

## Excerpts from *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

First written down around 2000 BCE, the story of Gilgamesh is one of the oldest surviving works of world literature. Based on an actual historical figure, King Gilgamesh of Uruk (reigned c. 2700 BCE), it recounts Gilgamesh's travels, adventures, and his search for immortality. In the process, it provides evidence of ancient Mesopotamian ideas about death, the place of humanity in the universe, and societal organization. The work survives in multiple copies, and it seems to have been a compilation of several hero narratives associated with Gilgamesh, his rival-turned-friend Enkidu, and the gods and men they encountered throughout their travels. This selection draws on multiple sections of the "Epic," and it gives a flavor of the whole.

Source: N.K. Sandars., trans. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 1978), pp. 61, 62–3, 69, 87–8, 102, 116–7, 118.

### Focus Questions:

1. What does the document suggest about ancient Mesopotamian beliefs about the gods and their effects on men?
2. What is the reaction of Gilgamesh to death, and how does this motivate his behavior?
3. What other sources from the ancient Near East does *The Epic of Gilgamesh* resemble?

I will proclaim to the world the deeds of Gilgamesh. This was the man to whom all things were known; this was 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 on a long journey, was weary, worn-out with labour, returning he rested, he engraved on a stone the whole story.

When the gods created Gilgamesh they gave him a perfect body. Shamash the glorious sun endowed him with beauty, Adad the god of the storm endowed him with courage, the great gods made his beauty perfect, surpassing all others, terrifying like a great wild bull. Two thirds they made him god and one third man.

Gilgamesh went abroad in the world, but he met with none who could withstand his arms till he came to Uruk. But the men of Uruk muttered in their houses, 'Gilgamesh sounds the tocsin for his amusement, his arrogance has no bounds by day or night. No son is left with his father, for Gilgamesh takes them all, even the children; yet the king would be a shepherd to his people. His lust leaves no virgin to her lover, neither the warrior's daughter nor the wife of the noble; yet this is the shepherd of the city, wise, comely, and resolute.'

The gods heard their lament, the gods in heaven cried to the Lord of Uruk, to Anu the god of Uruk: 'A goddess made him, strong as a savage bull, none can withstand his arms. No son is left with his father, for Gilgamesh takes them all; and is this the king, the shepherd of his people? His lust leaves no virgin to her lover, neither the warrior's daughter nor the wife of the noble.' When Anu had heard their lamentation the gods cried to Aruru, the goddess of creation, 'You made him, O Aruru, now create his equal; let it be as like him as his own reflection, his second self, stormy heart for stormy heart. Let them contend together and leave Uruk in quiet.'

So the goddess conceived an image in her mind, and it was of the stuff of Anu of the firmament. She dipped her hands in water and pinched off clay, she let it fall in the wilderness, and noble Enkidu was created. There was virtue in him of the god of war, of Ninurta himself. His body was rough, he had long hair like a woman's; it waved like the hair of Nisaba, the goddess of the corn. His body was covered with matted hair like Samuquan's, the god of cattle.

In Uruk the bridal bed was made, fit for the goddess of love. The bride waited for the bridegroom, but in the night Gilgamesh got up and came to the house. Then Enkidu stepped out, he stood in the street and blocked the way. Mighty Gilgamesh came on and Enkidu met him at the gate. He put out his foot and prevented Gilgamesh from entering the house, so they grappled, holding each other like bulls. They broke the doorposts and the walls shook, they snorted like bulls locked together. They shattered the doorposts and the walls shook. Gilgamesh

bent his knee with his foot planted on the ground and with a turn Enkidu was thrown. Then immediately his fury died. When Enkidu was thrown he said to Gilgamesh, 'There is not another like you in the world. Ninsun, who is as strong as a wild ox in the byre, she was the mother who bore you, and now you are raised above all men, and Enlil has given you the kingship, for your strength surpasses the strength of men.' So Enkidu and Gilgamesh embraced and their friendship was sealed.

