consultation of Utnapishtim is structurally similar to that of Tiresias. They are both immortalized shamans or what the Egyptians called 'effective personalities' among the dead (*ANET* 33 n. 10 [above, note 1]).

secrets are useless to him. In the less intellectual *Odyssey*, the tradition has nearly forgotten that there ever were secrets. Odysseus' journeys to Scheria and the Underworld have become just heroic adventures to enhance the hero's name. Odysseus' talk with the 'shaman' Tiresias reveals no more than what Circe had already told him. But not only does the Akkadian author show in his plot structure the failure of his hero, but to be certain that the reader cannot miss his intention he has this message delivered to his hero again and again. Gilgamesh is told that he will not find what he seeks by the Scorpion-men (IX iii. 8-9), by the god Shamash (X i [OB] 8), by the boatman Urshanabi (X iii [Assyr.] 7), by Utnapishtim (XI. 197-98), and most eloquently by Siduri (X iii [OB] 1-14). In a speech to Enkidu Gilgamesh in a sense tells himself (III iv [OB] 3-16). That is, this was the author's intention all along, that the hero fail, that he return home empty-handed and with no supernatural secrets of any use to mankind.

Why? We come now to the very heart of what the epic is all about. There can be no blinking the fact that the author intended this 'failure.' He wanted to say simply that Gilgamesh and *a fortiori* all other men are only—and should only strive to be—human beings. In our position in western civilization this may not seem too much of a statement. But in the context of its culture this was a truly momentous idea and one that was of momentous historical consequence. It was the first statement, at least in germinal form, of the idea of humanism, a belief we ordinarily associate with the rise of Greek culture. The whole structuring of the Akkadian epic, it seems to me, points to this conclusion. As we saw, both Gilgamesh and Enkidu, who have different folklore traditions, are restructured to be simply human beings. The otherworld and paradise myths of the Cedar Forest and Dilmun are restructured to be, in the one instance, just an adventure and, in the other, to point up what must be the author's belief that traditional stories of immortalized humans in paradise are nonsense; or, at least, are meaningless to urban, civilized humans. In the waking-test and Plant of Youth/Life episodes, which had originally different meanings, the author has had the hero do the natural, human thing. In the former episode Gilgamesh goes to sleep (cf. V iv. 7: "Sleep, which is shed on mankind, overcame him."). Utnapishtim apparently does not sleep—but he is not human. In the other episode the snake gets the magic plant and thus renews himself. Humans, however, do not do this. And especially, as also in the *Odyssey*, the hero goes home to friends and family, which, as Siduri sums it up, "is the task of mankind" (X iii. 14).<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup>It is not, of course, a new observation that the *GE* centers about a human being (e.g., Kramer [above, note 1] 7) or even that its end is not especially pessimistic or resigned but rather optimistic in a purely human sense (cf. J. J. Stamm, "Das Gilgamesch-Epos und seine Vorgeschichte," *Asiatische Studien* 6 [1952] 25: "Das Ende [of the *GE*] ist somit nicht die Verzweigung über den Misserfolg, sondern die nüchterne Zuwendung zu dem was in der Welt dem Men-

As a consequence of the new, humanized hero, the pivot around which the rest of the story turns, several new ideas arose important for the formation of heroic epic and important for the future of literature and philosophy in general. If there are no secrets and powers the hero can win what then does he labor for? The answer in the *Gilgamesh Epic* and the Homeric epics is much the same. He hopes simply to leave behind a name. In the expedition to the Cedar Forest there is a fine expression of this sentiment (III iv [OB] 13-16 and cf. III v [OB]6; IV vi. 39). This idea of 'heroic realism' is found throughout Homer, most eloquently expressed perhaps in the scene near the end of the *Odyssey* (24. 24-97) where Agamemnon laments his own fate and felicitates Achilles on his death and burial. Similarly Enkidu laments his not dying heroically in battle (fr. assigned to end of Tabl. VII, *ANET* 87 [above, note 1]).

