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Foundations I

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Enkidu: An Ode to the Ideal Friendship

Friendship as a theme in storytelling is as old as writing itself. And what greater testimony to this statement can we find than the oldest surviving literature of the world, "The Epic of Gilgamesh." Here Enkidu is shown as a model friend, as a blood brother, to the protagonist of the story. Several passages and lines in the text stand testimony to this fact.

There are many references in the epic that show Enkidu as a great counsel to Gilgamesh. Early in their quest to kill Humbaba and retrieve cedarwood, Enkidu helps Gilgamesh understand his five dreams (31-35). Later he encourages Gilgamesh to go for glory by killing Humbaba as illustrated by the following lines:

My friend! Humbaba is guardian of the forest [of cedars]

Finish him off for the kill, put him out of existence.

……………………………………

Establish [your reputation] for all time:

"Gilgamesh, who slew Humbaba." (44)

Both these instances serve as pivotal moments of the first quest. The dreams were interpreted as a divine blessing (Shamash's) bestowed on their mission and the slaying of Humbaba as its decisive culmination.

Enkidu continues in his role as a sound advisor, even during the Ishtar episode. He advises Gilgamesh on how to tackle the "Bull of Heaven" when he mentions, "So knowing its strength, [I know] how to deal with it…Thrust your dagger between nape, horn, and kill-point!" (53). This gave Gilgamesh victory over Ishtar's mad quest for revenge and saved Uruk from the rampaging bull. In the light of these excerpts, it is evident that Enkidu's guidance, just like that of a great friend, aided Gilgamesh on every step of the way.

Loyalty and steadfastness are hallmarks of Enkidu's friendship throughout his story arc. He is concerned for Gilgamesh's safety in undertaking a dangerous mission but, once confronted with actual danger, encourages him to hold his ground rather than run away. Enkidu tries his best to dissuade Gilgamesh from going on his quest to kill Humbaba by mentioning, "Enlil appointed him to frighten off the people, Enlil ordained him seven direful radiances. Besides, whoever goes into his forest, numbness overpowers him" (20). He even appeals to Uruk's elders and young men to "Tell him [Gilgamesh] he must not go to the forest of cedars" (21).

Enkidu's concern is beautifully contrasted in his encouragement of Gilgamesh once they are on their way to face Humbaba. He puts his faith in their combined strength by saying, "Two cubs are [stronger] than a mighty lion" (39), indicating that Humbaba, though powerful, can be bested. An unparalleled illustration of him galvanizing Gilgamesh into action comes in the form of these lines: "Why, my friend, do you talk like a weakling?...Retreat not a foot, you must not turn back, [Let your eyes see all], let your blow strike home!" (42). This speech immediately following Gilgamesh's second-guessing, possibly fear, on the prospect of fighting Humbaba is like a shot in the arm of courage and resolve.

Finally, Enkidu's entire function as a friend to Gilgamesh is a literal godsend. He is someone created for Gilgamesh's companionship by divine intervention. He is the answer to Uruk's prayer to "create a match for Gilgamesh" (6). They have a magical twofold connection as Enkidu's arrival is foretold in Gilgamesh's dreams, and Enkidu is made privy to these dreams by Shamhat (11-12). This way, no stones were left unturned by the hands of fate, or deliberation of the writer(s), in making Enkidu and Gilgamesh's heart pine for each other's friendship.

The profound mutual impact their friendship had on each other is most clearly seen during Enkidu's death and its after-effects. The following lines:

Now Gilgamesh, your friend and brother,

Will lay you out in a noble resting place,

……………………………………..

We will have the people of Uruk shed bitter tears for you,

He will burden the [pleasure-loving] people of Uruk with a task for you (59)

capture Shamash's consolation to Enkidu that his friendship with Gilgamesh is worth the premature death. He will be mourned, and a tomb immortalizing his memory will be built by Gilgamesh and the city of Uruk. His death is the turning point in Gilgamesh's life, after which he starts questioning the nature of life and death. He goes from being a man of civilization to a free-spirited, forest dweller like Enkidu. Gilgamesh's description to Shamash vividly captures this transformation: "He has put on their skins, he eats their flesh… He [drank] the water and went on, chasing the wind" (69).

Enkidu's camaraderie with his friend, combined with the description of their adventures and slaying of monsters, makes "Epic of Gilgamesh" a delightful read. It is utterly fascinating to think that Shamash's final words to Enkidu have exceeded their prophetic nature. It's not only the long-lost citizen of Uruk but even the posterity that now knows about the remarkable friendship between the lion-heart Gilgamesh and the steppe-born Enkidu.