

# THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH



TRANSLATED AND EDITED BY  
BENJAMIN R. FOSTER

A NORTON CRITICAL EDITION

A NORTON CRITICAL

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# THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH



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A NEW TRANSLATION  
ANALOGUES  
CRITICISM

*Translated and Edited by*  
BENJAMIN R. FOSTER

YALE UNIVERSITY

THE SUMERIAN  
GILGAMESH POEMS

*Translated by*  
DOUGLAS FRAYNE  
UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

THE HITTITE  
GILGAMESH

*Translated by*  
GARY BECKMAN  
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For errors or shortcomings that remain, I alone am responsible.

B.R.F.

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# Introduction

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This four-thousand-year-old tale of love, death, and adventure is the world's oldest epic masterpiece. Over a millennium before the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Mesopotamian poets wrote of Gilgamesh, hero-king of the Sumerian city of Uruk. The story has four main sections: first, Gilgamesh's abuse of his subjects, the creation of his rival—the wild man Enkidu—and their eventual friendship; second, the pair's heroic quest to the forest of cedars to slay a monster and bring back a gigantic tree, thus winning immortal fame for Gilgamesh; third, the death of Enkidu, which leaves Gilgamesh terrified at the prospect of his own death; and finally, Gilgamesh's arduous search for the secret of eternal life.

## Who Was Gilgamesh?

According to Mesopotamian tradition, Gilgamesh was a long-ago king of Uruk, builder of its famous city walls, traces of which are still visible today. These walls were nearly ten kilometers long and had more than nine hundred towers. Archaeologists date one phase of these immense walls to about 2700 B.C.E., so if Gilgamesh was a historical person, he may have ruled Uruk at that time. Anam, a king of Uruk during the nineteenth century B.C.E., mentions Gilgamesh as builder of the walls of his city in an inscription commemorating his own work on them, thereby comparing himself to his royal predecessor. Further, the walls of Uruk are the setting for the beginning and end of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

A list of ancient Mesopotamian kings, compiled in the early second millennium B.C.E., names Gilgamesh in the following passage, where he, like other kings of his era, is given a fabulously long reign: "The god Lugalbanda, a shepherd, reigned for 1200 years. The god Dumuzi, a fisherman(?), whose city was Ku'ara, reigned for 100 years. The god Gilgamesh, whose father was a phantom, lord of the city Kulaba, reigned for 126 years." *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and Sumerian poems about Gilgamesh give the name of his father as Lugalbanda, king of Uruk. They also identify his mother as the goddess Ninsun, a deified wild cow. The puzzle of Gilgamesh's parentage is reflected in the epic, where he is described as two-thirds divine and one-third human. As for

the name Gilgamesh, it may mean "Old-Man-Who-Became-a-Young-Man," although this is not certain. If this understanding is correct, his name may provide a clue, beyond the great walls of Uruk, as to why Gilgamesh was remembered as a famous figure of the past, inspiring epics and poems: he sought to escape death.

Stories about the adventures of Gilgamesh were first written in Sumerian around 2100 B.C.E. These have been translated here in "The Sumerian Gilgamesh Poems" by Douglas Frayne. The kings ruling in Sumer at that time, the Third Dynasty of the city of Ur, claimed that they were descended from the ancient royal house of Gilgamesh of Uruk. One king of Ur even called Gilgamesh his "brother." The kings of Ur may well have originated at Uruk, but their claim of kinship with such a remote figure of the past was perhaps little more than a bid for prestige and antiquity for their family. They may also have wanted to avoid referring to their more recent past, when Uruk and Ur had been ruled by a dynasty not related to them. Whatever the reason, Sumerian poets of the Third Dynasty of Ur extolled the life and deeds of Gilgamesh, as well as those of his father, Lugalbanda, and composed narrative poems about them, which were enjoyed at the royal court.

A document studied in Sumerian schools of the early second millennium B.C.E., supposed to be a copy of an ancient inscription, names Gilgamesh as builder of a structure known as the Tummal, perhaps a temple treasury, at the Sumerian city of Nippur. This "ancient" inscription is probably not genuine but fabricated to make the treasury sound more venerable. In any case, the document certainly does not date to the time of Gilgamesh.