*[Gilgamesh and Enkidu become great friends. Together they set out on a long journey to the Cedar Forest in the North. They slay a fire-breathing monster called Humbaba, who is the guardian of the forest. After their return, Ishtar, the goddess of love, becomes infatuated with Gilgamesh and offers to marry him. Gilgamesh, citing Ishtar's fickle nature in matters of love, refuses. Ishtar becomes incensed.]*

Ishtar opened her mouth and said again, 'My father, give me the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgamesh. Fill Gilgamesh, I say, with arrogance to his destruction; but if you refuse to give me the Bull of Heaven I will break in the doors of hell and smash the bolts; there will be confusion of people, those above with those from the lower depths. I shall bring up the dead to eat food like the living; and the hosts of dead will outnumber the living'....

When Anu heard what Ishtar had said he gave her the Bull of Heaven to lead by the halter down to Uruk. When they reached the gates of Uruk the Bull went to the river; with his first snort cracks opened in the earth and a hundred young men fell down to death. With his second snort cracks opened and two hundred fell down to death.

With his third snort cracks opened, Enkidu doubled over but instantly recovered, he dodged aside and leapt on the Bull and seized it by the horns. The Bull of Heaven foamed in his face, it brushed him with the thick of its tail. Enkidu cried to Gilgamesh, 'My friend, we boasted that we would leave enduring names behind us. Now thrust the sword between the nape and the horns.' So Gilgamesh followed the Bull, he seized the thick of its tail, he thrust the sword between the nape and the horns and slew the Bull. When they had killed the Bull of Heaven they cut out its heart and gave it to Shamash, and the brothers rested.

*[The death of the Bull of Heaven offends the gods. As compensation, they decree that one of the two heroes must die. After an ominous dream, Enkidu passes away. Gilgamesh greatly mourns for his friend and for the fate of all mortal men. He decides to seek the secret of immortality from Utnapishtim, the Mesopotamian Noah to whom the gods granted everlasting life.]*

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; 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.

*[Gilgamesh then encounters Siduri, "the woman of the vine, the maker of wine." She offers him sage advice concerning his quest.]*

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 keep-ing. 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.'

*[After an arduous journey, Gilgamesh finds Utnapishtim. Utnapishtim tells the hero the story of the flood: mankind's incessant activity had disturbed the rest of the gods, who thus decided to destroy the humans by flooding the earth. Ea, the god of the waters, warned Utnapishtim of the coming deluge. By building a strong ship, Utnapishtim and his family survive. The gods then repented of their action and granted immortality to the survivor. Utnapishtim also reveals another important secret to Gilgamesh.]*

'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.'

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 the 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 sloughed 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.'

The destiny was fulfilled which the father of the gods, Enlil of the mountain, had decreed for Gilgamesh: 'In nether-earth the darkness will show him a light: of mankind, all that are known, none will leave a monument for generations to come to compare with his. The heroes, the wise men, like the new moon have their waxing and waning. Men will say, "Who has ever ruled with might and with power like him?" As in the dark month, the month of shadows, so without him there is no light. O Gilgamesh, this was the meaning of your dream. You were given the kingship, such was your destiny, everlasting life was not your destiny. Because of this do not be sad at heart, do not be grieved or oppressed; he has given you power to bid and to loose, to be the darkness and the light of mankind. He has given unexampled supremacy over the people, victory in battle from which no fugitive returns, in forays and assaults from which there is no going back. But do not abuse this power, deal justly with your servants in the palace, deal justly before the face of the Sun.'

## The Code of Hammurabi

In order to “establish law and justice in the language of the land” and to “promote the welfare of the people,” the Amorite King Hammurabi (c. 1728–1686 BCE), who had made Babylon his capital and conquered Mesopotamia, issued a comprehensive code of laws. He caused them to be inscribed on stones that were erected at crossroads and in marketplaces throughout his kingdom, so that all his subjects would understand the penalties that their actions might incur. This document survives on one of these stones, topped by an illustration showing Hammurabi receiving the order to write the laws from the sun-god Shamash. The stone was discovered by French archaeologists in 1901–1902, and it remains one of the treasures of the Louvre in Paris.

