ME-Mesopotamia-Gilgamesh-Interpretation

The Epic of Gilgamesh & Ancient Mesopotamian Religion

**Introduction**

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a poetic epic comprised of numerous redacted Sumerian stories that were eventually patched together in Akkadian to form a coherent epic about a king, who, in antiquity, was believed to have been a historical person.[1]  The antecedent Sumerian stories that went into the production of the Akkadian epic as we know it today, date to sometime prior to 2150 BCE, toward the end of the Akkadian period,[2] although their oral origins probably reach much further back into Sumerian antiquity.[3]  This epic chronicles the fictional quest for immortality of Gilgamesh, king of Uruk.  The significance of this first great epic cannot be overstated. Many of the themes, myths and motifs that appear in this ancient epic were adopted by the authors of the Hebrew Bible and have thus made their way into Western culture via Christianity and into Middle Eastern culture via Islam.  It would be fair to say, that if we could delete from the annals of history the *Epic of Gilgamesh*and the corpus of redacted Sumerian tales that went into its production, both the Bible and the Qur’an would contain far fewer pages.[4]

There is much we can learn about the ancient Mesopotamian religion from this encyclopaedic epic.  What functions did both the format and contents of this epic serve?  What did the authors and the audience of this epic believe about gods and the supernatural realm?  What role did religion play with regards to kingship and politics? How did religion impact upon the urbanization of early Mesopotamia? How did dreams fit into the expression phenomena of the ancient Mesopotamian religion? How did they view the afterlife? All of these questions can be answered by a careful examination of this comprehensive tale about a divine king’s quest for immortality and his ascension from hubris to humility.

This essay will answer the questions set out above, and in the process it will be argued that the *Epic of Gilgamesh*was a mnemonic device used to instruct audiences in rudimentary sciences, ethics, politics and religion.  It will also be argued that such epics were a means by which superstitious populations could be kept in line by ruling elites, who used useful yet fictitious notions of divine kingship and other forms of psychological manipulation to maintain oppressive authority over the unwashed masses, and at the same time create social stability in the ancient urban centres of Mesopotamia.

**The Epic**

Epics were the encyclopaedias of the ancient world.[5]  They are vast narrative warehouses which contain large portions of a given society’s knowledge about the world.  This literary genre originated in the preliterate world,[6] and for this reason both the epic’s style and its contents served a highly important didactic function in largely illiterate societies.

Read, remember and recite the process Einstein used to arrive at his theory of general relativity. If that’s too difficult, recite the storyline of one of your favourite movies.  Which is easier?   It would be a steep challenge for anyone not versed in physics to read, remember and recite the method and means by which Einstein arrived at his theory of general relativity, but what if such details were anthropomorphized into interesting characters, or planted within pivotal plot points in an engaging and entertaining poetic epic, an epic that employed emotionally attractive archetypes such as the hero, the rhythm of beautiful poetry, the stimulating quest motif, metaphors, music and a narrative scheme?  Perhaps then it might be much easier to remember such intricate information.  This, as well as general entertainment, was the role of the ancient poetic epic.[7]

Although epics tend to be poetic combinations of myth and legend, they served similar functions to myths proper.

According to Vandiver, myths serve a variety of functions. They explain (explanatory/aetiological myths), warn (warning myths), in­struct (instructive myths), and they justify (justification/charter myths).[8]

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* fulfills each and every one of these functions. Notwithstanding numerous other examples, this epic *explains* why snakes shed their skins,[9] it *warns* the audience not to disrespect the temperamental goddess Ishtar (Inanna),[10] it *instructs*rulers to be humble, and it *justifies* the authority of the king,[11] who was believed to have been appointed by the gods.[12]

**Polytheism and Sickness**

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* clearly betrays the polytheism of ancient Mesopotamia. Many of the primary gods of the Mesopotamian pantheon play important roles in this epic, from Gilgamesh’s mother, the goddess Ninsun;[13] the wise sun god Shamash,[14] who convinces Enkidu to withdraw his curse on the temple prostitute Shamhat [15] – to the chief Mesopotamian sky god Anu,[16] who, after hearing the complaints of the people of Uruk, inspired the goddess Aruru to create Gilgamesh’s wild twin Enkidu.[17]  The various parts played by the gods demonstrates not only the polytheism of the ancient Mesopotamian religion but also, it reveals the roles that the ancient Mesopotamians believed the gods played in everyday life.