In the first millennium B.C.E., Gilgamesh was worshipped as a netherworld deity and was invoked in funerary rites. A prayer to him found on tablets from Assyria dating to the first millennium B.C.E. reads, in part, as follows:

O Gilgamesh, perfect king, judge of the netherworld gods,  
Deliberative prince, neckstock of the peoples,<sup>1</sup>  
Who examines all corners of the earth,  
Administrator of the netherworld,  
You are the judge and you examine as only a god can!  
When you are in session in the netherworld,  
You give the final verdict,  
Your verdict cannot be altered nor can your sentence be commuted.  
The Sun has entrusted to you his powers of judgment and verdict.  
Kings, governors, and princes kneel before you,  
You examine the omens that pertain to them,  
You render their verdicts.

1. A neckstock was a device of wood used to restrain prisoners, here used to signify Gilgamesh's control over the human race.



Aelian, a Roman author of the third century C.E., perhaps quoting indirectly a Babylonian writer, tells a story of the birth of Gilgamesh (translated below, p. 154). This does not correspond to anything in the extant epic and therefore may not represent an authentic Mesopotamian tradition. Gilgamesh is also mentioned in the "Book of Giants" in the Dead Sea Scrolls, so memory of him outlasted Mesopotamian civilization.

### *What Is The Epic of Gilgamesh?*

The Sumerian narrative poems of the late third millennium B.C.E. provided materials for narrative poems written in the Babylonian language around 1700 B.C.E., called here the "old versions" of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The longest and most original of these took episodes from the Sumerian poems and recast them into a new, cohesive plot showing how an arrogant and overbearing king was chastened by the knowledge that he too had to die, like everybody else. Pieces of various old versions have survived. These were the source for the Babylonian epic tradition about Gilgamesh, which was to last more than fifteen hundred years. Fragments of many different versions of the epic have been recovered on clay tablets from Mesopotamia, Syria, the Levant, and Anatolia, attesting to its wide distribution in ancient times.

Manuscripts of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* dating to the period 1500–1000 B.C.E. are referred to as the "middle versions." These preserve only scattered episodes. The longest surviving version, known from a group of manuscripts dating from the seventh century B.C.E., is referred to here as the "standard version." The term "late versions" refers to manuscripts later than the seventh century B.C.E.

Portions of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* were translated into non-Mesopotamian languages such as Hittite and Hurrian. The Hittite versions of the epic have been translated here in "The Hittite Gilgamesh" by Gary Beckman. The Hurrian versions are too broken and poorly understood to translate. The "Elamite version" found in some translations is actually a misunderstanding of two tablets that have nothing to do with Gilgamesh. "The Gilgamesh Letter" is an ancient parody of the epic.

When Babylonian and Sumerian tablets were rediscovered and deciphered in modern times, the story of Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu was gradually pieced together from numerous fragmentary manuscripts. Though certain pieces are still missing, enough of the text has been found to enable modern readers to read a coherent, extended narrative poem.

### *Form, Authorship, and Audience of The Epic of Gilgamesh*

The Mesopotamians had no word corresponding to “epic” or “myth” in their languages. Ancient scholars of Mesopotamian literature referred to the epic as the “Gilgamesh Series,” that is, a lengthy work on more than one tablet, each corresponding to a “book” or “canto” in modern literature, twelve in the case of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Eleven of these tablets form a continuous narrative poem. The twelfth is a partial translation of a Sumerian poem about Gilgamesh appended to the narrative, perhaps during the first millennium B.C.E., because it seemed germane. This has been omitted here in preference to the more complete Sumerian original translated by Douglas Frayne for this Norton Critical Edition. No one knows how many tablets comprised the old versions, but there were probably far fewer than eleven.

The Mesopotamians knew nothing of the original author of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* but associated the eleven-tablet version with Sin-leqe-uninni, a scholar who lived in the second half of the second millennium B.C.E., centuries after the old versions were written. Nothing further is known of this man except that long after his death he was claimed as an ancestor by certain distinguished families in Babylonia.

