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Mesopotamia

The Epic of Gilgamesh

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Babylonian scribes; standard version attributed to Sin-leqi-unninni

Adaptation (edition 1.2)

Credits

Author	Babylonian scribes; standard version attributed to Sin-leqi-unninni
Date	c. 2100 BC (Sumerian poems); c. 1800 BC (Old Babylonian version); c. 1200 BC (standard version)
Original language	Akkadian
Version	Adaptation (edition 1.2)
Translation	Une Sacra, from R. Campbell Thompson
Source	Une Sacra, from R. Campbell Thompson, The Epic of Gilgamish, 1928
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About:

The Epic of Gilgamesh is one of the oldest poems in the world. Gilgamesh, king of Uruk (the "Erech" of the translation), two-thirds god and one-third man, oppresses his people; so the gods create Enkidu, a wild man who lives with the animals, to stand up to him.

After they fight, the two become inseparable friends: they go to the Forest of Cedars to kill the giant Humbaba and slay the Bull of Heaven, which the goddess Ishtar sent because Gilgamesh refused her love.

As punishment, the gods decide that Enkidu must die. In despair at death, Gilgamesh crosses the mountains and the Waters of Death to find Uta-Napishtim, the only man who was given eternal life.

In the eleventh tablet, Uta-Napishtim tells of the flood: the god Ea warned him to build a boat, take his family and "the seed of all living things", and at the end release a dove, a swallow and a raven — a story very like that of Noah's ark.

Gilgamesh loses the plant of youth to a serpent and returns to Uruk; the twelfth tablet, a later addition, shows the spirit of Enkidu telling what the world of the dead is like.

The first poems about Gilgamesh, in Sumerian, date from about 2100 BC; the Old Babylonian version from about 1800 BC; the standard version, in twelve tablets, was put together about 1200 BC and is attributed to the scribe Sin-leqi-unninni.

The best-known tablets came from the library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh, excavated by Layard and Rassam from 1849 onwards; in 1872 George Smith, of the British Museum, recognised the account of the flood in the eleventh tablet.

This verse translation by R. Campbell Thompson (1928) joins to the Assyrian version the Old Babylonian and Hittite fragments known in his day; square brackets mark what he restored, and "[...]" marks the lost passages that he summarises in prose.

The Anunnaki appear as the judges of the underworld, who at the flood raise their torches and set the land ablaze. Thompson's preface, summaries and notes are not included.

For readers who want the story, the Une Sacra "Adaptation" retells the twelve tablets in modern language, with notes where the clay is broken. R. Campbell Thompson's translation (1928), faithful to the tablets and their gaps, remains available.

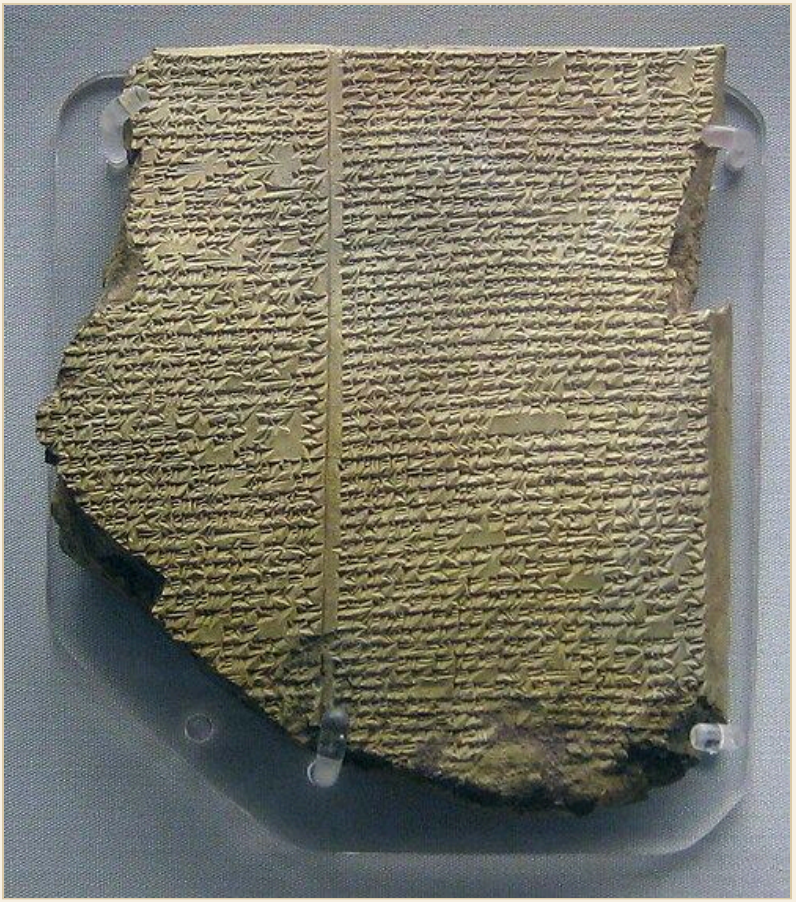
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Prose adaptation: the story told in modern English, tablet by tablet. Where the clay tablet is broken, a note in parentheses explains what is missing and what is known from the other ancient copies of the poem. For the faithful text, with its gaps, choose the translation by R. Campbell Thompson.

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Manuscripts and images



The "Flood Tablet": the eleventh tablet of the Epic of Gilgamesh, in Akkadian, from the library of Ashurbanipal at Nineveh (7th century BC). British Museum, London.

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TABLET I

✦

1 He who saw everything, who knew the depths of all things, must teach it to his people. Gilgamesh was a master of wisdom: he uncovered what was hidden and brought back news of the time before the flood. He made a long journey, came back weary, and carved on a stone all that he had suffered.