The new status of the hero leads, further, to a new situation in literature, peculiar to true heroic epic, the successful struggle of a mortal hero against an immortal god. In the *Gilgamesh Epic* Ishtar offers herself as wife to Gilgamesh (VI. 7). Far from accepting her proposal, Gilgamesh in a longish speech (VI. 24-78) insults her. I might note that it is quite consonant with the author's overall views that this defiance of the high god Ishtar (the goddess of his own city and in a ritual sense his consort) is composed of a catalogue of disgraceful myths of the past, the burden of which is her malign treatment of her lovers. Thus insulted Ishtar goes to her father, the sky-god Anu, and her mother Antum. She threatens to release the dead if her insult is not avenged (97-190). A monster, the Bull of Heaven, is sent against the heroes, which they slay; and, as a capping insult, Enkidu hurls the bull's thigh into the face of Ishtar (161). I have recounted this episode not only to show the successful defiance of a god by the two mortal heroes but to note as well the end of the whole episode (168-190), where the bull's horns are regarded as a trophy and the heroes hold, as it were, a victory parade in downtown Uruk. Gilgamesh is here acclaimed "the most splendid among heroes." In view of ordinary Mesopotamian beliefs about the relation of men and gods, this episode could hardly have been viewed as less than sacrilege (Jacobsen [above, note 1] 200-01, 219; Gressmann [above, note 1] 120; Landsberger in Garelli [above, note 1] 34; Böhl [above, note 1] 111-12). It is true Enkidu will have to pay for this, but for the moment the heroes have their glory. The whole scene here is, furthermore, replete with Homeric analogues.<sup>24</sup>

schen gegeben und ihm zu verwirklichen möglich ist."). What I have tried to show is that this meaning is contained in the structure and use the author has made of his inherited materials.

<sup>24</sup>While separate items of comparison have been pointed out, the whole complex of this scene has not been compared with Homer heretofore. It is well-known that Circe, like Ishtar, can turn humans into animals. But the striking of Ishtar by Enkidu is very similar to the wounding of the Greek goddess of love, Aphrodite, by Diomedes (*Il.* 5. 336). She too goes crying to her mother Dione (5. 370), who is Zeus' wife in this particular tradition. Moreover, her name is etymologic-

As heroic realism is the noble, manly response to the new view of man that he is not a god or half-god, nor is there any way for him to become one, so, what we may call the more human response, is the *carpe diem* philosophy put appropriately in the mouth of the ale-wife Siduri (X iii. 1-14). Neither the *Gilgamesh Epic* nor Homer make much of this Weltanschauung. To do so would tarnish the hero's image. The Greek lyric poets will be the first to give voice to this doctrine. Heroic realism is necessarily an unstable position. The new, humanistic hero (Gilgamesh, Achilles, Odysseus) knows there is no grand supernatural reward (Dilmun, Elysium) but he behaves still in the old pattern, as if there were. 'Leaving a name' is bound to appear to any intellectual questioning as an inadequate reason. Siduri's philosophy, however, after a long life in Greece and Rome, is still with us.

It is well-known that in the Sumerian tradition Enkidu was the servant, not the friend, of Gilgamesh. In the *Gilgamesh Epic* they are the closest of friends; they are, in fact, called the two brothers (VI. 156).<sup>25</sup> They are not evidently equals, however; Gilgamesh is king and Enkidu dies midway in the story. This is, I think, a new situation, a 'first' in literature, and here again Homeric epic follows the pattern: Achilles and Patroclus are the closest of friends; yet, they are clearly not equals, and Patroclus dies more or less midway in the story (*Il.* 16. 855). The situation in Sumerian literature was the original one, where the master has a servant or 'sidekick.' This original situation was retained in pure myth, usually more conservative than heroic epic. So Herakles has a sort of junior partner, Iolaus; Romulus has Remus, Theseus has Pirithous. This new situation was the result, also, of the changed status of the central hero. As the hero became more of an independent being, able to act even in defiance of the gods, so his servant rose a notch too and became his friend, though still subordinate. That is, he shared in the new found humanity of the hero.

The new situation, further, had clear dramatic dividends. Since there is no romance in heroic epic the death of a friend is certainly one of the highest emotional situations possible. The author of the *Gilgamesh Epic*

ally 'Mrs. Sky-god,' i.e. Mrs. Zeus. Thus, going along with the similar myth structure we have an exact etymological correspondence, Anu: Antu(m): : Zeus: Dione. Further, both wives are unimportant figures in their respective pantheons. In a different scene in the *Odyssey* Helios, much like Ishtar, brings pressure on Zeus by threatening to go down and shine among the dead (12. 383). In sum, these correspondences are obviously not the work of chance. But their different adaption in the *GE* and Homeric epics indicates indirect rather than direct influence or derivation from a similar tradition.