The gods of ancient Mesopotamia would intervene in human affairs for a variety of reasons.  When Gilgamesh rejected the advances of Ishtar she appealed to her father Anu to send a bull from heaven to kill him.[18]  Following their slaying of Humbaba and the bull from heaven, and Enkidu’s insulting of Ishtar, the gods intervened to ensure that one of the two heroes would die and subsequently, Enkidu became sick and eventually died.[19] This aspect of the narrative reveals that the people of ancient Mesopotamia believed that sickness was the result of the will of supernatural agents.  In discussing the ancient Mesopotamian’s perception of sickness and disease, Black and Green state:

`…the causes (as we mean the word) of disease were not understood. They were often ascribed to the work of gods or of demons acting as the agents of gods for the punishment of sin. Some diseases were described as, for example, ‘the hand of god’, ‘the hand of a ghost (gidim)’, ‘the hand of Istar (Inana)’, ‘the hand of Samas (Utu)’, indicating the deity or demon thought responsible for them.`[20]

The gods afflicting Enkidu with a fatal sickness represents an aspect of the narrative that serves multiple functions.  It warns the audience not to disrespect the gods; it explains why people get sick, and it justifies the role of the priest, particularly with regards to their services provided to the sick, diseased, and the dying.[21]  Given the belief that there were innumerable gods that might be offended, often absent the intent of the offender,[22] such tales would have probably kept the population in strict adherence to the religious rules established by priests and kings.

**Divine Kingship**

Gilgamesh was the king of Uruk.[23] He was, according to the story, two-thirds divine and one-third mortal.[24]  The prologue of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* paints the following picture of this royal paragon:

`He who saw the Deep, the country’s foundation,

[who] knew … , was wise in all matters!

[Gilgamesh, who] saw the Deep, the country’s foundation,

[who] knew … , was wise in all matters!

[He] … everywhere …

and *[learnt]*of everything the sum of wisdom.

He saw what was secret, discovered what was hidden,

he brought back a tale of before the Deluge.`[25]

This wasn’t merely an epic about a single Mesopotamian king but, in some regards, a standard Mesopotamian king.  They were wise, strong, handsome, heroic, intelligent, brave, and even if they did occasionally oppress their citizens, as was the case in the beginning of this epic,[26] they were guided by the gods toward virtue and valour.  The kings were not only on occasion semi-divine, [27] they were, in every case, divinely appointed.[28]

Regardless of whether kings were perceived of as being divine or not, they were almost certainly seen as having had a close relationship with the gods, who appointed them and from the gods’ heavenly abode descended kingship itself.[29]

**Religion and Urbanization**

An interesting and revealing theme which runs through the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is that of the struggle between civilization and savagery, or to put it another way, the dichotomy between urban civilization and rural habitation.[30] Despite being Gilgamesh’s equal in almost every conceivable way,[31] Enkidu was a wild man who lived with the animals, jostled with them at the watering holes, who ate grass and uncultivated foods, [32] who had long, matted and unkempt hair,[33] and who, in the end, was convinced by the wise sun god Shamash that it is better to die within the civilized walls of the city like a man, than to die like an animal in the wild.[34]  Shamhat, the temple prostitute responsible for civilizing Enkidu through temptation, causing him to the leave the steppe/open country (Sum. *Eden*),[35] represents a kind of proto-Eve, yet her temptation led to the rise rather than the fall of Enkidu, who was in many regards the personification of uncivilized man, and, possibly, of nature itself.[36]

This struggle between civilization and nature, coupled with the central role that the city of Uruk plays in the narrative, exposes the importance that urbanization had on both the daily life of the ancient inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia [37] and their religious worldview, which were both inextricably bound together.[38]

The author of the epic writes:

`He [Gilgamesh] had the wall of Uruk built, the sheepfold Of holiest Eanna, the pure treasury. See its wall, which is like a copper band, Survey its battlements, which nobody else can match, Take the threshold, which is from time immemorial, Approach Eanna, the home of Ishtar, Which no future king nor any man will ever match! Go up on to the wall of Uruk and walk around! Inspect the foundation platform and scrutinize the brickwork!  Testify that its bricks are baked bricks, And that the Seven Counsellors must have laid its foundations! One square mile is city, one square mile is orchards, one square mile is claypits, as well as the open ground of Ishtar’s temple. Three square miles and the open ground comprise Uruk`.[39]

This portion of the tablet exposes the emphasis placed on the quality and quantity of urban construction, but most of all, this small excerpt informs us about the jewel of Uruk, the sacred temple of Ishtar.  From this we may deduce that Ishtar was the patron deity of Uruk. In ancient Mesopotamia it was customary to have a patron deity for each city-state,[40] and these deities didn’t merely protect and punish the citizens of each urban centre, they resided within the city walls,[41] they ate the offerings provided by the inhabitants,[42] they were, often in statue form, venerated citizens of the cities,[43] thus displaying the crucial significance that cities themselves had on the religious worldview of the people of ancient Mesopotamia.