One common assumption about ancient epics, such as the *Iliad* or the *Odyssey*, is that their written form was based on oral tradition. This does not seem to be true of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. There is no evidence that *The Epic of Gilgamesh* began as an oral narrative performed by bards or reciters and coalesced into a written text only later. In fact, the poem as we now have it shows many signs of having been a formal, written, literary work composed and perhaps performed for well-educated people, especially scholars and members of a royal court. Rather than being popular or folkloric literature, the story of Gilgamesh may have been mostly of interest to a small circle of people who belonged to the social and economic elite of their day. A short excerpt of Tablet II, found on a student’s exercise tablet from Babylon and dating from the late first millennium B.C.E., shows that the epic was studied in ancient schools.

### *Translating The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Western literary tradition since classical antiquity has transmitted ancient works, such as the epics of Homer or the plays of Sophocles, as single unified texts with only minor “variants.” This term refers to changes in wording for the same passage from one manuscript to another, or to important passages omitted in some manuscripts but included in others. For the most part, however, there are no substantive deviations among manuscripts of the same classical work, even those

from centuries apart. Furthermore, ancient classical literature that survives only in fragments or quotations, such as the poetry of Sappho, has little chance of ever being pieced together into its original form, because it was written on perishable materials.

The situation for ancient Mesopotamian texts is quite different. For *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, there are numerous ancient manuscripts on durable clay tablets, some more than a thousand years older than others, from many places. When these deal with the same episodes, they show fascinating and significant variations in wording and content. This allows us to see what was added, subtracted, changed, and reinterpreted over the centuries, but it complicates presentation of the text to a modern reader. Since no single version of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* has survived intact from antiquity, any translator has to make difficult decisions about how to treat the material. The method followed here has been to take as the basic text the “standard version.” These are later copies of the eleven-tablet edition associated with Sin-leqe-unninni. Where lines, sections, or episodes are missing or omitted from this version, I have supplied them where possible from other versions, both earlier and later. There is no consistent line numbering for any original text of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The line numbers used here refer to lines of the translation only.

Even when all versions are consulted, there are still major gaps in the narrative, as well as in individual lines or passages. Editors and translators have guessed about what the missing elements might have been; new discoveries often prove these guesses wrong. In this translation, important words or phrases not found in any ancient manuscript and not restorable from surviving traces or parallel passages are enclosed in square brackets, meaning that these are only modern interpretive surmises. Where such inferences are not possible, square brackets enclose ellipses. Question marks within parentheses following words or phrases indicate particularly uncertain restorations that might have a significant impact upon the meaning of the passage. Words or phrases in parentheses indicate explanatory additions by the translator. Ellipses without brackets indicate signs or words of unknown meaning.

It is important to remember that the ancient languages in which *The Epic of Gilgamesh* was written or translated, including Akkadian, Sumerian, and Hittite, are not so well understood as other ancient languages, such as Greek and Latin. This means that translators frequently disagree among themselves as to what a given word or phrase could mean. While this translation is based on study of the ancient manuscripts, consultation of the extensive scholarly literature about the epic, and comparison with the best modern translations, it remains a more individual product than a translation of a work by Homer or Virgil is likely to be. The goal has been to produce a readable text well grounded

in the ancient sources. New discoveries constantly enlarge our understanding of the epic, whose genius and power can still move the modern reader four thousand years after it was written.

## *Reading The Epic of Gilgamesh*

### DIRECT SPEECH

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* contains considerable direct speech by the characters, normally introduced by the formula, "X made ready to speak, saying to Y." But in situations in which the narrator wishes to convey a sense of urgency, abruptness, anger, or excitement, this formula is often omitted (I, 94, 180, 224; VI, 7–21, contrast 24–79; VI, 84–86, contrast 87–88; VI, 154–55; VII, 141, 169; IX, 3; XI, 178, 206–8).<sup>2</sup> The story opens and closes using the same words, addressed by an omniscient narrator to the audience in the beginning and addressed by Gilgamesh to the exiled boatman at the end. The poem also contains first-person discourse by individual characters describing their past (XI, 9–209) or present (IX, 3–12) actions. In general, there is more direct speech by the characters than narration of their actions.