<sup>25</sup>I suspect that in much earlier tradition Gilgamesh and Enkidu were twins or two aspects of the same mythological person. Sumerian iconography may indicate this (see Amiet 169-71 and Offner 175 n. 1 in Garelli [above, note 1]). See further Ebeling, "Talim," *Afo* 5 (1928-29) 218-19 and Douglas van Buren, "The Guardians of the Gate," *Orientalia* 16 (1947) 312, 320. Herakles was a twin, as were Romulus et al.



uses this new theme to particularly good effect, to motivate in a changed and poignantly human sense the hero's traditional search for immortality.

This then is the meaning of the *Gilgamesh Epic*: it is the first embodiment in dramatic form and in explicit statement of the idea of humanism.<sup>26</sup> It must have been a very revolutionary idea at the time.<sup>27</sup> The cultural climate was perhaps not yet ripe for the further development of this idea; later in Greece, on friendlier soil, the germ of humanism will develop much further. Now, whether this first embodiment of the idea of humanism is pessimistic, negative, and unsatisfying is a question largely, I believe, of the way we look at it. On the religious side, from our background of Christianity and Platonism, Enkidu's vision of the Land of No Return (esp. VII iv. 18-42) as well as the brief retort of Achilles to Odysseus in the Underworld (*Od.* 11. 488-91) may seem excessively bitter. But I would call attention to the fact that it is the attitude and emphasis that have changed, not so much the mythological formulation. There is no question of non-survival after death in either epic. If we look closely in Homer (*Od.* 11) the heroes are doing much the same thing they did on earth. Orion still hunts (572-73), Herakles is about to shoot his bow (608), Minos is giving judgment (569) etc. Even in the *Gilgamesh Epic* this is obvious. We are told (VII iv. 37) that the dead eat dust and clay. But a few lines later (44-45) the fare is roast beef and cool water (always a sign of the fortunate dead). From the point of view of the drama itself, since Homer is perhaps a better

<sup>26</sup>Not, of course, a statement of humanism as a philosophical idea in systematic form. That will be the discovery of the Greek sophists. Jaeger says of the sophists (*Paideia*<sup>2</sup> [Engl. trans. 1939; New York: Oxford Univ. Press 1962] I 307) quite rightly, "The idea of human nature, now formulated for the first time, should not be regarded as a simple or natural idea; it was a great and fundamental discovery of the Greek mind. Only after it had been discovered was it possible to construct a real theory of culture." Jaeger further ties this discovery of the sophists not so much to the Milesian physicists but rather to Homer and the poets (296). I maintain that Homer inherited this generally human-oriented Weltanschauung from the Near East, in particular the tradition of the *GE*. I have not spoken of routes of transmission—notoriously hard to prove—but for some learned opinion see Heubeck in Garelli ([above, note 1] 185-86, 190—by way of the Hittites); similarly Ungnad ([above, note 1] 29-30) and Matouš (*Das Altertum* 4 [1958] 208). T.B.L. Webster (*Minos* 4 [1956] 115-16) speaks of bilingual Mycenaean at Ugarit.

<sup>27</sup>In speaking of the confrontation with Ishtar I have already indicated how irreverent the Akkadian author could be. This again is much like Homer on occasion. There must have been some social causation for this. If the times of the *OB* author were marked by economic growth, international contact, a separation of the secular and religious spheres of activity, and an "Umschaltung der sozialen Schichtung" (Böhl [above, note 1] 228), then this situation might well give rise to a more humanistic view of the world. This revolt against the past, particularly its religious positions, may have been aided by the Akkadian author's anti-Sumerian animus (Böhl 229). This 'humanistic' period was apparently only a hiatus and the concern of intellectuals only. Later times return to the faith of their fathers (Böhl 259-60; Heidel [above, note 1] 152).

poet and less of a philosopher, since he concentrates on the dramatic action and is not so concerned to prove a point, we are less aware that Odysseus, for instance, is only a human being, that he passes up marriage and immortality with a goddess for wife and home—we in fact applaud him for this. Odysseus' situation is not felt as a failure. Homer's world has become perhaps more secularized and he is not in such sharp disagreement with traditional lore. The Akkadian author, however, wants to place Gilgamesh in the sharpest possible contrast with the formulations of the past. He is intended to fail, as repeated statements throughout the epic tell him in the bluntest terms. But that is the point; these past formulations are valueless for humans. The human hero must discover this. Heroic realism is not the happy ending of folktale, but it is not pessimistic, unless realism is pessimistic. In any case, its future through the Greeks for western civilization was a momentous one.