Source: Robert Francis Harper, trans., *The Code of Hammurabi, King of Babylon*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1904.

### Focus Questions:

1. What general principles inform the laws stated here?
2. When was a financial punishment appropriate, and when a capital punishment? Is the principle applied consistently?
3. What does the document reveal about the status of women in this society?

When the lofty Anu, king of the Anunnaki, and Bel, lord of heaven and earth; he who determines the destiny of the land, committed the rule of all mankind to Marduk, the chief son of Ea; when they pronounced the lofty name of Babylon: when they made it famous among the quarters of the world and in its midst established an everlasting kingdom whose foundations were firm as heaven and earth—at that time, Ann and Bel called me, Hummurabi, the exalted prince, the worshiper of the gods, to cause justice to prevail in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil, to prevent the strong from oppressing the weak...to enlighten the land and to further the welfare of the people. Hammurabi, the governor named by Bel, am I, who brought about plenty and abundance...

...the ancient seed of royalty, the powerful king, the Sun of Babylon, who caused light to go forth over the lands of Sumer and Akkad; the king, who caused the four quarters of the world to render obedience; the favorite of Nana, am I. When Marduk sent me to rule the people and to bring help to the country, I established law and justice in the land and promoted the welfare of the people.

### 1.

If a man bring an accusation against a man, and charge him with a (capital) crime, but cannot prove it, he, the accuser, shall be put to death.

### 2.

If a man charge a man with sorcery, and cannot prove it, he who is charged with sorcery shall go to the river, into the river he shall throw himself and if the river overcome him, his accuser shall take to him-self his house (estate). If the river show that man to be innocent and he come forth unharmed, he who charged him with sorcery shall be put to death. He who threw himself into the river shall take to him-self the house of his accuser.

If a man has come forward to bear witness to a felony and then has not proved the statement he has made, if that case (is) a capital one, that man shall be put to death.

If a man aid a male or female slave of the palace, or a male or female slave of a freeman to escape from the city gate, he shall be put to death.

If a man seize a male or female slave, a fugitive, in the field and bring that (slave) back to his owner, the owner of the slave shall pay him two shekels of silver.

23.

If the brigand be not captured, the man who has been robbed, shall, in the presence of god, make an itemized statement of his loss, and the city and the governor, in whose province and jurisdiction the robbery was committed, shall compensate him for whatever was lost.

24.

If it be a life (that is lost), the city and governor shall pay one mana of silver to his heirs.

26.

If either an officer or a constable, who is ordered to go on an errand of the king, do not go but hire a substitute and dispatch him in his stead, that officer or constable shall be put to death; his hired substitute shall take to himself his (the officer's) house.

53.

If a man neglect to strengthen his dyke and do not strengthen it, and a break be made in his dyke and the water carry away the farm-land, the man in whose dyke the break has been made shall restore the grain which he has damaged.

127.

If a man point the finger at a priestess or the wife of another and cannot justify it, they shall drag that man before the judges and they shall brand his forehead.

128.

If a man take a wife and do not arrange with her the (proper) contracts, that woman is not a (legal) wife.

129.

If the wife of a man be taken in lying with another man, they shall bind them and throw them into the water. If the husband of the woman would save his wife, or if the king would save his male servant (he may).

130.

If a man force the (betrothed) wife of another who has not known a male and is living in her father's house, and he lie in her bosom and they take him, that man shall be put to death and that woman shall go free.

131.

If a man accuse his wife and she has not been taken in lying with another man, she shall take an oath in the name of god and she shall return to her house.

132.

If the finger have been pointed at the wife of a man because of another man, and she have not been taken in lying with another man, for her husband's sake she shall throw herself into the river.