2 It was he who raised the walls of Uruk and set the foundations of the Eanna, the holy temple of Anu and of Ishtar, firm as bronze. (Here the tablet is broken. From the other copies, the poem invites the reader to climb the wall, look at the bricks and open the cedar box in which this story is kept.)

3 Gilgamesh is two-thirds god and one-third man, and no one in the land is as strong as he. But he uses that strength against his own people. Day and night, without rest, he drags the young men off to his labours and his fights, and no son is left to his father. He takes the young women for himself, and no daughter is left to her mother, no bride to her groom. "He is our shepherd," say the people of Uruk, "and this is how he treats us."

4 The gods hear the lament and go to speak with Anu, the god of heaven and lord of Uruk: "It was you who made this tyrant son. He leaves no son to his father, no daughter to her mother." Anu calls the goddess Aruru, who created human beings: "Now make someone equal to him, to stand up to him, so that the two of them fight each other and Uruk has peace."

5 Aruru thinks over Anu's request, washes her hands, takes a pinch of clay and throws it onto the steppe. And so Enkidu is born, a warrior as strong as the god Ninurta. His whole body is covered with hair, and his hair, long like a woman's, grows thick like ears of barley. He knows neither people nor cities. He lives with the gazelles, grazes with the herds and drinks with the animals at the watering places.

6 One day a hunter comes face to face with him by the water, and he goes back there three days in a row. Each time he is more afraid. He runs home and tells his father: "Father, a huge man has come down from the mountains, the strongest in the land, strong as Anu. He roams the mountains with the animals and drinks with them. He fills in the pits I dig, tears up my traps and sets the beasts free. He will not let me hunt."

7 His father answers: "Go to Uruk and find Gilgamesh, whom no one has defeated. Tell him everything. He will give you a woman of the temple, a priestess of love (in the other copies she is called Shamhat). Take her to the watering place. When Enkidu comes near, she will take off her cloak and show herself to him. Once he has been with her, the animals that grew up with him will flee from him."

8 The hunter goes to Uruk and repeats the same words to Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh gives the same advice. The hunter sets out with the woman, and after three days on the road they reach the watering place. They wait one day, two days. Then the animals come to drink, and Enkidu with them.

9 "That is he," says the hunter. The woman is not ashamed: she takes off her cloak, and Enkidu comes near. They stay together six days and seven nights. When Enkidu goes back to his animals, the gazelles run from him and the beasts of the steppe draw away. He tries to run after them, but his legs are no longer what they were. He has lost the wild life, but he has gained understanding.

10 Enkidu sits at the woman's feet and listens. She says: "You are beautiful, Enkidu, you are like a god. Why roam the steppe with the animals? Come with me to Uruk of the great walls, to the temple of Anu and of Ishtar, where Gilgamesh lives, who rules over men like a wild bull." Enkidu likes the idea, because he longs for a companion. "Take me," he says. "I will challenge Gilgamesh and shout in Uruk: I am the strongest! The one born on the steppe has the greater strength."

11 She answers: "Come to Uruk, where every day is a feast, with musicians and dancers. I will show you Gilgamesh, a happy man full of strength, stronger than you, who rests neither by day nor by night. But temper your pride: Shamash loves him, and Anu, Enlil and Ea have given him wisdom. Before you ever left the mountains, Gilgamesh had already dreamed of you."

12 She tells the dreams. Gilgamesh said to his mother, the goddess Ninsun: "Mother, I dreamed that under the stars something fell on me, heavy as Anu himself. I tried to lift it and could not; I tried to push it off me and could not. The people of Uruk gathered round, my companions kissed its feet.

12.2 I embraced it as one embraces a woman and brought it to you, and you made it equal to me." Ninsun, who knows all things, explained: "That is a strong companion, who defends his friend, the strongest in the land. You embraced him as a woman: it is a sign that he will never abandon you."

13 Gilgamesh had a second dream: an axe fell in the middle of Uruk, the people gathered round, and he embraced it and took it to his mother. Ninsun said: "The axe is a man. It is the same companion, the friend who will stand by your side." And Gilgamesh answered: "Let him come, then. If great danger comes, I will have a friend." (The tablet ends here. In the next one, the woman takes Enkidu to a shepherds' camp, where he learns to eat bread and drink beer before reaching Uruk.)

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TABLET II

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1 While Gilgamesh tells his dreams in Uruk, Enkidu stays with the woman of the temple and forgets the place where he was born. She says to him again: "Enkidu, you are like a god. Why roam the steppe with the animals? Come, I will take you to Uruk of the great squares, to the Eanna, the house of Anu, where Gilgamesh lives, the greatest of all. You will love him as yourself. Get up from the ground: this is a shepherd's bed." Enkidu listens, and the advice touches his heart.

2 She takes off one of her garments and dresses Enkidu in it; she keeps the other. She takes him by the hand, as one does with a brother, and leads him to the shepherds' camp, by the sheepfolds. The shepherds gather round him. (Some lines are missing here.)

3 Enkidu had always sucked the milk of wild animals. They set bread before him, and he stares at it in wonder: he does not know how to eat bread or drink beer. The woman says to him: "Eat the bread, Enkidu, for it is what sustains life. Drink the beer, for it is the custom of the land." Enkidu eats his fill and drinks seven jars. His heart grows glad, his face lights up. He washes his body, anoints his hair with oil, and so he becomes human.

4 He puts on clothes like a man, takes up a weapon and goes out at night hunting the lions and jackals that attacked the flocks. With Enkidu on guard, the shepherds sleep in peace.

5 One day, while he is enjoying himself with the woman, Enkidu sees a man hurrying past and asks where he is going. The man says he is going to the wedding feast in Uruk, where Gilgamesh, as king, has the custom of lying first with the bride, before the husband. (The tablet is damaged at this point; in the other copies, Enkidu is outraged at what he hears.) Enkidu sets off for the city, with the woman behind him.