A practical reason for the propagation of the belief that powerful patron deities resided in the cities may well be linked with the need of the elites to maintain a loyal, if not fearful, hardworking labour force, a labour force necessary to build the grandiose temples, ziggurats, palaces and the properties of farmers, fortune-telling *sa ilu* (seer-priests),[44] brick makers, and the ever-expanding urban centres of ancient Mesopotamia.

**Mantic Dreams**

In ancient Mesopotamia dreams were not seen so much as expressions of the sub-conscious mind, but divine portents, messages from supernatural agents which needed to be decoded by those who possessed the highly valued mantic abilities to interpret them, or so the people believed.  A compilation of dream omens has come down to us from ancient Mesopotamian records and it appears that the practice of divining the future from dreams was, at least in part, based on precedent. For example, the list of dream subjects and their meanings include sexual encounters, journeys, visions of certain people and animals.[45]

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the hero has a number of significant dreams. These dreams are accurately interpreted by both his mother Ninsun and by his best friend Enkidu.  On both occasions, the dreams foretell Gilgamesh’s future. The first two dreams forecast, albeit in typical dreamlike abstraction, the coming of Enkidu, representing him as both an immovable “sky-bolt of Anu”[46] (possibly a meteor) and an axe that both Gilgamesh and his mother doted over.[47]  On the second occasion, Gilgamesh had a series of three dreams about he and Enkidu’s forthcoming showdown with the forest-dwelling monster Humbaba, and later on in the epic, Enkidu has a dream about his own death.  Each and every one of these dreams not only carried important significance for the plot but more importantly, they all came true.  Divining the future from dreams was an aspect of the expression phenomena of the ancient Mesopotamian religion, and this form of manticism later found its way into the Abrahamic religions.

Husser elaborates on the significance of dreams in ancient Mesopotamia, saying:

`As in the science of divination as a whole, it is Samas [Shamash] who presides over dreams and who holds in his possession knowledge of the messages they transmit’.[48]

Shamash’s role as the presider over dreams is betrayed in the narrative of Gilgamesh following Enkidu’s interpretation of Gilgamesh’s dream about Humbaba, exclaiming:

`At the light of dawn we shall hear the favourable word of Shamash‘.[49]

Enkidu`s dream offers a particularly valuable contribution to our understanding of how the ancient Mesopotamians organized their conceptions of the afterlife, or `netherworld’. The afterlife, at least the afterlife that Enkidu was bound for, is a miserable place of no return [50] – a place of darkness,[51] where people survive by eating soil and clay [52] – a place ruled over by the queen of the netherworld, the bitter goddess Ereshkigal.[53]  Despite the absence of light, reading and writing seem to be undertaken by the goddess’ scribe [Beret]-Seri.[54]  Among the inmates in this dark `house of dust’ are priests and kings.[55]

*Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and the Netherworld* is an early Sumerian tale that offers greater detail of the ancient Mesopotamian concept of the afterlife, and part of this tale appears to have been adapted into Tablet XII of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.[56]  In this early Sumerian tale, a person’s fate in the netherworld is determined by both how they lived and how they died, but such a concept doesn’t appear to have been adopted in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, although there is a lost portion of Enkidu’s dream of the netherworld,[57] so it may have existed in the now lost fragment of the story.

**Conclusion**

The Epic of Gilgamesh was a didactic and entertaining poem.  It was a tale that teaches us a great deal about the religion of its authors and their audience.  We can deduce from the epic’s oral origins that it probably served as a mnemonic device employed for imparting teachings with regards to ancient ethics, the sciences of the day, the role of the king and the divinely ascribed legitimacy of the king. It warns about the grave consequences for disrespecting the gods, consequences that included sickness, disease and death. It informs us about the role that religion played in the urban centres. It reveals the significance that dreams had within the expression phenomena of the ancient Mesopotamian religion and it enlightens our understanding of how the ancient Mesopotamians viewed the afterlife.

Overall, the picture of the ancient Mesopotamian religion painted by this epic is a pessimistic one.  Yet, in spite of its pessimism, it vindicates the values of friendship, love, humility, empathy for the sick and dying, and many of the valuable qualities which make us human.  Aside from the tyranny of the ancient Mesopotamian monarchies and the superstitious and scientific ignorance of the ancient civilization which forms the canvass and the curvatures of this poem, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* shows (some may say sadly) that modern religion has remained remarkably similar in substance to its archaic antecedents, for, many believers still dangerously prefer prayers over medicine, our largest cities are still adorned with expensive `houses of the gods’; dreams are still believed to be cryptic messages from supernatural agents; many still fear the wrath of their particular deity, and the majority of the inhabitants of our planet still live their lives in the hope of avoiding Enkidu`s netherworld whilst praying to enter into the glorious abode of Anu.

**Notes**

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