I have been concerned to demonstrate why it is we feel such affinity between the Akkadian and Homeric epics. But it is not just the same type of hero and same general outlook that these epics share; in addition, they are cast in the same literary genre, the heroic epic. By heroic epic I do not mean any work vaguely designated epic or any figure vaguely describable as heroic, but literary works of the sort that the *Gilgamesh Epic* and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are. This sounds like a circular argument and it is—but necessarily so. The literary genre of heroic epic arose as a consequence of the new view of man. It was historically unique. It is said that Gilgamesh was the first tragic hero (Sandars [above, note 2] 7), that "for the first time in the history of the world a profound experience on such a heroic scale has found expression in a noble style" (*ANET* [above, note 1] 72), that the Near East, though rich in other literary genres, produced nothing else like the *Gilgamesh Epic* (Landsberger in Garelli [above, note 1] 31). Some primitive peoples have oral compositions that are often called epic, some of considerable size, obviously the result of much skill and a long tradition; but these bear little resemblance to true heroic epic.<sup>28</sup> The Sumerian materials that form the basis of the Akkadian epic have a hero, Gilgamesh, but are not—nor would a combination of them be—true heroic epic. If then the *Gilgamesh Epic* is a unique artistic creation, establishing for the first time a new genre, we should ask what must be the reason for this. The answer can hardly be other than, as we have seen, the rise of this new view of what man is, a first glimpse of the idea of humanity as something separate and apart, neither god nor animal. An examination

<sup>28</sup>In addition to the generally primitive aspect (hero can speak with his knife, can change into animal form, is killed but soon restored to life, etc.) there is a noticeable lack of human concerns and feelings (hero's comrade or relatives may get killed but this is regarded matter-of-factly). Some primitive epics, however, do show a unity of sorts because it is a story about a hero. The overall impression of primitive epic, however, is vastly different from that of the *GE* or Homer. In this respect primitive epic is closer to myth and folktale.

of the differentiae distinguishing heroic epic from other Near Eastern works, on the one hand, and from primitive epic on the other, makes this clear. In both the Akkadian and Homeric epics man is the focus of the dramatic attention. Whatever parts—and these may be considerable—divinities play, their action is relevant only insofar as it affects the hero. While in theory the gods are greater, wiser, etc. this is of little moment in heroic epic; attention is centered upon the human hero and his feelings. It is true that the Sumerian poem “Gilgamesh and Agga of Kish” is about humans only; but besides its lack of epic proportion, the use of the dramatis personae is stiff and no human concerns are touched upon in a way to enlist our sympathies.

Since the concentration in heroic epic is upon a human hero and his life, this led to another literary feature of this genre (later employed in drama); that is, unity of action. If we read Hesiod’s *Theogony* or the *Enuma Elish* the difference in structure in the two types is at once apparent. The theological works present a tableau of scenes which have their moments but no artistic unity. In the *Gilgamesh Epic* this unity is formally noted by the words at the beginning (I i. 15-18) having an echo at the end (XI. 305-08). However, the artistic unity of the *Gilgamesh Epic* is not merely a formal achievement; but like the genre of heroic epic, the theme of friendship, the philosophy of heroic realism and *carpe diem*, it too is the result of the central idea of the humanity of the hero. A story of human life, as contrasted with immortals, by its very nature imposes a unity, but this cannot come about until the discovery that humans have only a human life.

In conclusion, all of this comes together and ‘gels’ for the first time primarily as a result of cultural factors: the collapse of older mythic formulations and the consequent rise of a certain disillusionment, perhaps bitterness even, in this realization; but also the consequent birth, almost unconsciously perhaps, of the idea that humans are separate by and for themselves. In literature the first fruits of this new idea were the *Gilgamesh Epic* and the Homeric epos.

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