6 When he stops in a street of Uruk, the people gather and say: "He looks like Gilgamesh! A little shorter, but stronger in the bone. When he was small he sucked the milk of beasts. Now he is a hero, equal to Gilgamesh."

7 The bed is made ready for the wedding, and Gilgamesh comes in the night. But Enkidu stands in the passage, blocks the door with his foot and does not let Gilgamesh in. The two grapple and snort like bulls; they shatter the doorpost, and the wall shakes.

8 At last Gilgamesh plants his knee on the ground and his anger passes. Then Enkidu says to him: "Your mother bore you as one of a kind, Ninsun set you above all heroes, and Enlil gave you kingship over men." (In the other copies, the two embrace and become friends.)

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TABLET III

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1 (The beginning of the tablet is lost.) Someone tells Gilgamesh's mother that Enkidu has no equal, that he was born on the steppe and no one compares with him. Enkidu hears it and sits down sadly, his eyes fill with tears and his arms lose their strength. The two friends take each other's hands like brothers. "It is my dear one who embraced me to say farewell," says Enkidu, "that is why my strength left me."

2 Gilgamesh says to him: "Friend, I have decided to go to the Cedar Forest. I will defeat Humbaba the Terrible, put an end to the evil that is in it and cut down the cedar." Enkidu answers: "When I roamed the mountains with the animals, I came close to that forest. Humbaba's roar is a storm, his mouth is fire, his breath is death. Why do you want to do this? To face Humbaba is an unequal fight."

3 Enkidu insists: "Enlil put Humbaba there to guard the forest and to frighten men. He never sleeps. If he hears a step on the path, he asks: who is it that comes down into my forest? And whoever comes down, misfortune seizes him."

4 Gilgamesh answers: "My friend, who escapes death? Only the gods live forever in the light of the sun. The days of men are numbered, and all they do is wind. Are you already afraid of death? Then I will go in front. If I fall, I will have made a name. They will say: Gilgamesh fought against

Humbaba the Terrible. And one day, when my children climb onto your lap, they will ask: tell us what you know. I am resolved: I will cut down the cedar and win fame forever."

5 The two go to the craftsmen, who cast enormous weapons: axes of three talents each, swords with hilts of two talents and blades of thirty minas, with gold. Each of the two carries ten talents of weapons.

6 At the Gate of the Seven Bolts of Uruk the people gather, and the elders sit before the king. Gilgamesh says: "Elders of Uruk, listen: I am going to face Humbaba the Terrible. I want him to hear of me and say: I want to see this Gilgamesh, of whom the whole world speaks. I will defeat him and cut down the cedars, to have fame forever."

7 The elders answer: "Gilgamesh, you are young, and your courage carries you too far. You do not really know what you are going to face. We have heard that Humbaba is terrible. Who could face his weapons? His roar is a storm, his mouth is fire, his breath is death." Gilgamesh listens, thinks, and says to his friend: "Yes, I am afraid of him. But even so I will go to the forest."

8 Gilgamesh kneels before Shamash, the sun god, and raises his hands: "Shamash, guard my life and bring me back to the walls of Uruk. Spread your protection over me." With tears running down his face, he says: "I am going by a road I have never walked, by a way I do not know. If I return in peace, I will honour you as you deserve." They take up the axes, the bow and the quiver, and before setting out they offer gifts to Shamash, so that he will bring them back.

9 The elders take leave of them with blessings and advice: "Gilgamesh, do not trust in your strength alone. Let Enkidu go in front: he knows the way and has walked it before. Whoever goes in front protects his companion. May Shamash give you what you desire, may he open the closed road and the pass through the mountains.

9.2 May your god Lugalbanda send you at night a dream that gladdens you. Wherever you stop, dig a well, so that the water in your skin is always pure, and pour out fresh water for Shamash." Enkidu says to his friend: "Have no fear in your heart. Trust me." They throw their cloaks over their shoulders and set out together for the land of Humbaba.

10 First, nevertheless, Gilgamesh takes Enkidu to the Splendid Palace, into the presence of his mother, Queen Ninsun, who knows all things, so that she may show them the way. "Ninsun, I am going on a long journey, to the house of Humbaba, to a fight I do not know, by a road I do not know."

11 Ninsun goes into her room, adorns herself with flowers, puts on her festive robes and her crown, climbs to the terrace of the palace and offers incense and sacrifice to Shamash: "Why did you give my son Gilgamesh this restless heart? Now he goes by a road he does not know, to the Cedar Forest, to defeat Humbaba and put an end to the evil that you hate. May Aya, your wife, remind you of him every day of the journey." (The end of the tablet is badly damaged.)

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TABLET IV

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1 (The beginning is lost.) The two reach the great gate of the Cedar Forest. Enkidu raises his eyes and speaks to the gate as if it were a person: "Gate of the forest, you who understand nothing! For forty leagues I admired your wood, until I caught sight of the tall cedar. Your wood has no equal in the land: six rods high, two wide. Your parts must have been made in the city of Nippur. Had I known you were so beautiful, I would have raised my axe against you..." (Lines are missing here.)

2 Enkidu charges like a wild bull, tears off the gate and flings it away, and shouts to the guardian of the forest, challenging Humbaba. (The text fails again.)

3 Afterwards Enkidu has a bad dream, and what he dreamed comes true: he falls ill and lies in bed one day, two, three... up to twelve days. Then he calls Gilgamesh: "My friend, someone hates me, because in Uruk I was afraid of the fight..." And he begs: "Friend, let us not go down into the depths of the forest. My hands have grown weak, my arms have no strength."

4 Gilgamesh answers: "Friend, shall we act like cowards? You are clever in war and know how to fight. Forget death and do not be afraid. Let the weakness leave your arms! Take heart! Let us go down together. Whoever

goes in front, with care, protects himself and his companion, and the two of them make a name." And so they reach the entrance of the forest together, and stand there in silence.

