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Essay #1 Topic #2

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The Gods in the Epics

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* and *The Iliad*

The word “God” originated from the Greeks and the Hebrews and was influenced by several other cultures and languages, meaning the rulers, judges, or divine ones.[[1]](#footnote-0) But where did God even come from? People usually think of Jesus when asked such a question due to Christianity’s mainstream dominance today. However, back in ancient times, in contrast to the modern monotheistic Christian, the Sumerians created, believed, and worshipped a polytheistic religion themselves. The Greeks also had their own polytheistic religion - mythology, to be precise. In fact, they were both as influential and popular in their areas as Christianity today. As a result, they were both well manifested through various ancient literature, historic documents, and epics. Among them, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* by Anonymous was the first epic known that involved the Sumerian deities while *The Iliad* by the ancient poet Homer was another classic epic that involved the Greek gods. The portrayal of the gods in the two epics had many similarities in terms of their respective roles, as well as how they compared to humans through interactions with each other.

The first similarity between the portrayal of the gods in *The Iliad* and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* lay behind the structural similarity of the Greek and Sumerian religions. Not every Greek or Sumerian worshipped the exact same gods. Faiths and temples differed slightly from city-state to city-state.[[2]](#footnote-1) In fact, this contextual background knowledge was quite essential in a way that it served as an important underlying cause for the conflicting wills among the gods, and the corresponding interaction with humans. Other structural similarities included that the Greek mythologies had many gods, each responsible for his or her own field. People prayed the right god for return on that aspect of life. There was also a god of god in both mythologies. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Anu was the sky god and the fatehr of gods. He ruled the heaven. In *The Iliad*, the equivalent was Zeus, also the god of the sky and the ruler of all gods.

The second similarity between the portrayal of the gods in *The Iliad* and *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was their common portrayal of the flaws of the gods. People assumed gods were omniscent, omnipotent, and omnipresent. However, in both epics, gods tended to show all three traits oppositely quite frequently. As mentioned earlier, the gods always created conflict. Even worse, they brought the conflict among themselves to the humans. In such ways, the constant conflict among the gods not only divided the gods themselves but also divided people in the mortal world. Gods made immature, ignorant, and short-sighted decisions that caused many tragedies in humans. Sadly, the gods never took these into consideration. During these conflicts, they only cared about themselves and aimed to win each other to fulfill their vanity and pride, leaving the humans fighting, suffering, and dying. In other words, the gods were indeed powerful, but they used that power to play their own games while crushing the mortals relentlessly.

While most people had no choice but to pray for the good and let the gods play, some stood up bravely like true legendary heroes against such fate. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh would be such a man who was never willing to submit. Although he paid his price and learned his lesson later, Gilgamesh offended the gods and attempted to fight and prove himself. Such a courageous act deserved to be respected.

“What could I offer

the queen of love in return, who lacks nothing at all?

Balm for the body? The food and drink of the gods?

I have nothing to give to her who lacks nothing at all.

You are the door through which the cold gets in.

You are the fire that goes out. You are the pitch

that sticks to the hands of the one who carries the bucket.

You are the house that falls down. You are the shoe

that pinches the foot of the wearer. The ill-made wall

that buckles when time has gone by. The leaky

water skin soaking the water skin carrier”(*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, VI).

Here Gilgamesh had just slain Humbaba and returned from the Cedar Forest. Ishtar, the goddess of love, was lustful and asked him to become her lover. Gilgamesh rejected her with contempt. He scorned and insulted her with the use of skillful diction and a sarcastic tone. This was extremely rare in ancient mythologies. Gilgamesh knew the consequence of a mortal man offending an immortal god, but he still did offend Ishtar harshly. As a result, Ishtar asked her father Anu to release the bull of heaven, devastating Gilgamesh’s land. And after Gilgamesh and Enkidu killed the bull of heaven, they faced even worse consequences, eventually their death. Life and brotherhood were what Gilgamesh paid for the price of offending a goddess like this. He eventually failed to escape his fate, but again, this unstoppable fearlessness deserved to be recognized.

Similarly, in *The Iliad*, Achilles was somehow the equivalent of Gilgamesh. When he and Agamemnon led the Achaean army to invade Troy, they were unafraid of the fact that Troy was under the protection of Apollo. They both paid their prices. The plague and the loss of the lives of the Achaean army was Agamemnon’s price while the death of Patroclus was Achilles’ price. But the intervention of the gods with the human affairs had much more to do with the gods themselves. In this scene Ares told the true intentions of the gods after wounded:

“we suffer—thanks to our own conflicting wills—

whenever we show these mortal men some kindness”(*The Iliad*, V).

According to Ares, the gods attempted to bring “some kindness”(*The Iliad*, V) to mortal human beings. However, things did not go perfectly planned, just as the gods themselves were not perfect either. Whenever the gods were willing to do something good for someone, they were doing something harmful to someone else in the meantime. Sometimes they just ruined everything. For example, Aphrodite saved Paris from his duel with Menelaus, causing further conflict between the Achaeans and the Trojans. If Paris died in the duel, the Trojan would have ended, saving thousands of people’s lives. Similarly, in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the gods’ first intention for their intervention and the creation of Enkidu was only to warn Gilgamesh of his mistreatment of his people but ended up killing both Enkidu and Gilgamesh.

All of these proved that the gods were neither omniscient nor omnipotent. They fought over their own conflicts, just like how the mortal humans fought wars against each other. They had their own selfish desires, preferably helping ones they liked and leaving others to die. They played around the mortal world as if watching an entertainment performance. They were powerful indeed, but just because of that, they were not capable of doing anything good but causing tragedies to happen. In other words, the gods were essentially empowered humans. They inherited all the human traits. With more power came deeper flaws and harsher consequences of every intervention they made with the moral world.

Work Cited

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