The narrative is sometimes rapid, sometimes slow. Suspense is built up by repetition (I, 113–66) or lengthy speeches at climactic moments (V, 64–116). Passage of time may be conveyed by serial repetition of lines (VII, 174–80; IX, 82–109). Description of particularly dramatic moments or speeches of great emotion may be given in full twice, as if pausing for effect (II, 66–68, 100–104). Action is presented in short episodes, often with direct speech, such as instructions, assertions, or statements of will, setting the stage for action to follow (X, 196–205). The second half of the poem makes extensive use of retrospective speech concerning events already narrated or that took place before the time of the poem, climaxing in the long speech of Utanapishtim narrating the story of the flood (XI, 9–209). While these speeches are progressively more important for Gilgamesh's broadening understanding, their effect is to slow the action in the second half of the poem, though the denouement is surprisingly rapid.

### PARALLELISM

In Mesopotamian poetry, each line usually consists of a complete sentence or thought. Lines often divide into two, three, or more parts with roughly the same number of words in each part, usually two to four, though there are many variations on this pattern. There is no strict meter in Mesopotamian poetry, but the symmetry of poetic lines can give the poetry a kind of rhythm or beat that may be varied for artistic

2. References are to tablet and line of the translation.

reasons. For example, rapid rhythms may be used for a fight scene (II, 96–108), slow rhythms for an anxious mother's prayer (III, 46–85).

Lines of poetry often come in pairs, which can be related to each other in sound, rhythm, and meaning. Meaning is developed in part of a line, a whole line, in pairs of lines, or in groups of lines by use of parallelism; that is, repeated formulation of the same message such that subsequent statements may restate, expand, complete, contrast, render more specific, or carry further the first message. The following two-line example illustrates this:

He anointed himself with oil, turned into a man,  
He put on clothing, became like a warrior.  
(II, 43–44)

In this case, the first half of each line gives complementary, sequential actions that describe Enkidu's progress in grooming himself into civilization. The second half of each line proclaims his progress from becoming a human being to becoming a leader among men.

The following example is in five lines:

The whole of Uruk was standing beside him,  
The people formed a crowd around him,  
A throng was jostling towards him,  
Young men were mobbed around him,  
Infantile, they groveled before him.  
(II, 85–89)

This describes the street scene as Enkidu enters Uruk to challenge Gilgamesh. Activity increases as the scene focuses on the hero at the center: the outer limits are standing in a crowd, some within are jostling each other for position, the nearer ones are piling up on each other's shoulders, those closest are collapsing at his feet in awe. This quickening of action is paralleled by ever greater specification of the people involved: the whole land, a rabble or mob, the young men of the city. One senses, too, increasing derogation by the narrator, for he seems to be contemptuous of the shoving crowd of gawking, fawning men and youngsters.

#### NARRATIVE CONTRASTS

The reader will observe that another favored literary device of the standard version of the epic is the use of contrasts or symbols that can be redefined or even reversed in meaning between the beginning and the end of the poem. For instance, in the beginning, Gilgamesh stays up all night roistering and abusing his subjects; at the end, he cannot stay awake more than a few minutes. Gilgamesh, the king, at the apex of society, is supposed to act as shepherd of his subjects, but instead mis-

treats them; Enkidu, the uncivilized man, watches all night over the shepherds' flocks. Enkidu begins as a wild man roaming the steppe and saving wild beasts from the hunter; Gilgamesh becomes a wild man who kills wild beasts.

#### FIGURES OF SPEECH

Mesopotamian literature makes extensive use of figures of speech familiar to the modern reader, for example, a variety of similes. Some are simple comparisons: "like a lioness whose cubs are in a pitfall, he paced to and fro" (VIII, 60–61), or an attacker springs back "like a swing rope" (VII, 137). Some similes are developed further or form part of a wider set of associations: "like a guardian deity she (the harlot) led him" (II, 22). This evokes an image, familiar to Babylonians from their document seals, of a personal intercessor deity leading the seal owner into the presence of a more important deity. Yet once Enkidu has become civilized, he walks in front of the harlot to Uruk (II, 74), and later in the poem, the elders of Uruk, Gilgamesh, and Enkidu have much to say about who is to walk first as they set forth on their quest (III, 5–7, 170, etc.). So here an apparently simple simile opens a series of related images that recur throughout the poem. Some similes seem enhanced with irony: "Roof her over like the watery depths" (XI, 31), for example, is a striking way to describe the ark under construction just before the flood. The Mesopotamians considered the watery depths below the earth to have a surface over them to hold them in. This the poet compares to the roof of the ark, which is supposed to keep the waters out.