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TABLET V

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1 They stand and look at the forest, look at the height of the cedars, look at the trail that goes into it. Where Humbaba used to walk there is a straight, good path. They see the Cedar Mountain, the dwelling of the gods, the sanctuary of the goddess Irnini. The cedar lifts its crown before the mountain; its shade is good and full of delight, and the undergrowth spreads all around.

2 (Lines are missing.) Gilgamesh tells his friend a dream: "We were both on top of a mountain, and the mountain fell..." Enkidu explains: "Friend, it is a good dream, of great gain. The mountain you saw is Humbaba. It means we will seize Humbaba and throw his body to the ground. Tomorrow I will show you."

3 They walk on. After forty leagues they stop to eat; after sixty, they rest. They dig a well in the sun. Gilgamesh climbs the mountain and pours out flour as an offering: "Mountain, give me a dream." At night a cold wind blows over him; Gilgamesh curls up, hugs his knees, and sleep takes him. At midnight he wakes with a start and says to his friend: "Did you call me? Why did I wake? Did you touch me? Why am I afraid? Did some spirit pass by? Why does my flesh tremble?"

4 "I had a third dream, and it was terrifying. The sky roared, the earth answered; the day grew dark, darkness came, lightning flashed, flames blazed up, and death had its fill. Then the glare faded, the fire went out and the

embers turned to ash." Enkidu interprets the dream. (His explanation is lost; in the other copies he says that this dream, too, is good.)

5 Gilgamesh prays to Shamash, who hears the request and raises great winds against Humbaba: the north wind, the south wind, the storm, the cold wind, the whirlwind, eight winds in all. The winds pin Humbaba from the front and from behind, and he can neither advance nor retreat. Then Humbaba surrenders.

6 Humbaba says to Gilgamesh: "Gilgamesh, stop! Be my lord, and I will be your servant. Forget the proud words I spoke against you." (His promise is broken off; in the other copies he offers to cut cedars for Gilgamesh and to serve in his palace.) But Enkidu says to Gilgamesh: "Do not accept what Humbaba offers you. He must not stay alive." (Lines are missing.) And they cut off Humbaba's head.

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TABLET VI

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1 Gilgamesh washes his body, filthy from the fight, and cleans his weapons. He lets his hair fall loose over his shoulders, takes off his stained clothes and puts on clean ones, and puts on his diadem and his belt.

2 The goddess Ishtar sees how beautiful Gilgamesh is and says to him: "Gilgamesh, come, be my bridegroom! Give me your love; be my husband, and I will be your wife. I will give you a chariot of lapis lazuli and gold, with wheels of gold, drawn by great mules.

2.2 Come into our house, fragrant with cedar: the threshold and the throne will kiss your feet, kings and princes will bow before you and bring you tribute from the mountains and the plains. Your goats will bear young, your ewes will bear twins, your horses will be famous in the race."

3 Gilgamesh answers: "And what would I have to give you if I married you? Oil for the body, clothes, bread and food worthy of a goddess, drink worthy of a queen. And what would I gain?

3.2 You are a ruin that gives no shelter from the rain, a back door that does not keep out the wind, a palace that crushes the heroes inside it, a covered pit that deceives whoever steps on it, pitch that soils whoever carries it, a waterskin that leaks, a limestone that brings down the wall, a sandal that trips its wearer. Which of your husbands did you love forever? Come, I will tell you the story of your loves."

4 "Tammuz, the love of your youth, you made him to be wept for every year. You loved the bird of many colours and broke its wing; it stays in the grove crying: my wing! You loved the lion, full of strength (and, from the other copies, you dug pits for him, seven and seven more). You loved the horse, magnificent in battle, and gave him the bridle, the spur and the whip, and made him gallop without stopping, and made his mother weep."

5 "You loved the shepherd, who every day offered you kids and loaves, and you turned him into a wolf: his own helpers drive him away, and the dogs bite his legs. You loved Ishullanu, your father's gardener, who every day filled your table, and you said to him: come, my Ishullanu, let me taste your strength. He answered: what are you asking of me?

5.2 I eat only what my mother has cooked; what I would eat with you would be the bread of sin. You punished him and turned him into a spider (or a mole; the word is uncertain), stuck in the middle of the house, unable to go up or down. And so you would do with me as well."

6 Ishtar is furious and goes up to heaven, to Anu her father and to Antu her mother: "Father, Gilgamesh has insulted me, he has told all my sins!" Anu answers: "It was you who asked him for love, and so he told your sins." Ishtar says: "Father, make me the Bull of Heaven, to kill Gilgamesh. If you do not, I will break the gates of the world of the dead and bring up the dead to eat the living." (The last words of the threat are broken off; they come from the other copies.)

7 Anu warns: "If I make the Bull of Heaven, seven years of famine will come. Have you gathered grain for men and grass for the animals?" Ishtar answers: "I have gathered grain for men and grass for the animals, for the

seven years of famine." (Lines are missing; the Bull comes down to Uruk and, with every snort, opens pits into which hundreds of men fall.)

8 Enkidu tightens his belt, leaps, seizes the Bull of Heaven by the horns and throws it down before him; he chases it and holds it by its thick tail. (In the other copies, Gilgamesh drives his sword into the back of the Bull's neck.) When they have killed the Bull, the two take out its heart and offer it to Shamash, pour out the libation and sit down together, like brothers.

9 Ishtar climbs onto the wall of Uruk and cries out: "Woe to Gilgamesh, who has made me weep by killing the Bull of Heaven!" When Enkidu hears this, he tears off the Bull's thigh and hurls it at her: "If I could reach you, I would do the same to you and hang its entrails on you!" Ishtar gathers the priestesses of the temple, and they weep over the Bull's thigh.