**142.**

If a woman hate her husband, and say: "Thou shalt not have me," they shall inquire into her antecedents for her defects; and if she have been a careful mistress and be without reproach and her husband have been going about and greatly belittling her, that woman has no blame. She shall receive her dowry and shall go to her father's house.

**143.**

If she have not been a careful mistress, have gadded about, have neglected her house and have belittled her husband, they shall throw that woman into the water.

**144.**

If a man take a wife and that wife give a maid servant to her husband and she bear children; if that man set his face to take a concubine, they shall not countenance him. He may not take a concubine.

**145.**

If a man take a wife and she do not present him with children and he set his face to take a concubine, that man may take a concubine and bring her into his house. That concubine shall not rank with his wife.

**146.**

If a man take a wife and she give a maid servant to her husband, and that maid servant bear children and afterwards would take rank with her mistress; because she has borne children, her mistress may not sell her for money, but she may reduce her to bondage and count her among the maid servants.

**196.**

If a man destroy the eye of another freeman [i.e., a man in the upper class], they shall destroy his eye.

**197.**

If one break a man's bone, they shall break his bone.

**198.**

If one destroy the eye of a villein [a dependent laborer] or break the bone of a freeman, he shall pay one mana of silver.

**199.**

If one destroy the eye of a man's slave or break a bone of a man's slave he shall pay one-half his price.

**200.**

If a man knock out a tooth of a man of his own rank, they shall knock out his tooth.

201.

If one knock out a tooth of a villein, he shall pay one-third mana of silver.

203.

If a man strike another man of his own rank, he shall pay one mana of silver.

204.

If a villein strike a villein, he shall pay ten shekels of silver.

205.

If a man's slave strike a man's son, they shall cut off his ear.

253.

If a man hire a man to oversee his farm and furnish him the seed-grain and intrust him with oxen and contract with him to cultivate the field, and that man steal either the seed or the crop and it be found in his possession, they shall cut off his fingers.

254.

If he take the seed-grain and overwork the oxen, he shall restore the quantity of grain which he has hoed.

257.

If a man hire a field-laborer, he shall pay him 8 GUR of grain per year.

258.

If a man hire a herdsman, he shall pay him 6 GUR of grain per year.

The righteous laws, which Hammurabi, the wise king, established and (by which) he gave the land stable support and pure government. Hammurabi, the perfect king, am I...

The great gods proclaimed me and I am the guardian governor, whose scepter is righteous and whose beneficent protection is spread over my city...

The king, who is pre-eminent among city kings, am I. My words are precious, my wisdom is unrivaled. By the command of Shamash, the great judge of heaven and earth, may I make righteousness to shine forth on the land. By the order of [the god] Marduk, my lord, may no one efface my statues...

...Let any oppressed man, who has a cause, come before my image as king of righteousness!...

...Let him read the code and pray with a full heart before Marduk, my lord, and Zarpanit, my lady, and may the protecting deities...look with favor on his wishes (plans) in the presence of Marduk, my lord, and Zarpanit, my lady!...

If that man pay attention to my words which I have written upon my monument, do not efface my judgments, do not overrule my words, and do not alter my statues, then will Shamash prolong that man's reign, as he has mine, who am king of righteousness, that he may rule his people in righteousness.

If that man do not pay attention to my words which I have written upon my monument: if he forget my curse and do not fear the curse of god: if he abolish the judgments which I have formulated, overrule my words, alter my statues, efface my name written thereon and write his own name: on account of these curses, commission another to do so—as for that man, be he king or lord, or priest-king or commoner, whoever he may be, may the great god, the father of the gods, who has ordained my reign, take from him the glory of his sovereignty, may he break his scepter, and curse his fate!

May Ea, the great prince, whose decrees take precedence, the leader of the gods, who knows everything, who prolongs the days of my life, deprive him of knowledge and wisdom! May he bring him to oblivion, and dam up his rivers at their sources! May he not permit corn, which is the life of the people, to grow in his land!