Metaphors, or implied comparisons, include such examples as "Whatever they attempt is a puff of air" (II, 187) and "his breath (of life) is death" (II, 153). They may also be refurbished and expanded, as with some of the similes. In Tablet I, line 31, for example, Gilgamesh as king is compared to a charging wild bull, an image common enough when used in praise of Mesopotamian royalty, but the image gains richness a few lines later by reference to his mother, Ninsun, as a wild cow (I, 37): Gilgamesh is a wild bull by birth, so to speak, as well as by behavior. Later in the poem, Enkidu dreams that he is trampled down by a monster "like a wild bull" (VII, 139), perhaps symbolic of Gilgamesh's role in his friend's impending doom. Likewise, the metaphor of Gilgamesh as shepherd of Uruk, contrasted to Enkidu as an actual shepherd, is an example of the refurbishment of what was nearly a "dead metaphor" elsewhere: the king as shepherd of his people.

#### WORDPLAY

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* abounds in wordplay, that is, suggestion of one word through use of another with the same or similar sound. In modern

Western literature, this technique is usually used as a game or joke, but in Mesopotamian literature wordplays were used in serious and solemn literary contexts as well as for humor. Three or more wordplays in the narration of Gilgamesh's dreams (I, 246–86), for example, provide a clear reference to homosexual love: “axe” (I, 279) can suggest “female impersonator,” “force” (I, 248) can suggest “male wearing his hair in a distinctive manner to suggest prostitution,” and in a three-way wordplay, “commanded” or “something evoked by” (I, 96) may also suggest “male” and “sequestered man as if in a harem.” An equally complicated wordplay, intended to deceive the human race about the true nature of the events presaged by construction of the ark, apparently depends on “cakes” suggesting “darkness,” “grains” suggesting something like “grievous,” and “rains” suggesting “provide for,” though the whole passage is difficult and its meaning in dispute (XI, 43–47). Enkidu's curse and blessing of the prostitute (VII, 67–95, 115–25) contain numerous wordplays, some with sexual overtones: “best clothes” suggests “lap” (a euphemism for genitalia). Likewise in Humbaba's curse of Gilgamesh and Enkidu (V, 113), there seem to be elaborate wordplays that mean at the same time “May they not cross water safely to the opposite bank” and “May they not find a friend to rely on,” where “cross” sounds like “friend” and “bank” has an ominous echo of the word for “grave,” although this example remains obscure. In the gardener's rejection of Ishtar's advances (VI, 71–74), his choice of the word “reed” (*elpet*) echoes harshly Ishtar's use of “touch” (*luput*) (VI, 69); and in line 77, “garden patch” suggests “suffering.” In Tablet XI, line 227, there is a wordplay on “day” and “make known.” In this translation, a few of the most important wordplays are explained, the wording is altered to suggest the tone or ambiguity, or comparable English puns and expressions are used. Others have of necessity been left aside.

#### USE OF FANTASTIC NUMBERS

Of all ancient Mesopotamian literary works, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* makes the most frequent use of fantastic numbers: quantity, size, weight, time, and distance. Sometimes the unit counted is not expressed but left to the reader's imagination, as in Tablet XI, line 66, “thrice thirty-six hundred measures of pitch I poured in the oven.” The precise numbers may vary among different versions of the poem. In some instances, the figures do not seem to add up (II, 205–11) or simply defy calculation (X, 211–17). Some of these figures may have been mathematical jokes intended for people with a Mesopotamian mathematical education, while others may simply be exaggerations in folkloric or epic style. Among the most celebrated riddles in the poem is Gilgamesh's genealogy: two-thirds god, one-third human, for which various explanations have been offered. The fraction two-thirds appears again

in the name of the boatman, Ur-Shanabi, "Servant of Two-Thirds," and in connection with launching or loading the ark (XI, 80).