10 Gilgamesh calls the craftsmen, who marvel at the size of the horns: each weighs thirty minas of lapis lazuli, and the two together hold six measures of oil. He offers them to his god Lugalbanda and hangs them in his chamber. The two wash their hands in the Euphrates and return to the city.

11 They walk through the streets of Uruk, and the people gather to see them. Gilgamesh asks those around him: "Who is the most beautiful of heroes? Who is the most famous of men?" And the answer comes: "Gilgamesh is the most beautiful of heroes! Enkidu is the most famous of men!"

12 That night there is a feast in the palace. The heroes sleep in their beds, and Enkidu sleeps too, and he has a dream. He wakes and goes to tell it to his friend.

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TABLET VII

✦

1 Enkidu tells the dream: "Friend, why are the great gods gathered in council?" (Here the tablet is lost. In the other copies, Enkidu dreams that Anu, Enlil and Shamash are arguing, and that one of the two friends must die for having killed Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven; the gods decide that it will be Enkidu.) And Enkidu falls ill: "The fever has thrown me onto my bed."

2 Sick, Enkidu curses the woman of the temple who took him from the steppe (in the other copies, the hunter as well). Shamash hears and speaks from heaven: "Enkidu, why do you curse the woman? It was she who gave you bread worthy of a god and beer worthy of a king, who dressed you in a fine cloak and who gave you the splendid Gilgamesh as your companion.

2.2 And Gilgamesh, your friend and your brother, will lay you on a great bed of honour, on a throne at his left, so that the princes of the world of the dead will kiss your feet. He will make all the people of Uruk weep for you. And he himself, because of you, will leave his body unwashed, put on a lion's skin and wander the steppe."

3 Hearing Shamash, Enkidu's anger passes, and he turns the curse into a blessing: "May kings, princes and nobles love you. May they give you jewels and gold, may your bed be of lapis lazuli and gold, may the gods let you enter the temples." (Several lines of this blessing are broken.)

4 With a pain in his belly, lying alone, Enkidu tells his friend a new dream in the night: "Friend, I dreamed that the sky roared and the earth answered, and I was alone. A man appeared with a dark face, with a lion's claws in place of nails. He overpowered me, threw me down, crushed me..."

5 "...and my hands turned into wings, like a bird's. He seized me and carried me off to the House of Darkness, the dwelling of Irkalla, the house from which whoever enters never leaves, by the road that has no return. There the dwellers live without light, eat dust and feed on clay. They wear garments of feathers, like birds, and sit in the dark, never seeing the light."

6 "In the House of Dust I saw those who had worn crowns, who had ruled the land since ancient times, serving food and cool water like servants. There sat the high priest and the acolyte, the diviner and the magician, the priest who anointed the gods; there were Etana and Sumuqan, and the queen of the world of the dead, Ereshkigal.

6.2 Before her, Belit-seri, the scribe of the world below, was reading aloud. She raised her head and saw me..." (The end of the tablet is lost. In the other copies, Enkidu lies sick for twelve days and dies.)

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TABLET VIII

✦

1 Gilgamesh weeps before the elders of Uruk: "Listen, elders. I weep for my friend Enkidu, I weep bitterly like a mourning woman. The axe no longer stays in my hand, the sword has fallen from my belt, and my festive clothes no longer gladden me. Grief has struck me down."

2 "My friend, my brother, who hunted the wild ass and the leopard of the steppe; Enkidu, who overcame every danger with me, climbed the mountains, seized the Bull of Heaven and defeated Humbaba in the Cedar Forest: what sleep is this that has taken you? Now you are dark and do not hear me." But Enkidu does not open his eyes. Gilgamesh puts his hand on his friend's chest, and the heart does not beat.

3 Then he covers his friend's face as one covers a bride. He roars like a lion, like a lioness who has lost her cubs. He paces back and forth before the body, tears out his hair and throws it away, rips his fine clothes.

4 When day breaks, Gilgamesh promises his friend what Shamash had said: "I will lay you on a great bed of honour, on a throne at my left, so that the princes of the world of the dead will kiss your feet. I will make the people of Uruk weep for you and set men and women to serve you. And I myself, for you, will leave my body unwashed, put on a lion's skin and wander the steppe."

5 The next day Gilgamesh prepares the funeral: he has a statue made of his friend (the text is broken; in the other copies, with a chest of lapis lazuli and a body of gold), a great table of mountain wood, a cup of carnelian

full of honey and a cup of lapis lazuli full of butter, and he offers them to Shamash. (The rest of the tablet is lost.)

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TABLET IX

✦

1 Gilgamesh weeps bitterly for his friend and wanders the steppe: "Will I die too, like Enkidu? Grief has entered my heart. I am afraid of death, and so I roam the steppe. I will go and find Utnapishtim, son of Ubara-Tutu, and I will go quickly."

2 "If I come at night to the mountain passes and meet lions, I will raise my head and pray to the moon god: save me!" He sleeps and has a dream (broken). He wakes, raises his axe, draws the sword from his belt, leaps like a spear into the midst of the lions and kills them.

3 He reaches the mountains of Mashu, which every day watch over the rising and the setting of the sun. Their peaks touch the sky, and their roots go down to the world of the dead. At the gate the scorpion-men stand guard, so terrible that their gaze is death, so huge that they make the hills tremble. They are the guards of Shamash at the rising and the setting of the sun. When Gilgamesh sees them, his face goes pale with fear, and he throws himself to the ground before them.

4 The scorpion-man says to his wife: "The one who comes has the body of a god." The wife answers: "Two-thirds of him are god, and only one-third is man." (A good part is missing here. From the other copies, Gilgamesh tells them he is looking for Utnapishtim, and the guards let him into the tunnel of the sun, which he crosses through twelve leagues of complete darkness, until he comes out into the light.)

5 On the other side there is a garden of precious stones: trees bearing fruit of carnelian, with clusters hanging down, beautiful to see, with leaves of lapis lazuli, full of fruit that delights the eyes.

6 (Lines are missing.) Shamash is troubled about Gilgamesh, who wears the skins of animals and eats their flesh, and says to him: "Gilgamesh, why do you run? The life you seek, you will not find." Gilgamesh answers the god: "After wandering aimlessly over the steppe, shall I lay my head beneath the earth and sleep through all the years? Let my eyes see the sun and have their fill of light. When does a dead man ever see the light of the sun again?"

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TABLET X

✦

1 By the shore of the sea lives Siduri, who makes and sells wine, covered with a veil. Gilgamesh approaches, dressed in skins. He has the body of a god, but grief in his belly, and the face of one who has made a long journey. Siduri sees him from afar and thinks: "This man means to do me harm." She shuts the gate, the door and the room.

2 Gilgamesh hears the noise and raises his eyes to her: "Woman of the wine, what did you see that you shut the gate and the door? I will break your door and smash the bolt!"

3 Siduri asks: "Why are you so downcast, with your face so hollow? Why is there grief in your heart? You have the face of one who has made a long journey, burned by cold and by heat. Why do you wander the steppe?" Gilgamesh answers: "How could I not be downcast? My friend, my brother, who hunted the wild ass and the leopard with me, who defeated Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven with me and killed the lions in the mountain passes: Enkidu, whom I loved so much, has been taken by the fate of men."

4 "I wept for him six days and seven nights and did not give him up to the tomb (in today's readings: until a worm fell from his nose). Then I was afraid of death and went off wandering the steppe. How can I keep silent? How can I be still? The friend I loved has turned to dust. And I, shall I not lie down like him, never to rise again? Now that I see your face, woman of the wine, may I not see the death I fear so much!"

5 Siduri answers: "Gilgamesh, why do you run? The life you seek, you will not find. When the gods created men, they gave them death and kept life for themselves. You, Gilgamesh, fill your belly, be glad day and night, make every day a feast, dance and play day and night. Put on clean clothes, wash your head and bathe in water. Look at the child who holds your hand, and let your wife rejoice in your arms. This is what belongs to men."

6 Gilgamesh insists: "Woman of the wine, what is the way to Utnapishtim? What is the sign? Give me the sign. If it is possible, I will cross the sea; if not, I will go back to wandering the steppe." Siduri answers: "There has never been a crossing, Gilgamesh. No one who has come this far has been able to cross the sea. Only Shamash, the hero, crosses it; besides him, who?

6.2 The crossing is hard, the way is painful, and in the middle lie the Waters of Death, which close the passage. But there is Urshanabi, Utnapishtim's boatman. He has with him what moves the boat, and he is in the forest. Go and see him: if it is possible, cross with him; if not, go back."

7 Hearing this, Gilgamesh takes his axe and his sword and goes there. (Lines are missing. From the other copies, in a fit of rage he smashes the "stones", perhaps stone figures, that helped the boatman make the crossing.) Urshanabi asks: "What is your name? I am Urshanabi, servant of Utnapishtim the Faraway."

7.2 Gilgamesh answers: "My name is Gilgamesh, I come from Uruk, I have crossed the mountains by a long road, from the side where the sun rises. Now that I see your face, Urshanabi, let me see Utnapishtim the Faraway as well."

8 Urshanabi asks him the same questions as Siduri, and Gilgamesh gives the same answers and asks the way. The boatman says: "Gilgamesh, it was your own hand that prevented the crossing: you broke what carried us. Take your axe, go down into the forest and cut poles five rods long each, with tips of bitumen, and bring them." Gilgamesh cuts the poles, makes the tips and brings them. The two go aboard and launch the boat on the waves.

9 In three days they cover a month and a half's journey and reach the Waters of Death. Urshanabi warns: "Gilgamesh, do not let the Waters of Death touch your hand! Take a pole, then another, a third, a fourth..." Gilgamesh pushes the boat along with the poles, one after another, until he has used all hundred and twenty. Then he takes off his garment and holds it up as a sail on the mast.

10 Utnapishtim looks into the distance and thinks: "Why is the boat without what used to move it? Who is that in the boat, who is not one of mine? I look and do not recognize this man." (Lines are missing.) Gilgamesh tells him his story: "I thought: I will go and see Utnapishtim the Faraway. I crossed every land, climbed hard mountains, crossed every sea.

10.2 My face has not known sweet sleep; I wore myself out, and my flesh was filled with pain. Before I reached the house of the woman of the wine, my clothes were already worn out. I killed owls, bats, lions, leopards, wildcats, deer and goats, ate their flesh and dressed in their skins."

11 Utnapishtim answers (the beginning of his speech is lost): "Do we build houses to last forever? Do we seal contracts to last forever? Do brothers divide an inheritance forever, or does hatred last forever? Does the river in

flood run forever? The face that looks upon the sun will soon be here no more.

11.2 The one who sleeps and the one who dies are alike: death makes no difference between servant and master. The Anunnaki, the great gods, assemble, and Mammetum, who makes the fates, decides with them. They determine death and life, but the day of death they do not reveal."

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TABLET XI

✦

1 Gilgamesh says to Utnapishtim the Faraway: "I look at you, Utnapishtim, and you are no different from me. You are like me. I thought you would be a hero ready for battle, and here you are lying on your back, resting. Tell me: how did you come to the assembly of the gods and win life forever?"

2 Utnapishtim answers: "Gilgamesh, I will reveal to you a hidden thing, a secret of the gods. You know Shuruppak, the city on the bank of the Euphrates. It is an ancient city, and the gods lived in it. The great gods decided to send the flood: Anu, their father; Enlil, the counsellor; Ninurta, the messenger; Ennugi, the guardian of the canals. Ea was with them and swore secrecy, but he told the plan to my reed hut."