#### PECULIARITIES OF SPEECH

Tone and usage in such an ancient text are hazardous topics for discussion, but *The Epic of Gilgamesh* contains clear differentiations in the speech of individual characters, including style, diction, grammar, and even pronunciation. Utanapishtim, for example, expresses himself in the elevated, obscure style suitable for an antediluvian sage but has a curious mannerism of rolling or doubling consonants (*sharru* for *sharu*, *shaqqa* for *shaqa*, *ushaznannu* for *ushaznanu*, *niqqu* for *niqu*). This may have suggested to an ancient audience some social or personal distinction now no longer apparent. Shamhat, the harlot, is eloquent and persuasive (I, 224–44), whereas Ishtar, the goddess, apparently speaks like a person of little education, perhaps a streetwalker (VI, 94–100, 151). The elders of Uruk are pompous and long-winded, causing Gilgamesh to laugh (II, 275); Humbaba is mincing and bombastic, and Ishullanu, the gardener, uses a nonstandard form in Tablet VI, line 72 (this could be translated either as archaic and proverbial: "Hath my mother not baked?" or as a colloquialism: "Hain't my mother baked?"). Although deliberate distortion of normal poetic language to reflect distinctive speech may occur elsewhere in Mesopotamian literature, no other work develops the device to the same extent as this poem.

#### COMPOUND EXPRESSIONS

A minor but distinctive motif of *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the formation of compounds with the word "man," such as "trapping-man" or "entrapping-man" (I, 113; VII, 59), "mightiness-man" (I, 139), "joy-woe man" (I, 234), "yokel-man" (V, 27), "human-man" (I, 178), and "circumspect-man" (IV, 223). The most elaborate of these is the name of the old man who is supposed to test the plant of rejuvenation: "Old Man Has Become Young-Again-Man" (XI, 303). This type of formation is very rare outside of this poem, so may be considered a special feature of its style, though the tone or intent is no longer perceivable.

#### THEMES

To a Mesopotamian audience, certain themes of the poem would have been familiar from other popular literary works. The portrayal of human mortality as a consequence of divine selfishness, for example, was well known to them. They also recognized a hero as a man striving towards greater accomplishments than those of ordinary people, in spite of the limitations imposed by chance and destiny. The Mesopotamians pre-



ferred literary works set in ancient times, involving kings and gods, narrating events largely outside of everyday experience. Yet the divine and human heroes often display imperfections and personal limitations, as if remoteness of time and empirical background were no obstacles to projecting inglorious human weakness onto long-ago heroes. The theme of the partiality of divine justice was familiar to Babylonian readers as well: they would not have been surprised at the unfair condemnation of Enkidu nor at the intervention of the sun god, Shamash, to the crucial advantage of the heroes.

In the epic, the Mesopotamian audience would have recognized passages that occur in other literary works. For example, in Tablet VII, lines 147–52, Enkidu uses lines found also in the poem called “Ishtar’s Descent to the Netherworld”<sup>3</sup> in describing his own descent to hell. Furthermore, Ishtar’s threat to release the dead, in Tablet VI, lines 99–100, is also found in “Ishtar’s Descent to the Netherworld.” Mesopotamian readers might have relished the contrast between how this passage was used in the epic and how it was used in the other poem. In the epic, Ishtar makes these threats after going up to heaven, whereas in “Ishtar’s Descent to the Netherworld,” she makes the same threats at the gates of hell. They would also have noticed that in threatening to break down the tavern keeper’s door (X, 22) Gilgamesh uses the same words that Ishtar uses in the other poem when threatening to break down the doors of hell, and perhaps they thought that a humorous touch. Nor is this the only instance of wording from another poem used in the Gilgamesh epic to mean something quite different. In Tablet VII, lines 83 and 85, Enkidu curses the female prostitute using the same terms with which the queen of the netherworld curses the male impersonator of women in “Ishtar’s Descent to the Netherworld.” These and other allusions to Mesopotamian intellectual tradition suggest that the anticipated audience included people of formal education appreciative of the adroit reuse of stock phraseology.

Mesopotamians expected their literature to stress the importance of knowledge. The significance of Gilgamesh’s story lay not so much in the deeds themselves as in the lesson his experience offered to future generations. The Mesopotamians believed that highest knowledge came to sages of the remote past directly from the gods or through extraordinary events not likely to recur. For their own times, they thought that highest knowledge came from study of written works of the past.

The modern reader may well find other themes of the poem of special interest. Women, for example, are more active in this narrative than in many Mesopotamian literary works. In fact, Gilgamesh’s success in his quest is largely owed to the intervention of women: his mother’s with the sun god, leading to his defeat of Humbaba; the wife of the

3. Translated in *Muses*, pp. 402–9.