3 "He said: Hut, hut! Wall, wall! Listen, hut; pay attention, wall! Man of Shuruppak, son of Ubara-Tutu, tear down your house and build a boat. Abandon riches and save life. Put into the boat the seed of every living thing. The boat you are to make must have the right measurements, its width equal to its length. I understood and said to Ea, my lord: I will do as you say.

3.2 But what shall I tell the city, the people and the elders? Ea answered me: tell them that Enlil hates you, that you can no longer live in the city or set foot on Enlil's land, and that you are going down to the Deep to live with Ea. And that on them Enlil will rain down abundance: birds, fish and great harvests."

4 "At daybreak the people gathered around me. The children brought the pitch, the strong brought what was needed. On the fifth day I set up the frame: the walls were ten rods high, and the deck ten rods on each side. I made six decks and divided it into seven parts, and the inside into nine. I caulked it, prepared the punting poles and everything else that was needed.

4.2 I poured six measures of bitumen and three of pitch into the kiln. For the workers I slaughtered oxen and lambs every day; they drank beer, wine and oil as if it were river water, and feasted as at the New Year."

5 "I loaded the boat with all I had: the silver, the gold, the seed of every living thing. I took aboard my family and my kin, the animals of the field, the wild beasts and the craftsmen. I had been given a sign: when at night a heavy rain falls, go into the boat and shut the door. The hour came. I looked at the sky, and the weather was frightening. I went into the boat and shut the door. I handed over the boat, with everything in it, to Puzur-Amurri, the boatman."

6 "When the light of morning began, a black cloud rose from the horizon, and inside it Adad, the storm god, thundered. Nabu and Sharru went before him as messengers, over hills and plains. Irragal tore out the posts of the dam, Ninurta opened the dikes, and the Anunnaki raised their torches and set the land ablaze with their glare. The silence of Adad rose up to heaven, and everything that was bright turned to darkness."

7 "No one could see his brother; from heaven men could no longer be seen. The gods themselves were afraid of the flood. They fled and went up to the heaven of Anu, and crouched against the wall like dogs. Ishtar cried

out like a woman in labour, the sweet-voiced lady wept: may that day turn to dust, for I spoke evil in the assembly of the gods!

7.2 How could I ask for the destruction of my people? It was I who gave birth to men, and now they fill the sea like the spawn of fish! The Anunnaki wept with her; the gods sat humbled, weeping, with their lips closed."

8 "For six days and seven nights the wind, the flood and the storm swept over the land. On the seventh day the storm, which had fought like an army, stopped. The sea grew calm, the wind passed, the flood was over. I looked at the day: everything was silent, and all mankind had returned to clay. The plain was as flat as a roof."

9 "I opened a window, and the light fell on my face. I knelt and wept; tears ran down my face. I looked to the ends of the sea: twelve leagues away land appeared. The boat ran aground on Mount Nisir, and the mountain held the boat and would not let it move again: one day, two days, three, four, five, six days."

10 "When the seventh day came, I sent out a dove. It went and came back, because it found no place to rest. I sent out a swallow; it went and came back, because it found no place. I sent out a raven; the raven went, saw that the waters had gone down, ate, scratched about, croaked and did not come back. Then I sent out all the animals to the four winds and offered a sacrifice on the top of the mountain: I set out seven and seven vessels, and beneath them reed, cedar and myrtle."

11 "The gods smelled the scent, the sweet scent, and gathered like flies around the one offering the sacrifice. The great goddess arrived and lifted up the necklace of precious stones that Anu had made for her: gods, just as I do not forget this necklace of lapis lazuli, I will not forget these days. Let the gods come to the offering, but not Enlil, for without thinking he sent the flood and gave my people over to destruction."

12 "When Enlil arrived and saw the boat, he was furious with the gods: has some living being escaped? No man was to survive the destruction! Ninurta said to Enlil: who else would do this but Ea? Ea knows everything. Then Ea said to Enlil: you, the wisest of the gods, the hero, how could you send the flood without thinking?

12.2 Punish the sinner for his sin, the guilty for his guilt, but have mercy, so that not all are destroyed. Instead of the flood, a lion might have come to thin out men; instead of the flood, a wolf might have come; famine might have come and laid the land waste; plague might have come and killed the people.

12.3 And it was not I who revealed the secret of the great gods (in the other copies: I showed a dream to the very wise one, and he understood). Now decide what to do with him."

13 "Then Enlil went up into the boat, took my hand and led me out, and made my wife kneel at my side. He touched our foreheads, stood between us and blessed us: until now Utnapishtim has been only a man; from now on he and his wife shall be like us, the gods. Let Utnapishtim live far away, at the mouth of the rivers.

13.2 And so they took me far away and made me live at the mouth of the rivers. But you, who will gather the gods for you, so that you may find the life you seek? Come, try not to sleep for six days and seven nights."

14 But as soon as he sits down, sleep blows over Gilgamesh like a mist. Utnapishtim says to his wife: "Look at the strong man who wants life: sleep has blown over him like a mist." The wife answers: "Touch him and wake him, so that he may go back in peace by the road he came, through the gate by which he left, to his own land." Utnapishtim says: "How you worry about the troubles of men! Bake a loaf each day and put it beside his head, and mark on the wall the days he sleeps."

15 She does so. The first loaf goes hard, the second goes like leather, the third goes damp, the fourth goes white, the fifth goes mouldy, the sixth is still fresh, and the seventh is on the fire when Utnapishtim touches Gilgamesh, and he wakes. (Thompson reads these lines as the stages of making the bread; today's reading, more widely accepted, is that of the bread going bad day by day, which proves how long he slept.)

16 Gilgamesh says: "Sleep had barely fallen on me when you touched me and woke me." Utnapishtim shows him the loaves: "Count them, Gilgamesh: there are seven. You slept seven days." Gilgamesh answers: "What shall I do, Utnapishtim? Where shall I go? A thief has stolen my courage. Death lives in my bedroom, and wherever I look, there is death."

17 Utnapishtim says to the boatman: "Urshanabi, the crossing no longer wants you, the shore closes its passage to you. Take this man you brought here to wash. Let him wash the filth from his body in the water until he is white as snow, let him throw his skins into the sea, let his body become

fair, let him put a new diadem on his head and wear a garment that will not grow old until he reaches his city." Urshanabi does all this. Then Gilgamesh and Urshanabi go aboard and launch the boat on the waves.

18 Utnapishtim's wife says to him: "Gilgamesh came here weary, rowing hard. What will you give him to take back to his land?" Gilgamesh raises the pole and brings the boat back to the shore. Utnapishtim says: "Gilgamesh, I will reveal to you a hidden thing. There is a plant like a thornbush at the bottom of the sea. Its thorns wound the hands like those of the rose. If your hand reaches that plant, you will have new life."

19 Hearing this, Gilgamesh loosens his belt, ties heavy stones to his feet, and they carry him down to the bottom. He finds the plant and pulls it up, and the thorns wound his hand. He cuts the stones from his feet, and the sea gives him back to the shore.

20 Gilgamesh says to the boatman: "Urshanabi, this plant is wonderful: with it a man regains his strength. I will take it to Uruk of the great walls and give it to be eaten (to whom, the tablet does not say; in the other copies, to the old). Its name is The-old-man-becomes-young-again. I too will eat it and return to my youth."

21 At the fortieth hour they stop to eat; at the sixtieth, to rest. Gilgamesh sees a pool of cool water and goes down to bathe. A serpent smells the scent of the plant, comes up out of the water and carries it off (in today's readings, it sheds its skin as it goes). Gilgamesh sits down and weeps, with the tears running down his face: "Urshanabi, for whom have my arms laboured?

21.2 For whom has my heart spent itself? I have gained nothing for myself. I have done good for a snake. If I had seen the sign and left the boat on the shore..."

22 At the fortieth hour they stop to eat; at the sixtieth, to rest. And they reach Uruk of the great walls. Gilgamesh says to the boatman: "Urshanabi, climb the wall of Uruk and walk along it. Look at the foundations, examine the bricks: are they not of baked clay? Is the base not of bitumen, in seven layers? One part is city, one part is garden, one part is clay pits, and there is the temple of Ishtar: three parts and the temple, that is Uruk."

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TABLET XII

✦

1 (This tablet does not continue the earlier story: it is the translation of an older Sumerian poem in which Enkidu is still alive. That is why many scholars see it as an appendix.) (The beginning is badly broken.) Gilgamesh has lost two wooden objects (in the Sumerian poem, a drum and a drumstick that fell into the world of the dead), and Enkidu offers to go down and fetch them.

2 Gilgamesh warns him: "If you go down to the world of the dead, do not wear clean clothes, or they will know you for a stranger. Do not anoint yourself with fine oil, or they will gather around you at the scent. Do not throw the spear, or those killed by the spear will surround you. Do not carry a staff in your hand, or the spirits will tremble before you.

2.2 Do not wear sandals or make noise on the ground. Do not kiss the wife you love or strike the one you hate, do not kiss the son you love or strike the one you hate, or the lament of the earth will hold you fast."

3 The lament is for the goddess who lies dead down below: "She who lies dead, the mother of Ninazu, who lies dead: her fair shoulders are no longer covered by her cloak, her breast is no longer raised."

4 But Enkidu does everything that was forbidden: he puts on clean clothes, anoints himself with fine oil, and the dead gather around him; he throws the spear, and those killed by the spear surround him; he carries a

staff, and the spirits tremble; he wears sandals and makes noise; he kisses the wife he loves and strikes the one he hates, kisses the son he loves and strikes the one he hates. And the lament of the earth holds him fast.

5 Gilgamesh weeps for Enkidu, who no longer comes up from the earth: "It was not Namtar, the plague, that took him, nor the fever: it was the earth. It was not Nergal, the cruel one, that took him: it was the earth. He did not fall on the battlefield of men: it was the earth that took him."

6 Alone, Gilgamesh goes to the temple of Enlil: "Father Enlil, the net has caught me, it has fallen on me. Enkidu, whom I beg to come up from the earth, was not taken by plague or by fever: it was the earth that took him." Enlil does not answer. He goes to the moon god and says the same; the moon god does not answer. He goes to Ea.

7 Ea, the father, listens and says to Nergal, the hero: "Nergal, open a hole in the earth, so that the spirit of Enkidu may come out and speak with his brother." Nergal opens the hole, and the spirit of Enkidu rises from the earth like a breath of wind. The two embrace and talk, weeping.

8 "Speak, my friend, speak: what did you see of the laws of the world below?" "I will not tell you, my friend, I will not tell you. If I tell you what I saw, you will sit down and weep." "Then I will sit down and weep." "The body you caressed, which gladdened your heart, the worms eat it like an old garment. The body you caressed is full of dust."

9 (Lines are missing.) Gilgamesh asks about the dead, and Enkidu answers. "The one who died a peaceful death, did you see him?" "I saw him: he rests on a bed and drinks clean water." "The one who died in battle, did you see

him?" "I saw him: his father and mother hold his head, and his wife weeps for him."

10 "The one whose body was left lying on the steppe, did you see him?" "I saw him: his spirit finds no rest beneath the earth." "The one whose spirit has no one to care for it, did you see him?" "I saw him: he eats the dregs of the cups and the scraps of bread thrown into the street."

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