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A New English Version

GILGAMESH

# GILGAMESH

A NEW ENGLISH VERSION



STEPHEN MITCHELL

FREE PRESS

NEW YORK ♦ LONDON ♦ TORONTO ♦ SYDNEY



FREE PRESS

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## Praise for Stephen Mitchell's *Gilgamesh*

"Stephen Mitchell's *Gilgamesh* is a wonderful version. It is as eloquent and nuanced as his translations of Rilke. This is certainly the best that I have seen in English."  
—Harold Bloom

"Reading Stephen Mitchell's marvelously clear and vivid rendering makes me feel that I am encountering *Gilgamesh* for the first time."  
—Elaine Pagels, author of *The Gnostic Gospels*

"Ingenious and very readable."  
—*The New York Review of Books*

"It was a revelation. The translation is superb."  
—Harold Pinter

"A magnificent new rendering. . . . Propels the reader along through the subtle, muscular music of its rhythms. The language is spare, sinuous, pellucid and often striking. For the reader who wishes to breathe in the spirit of this epic, to relate to it as a work of literature rather than to interpret it as a series of fragments recording some distant legend, Mitchell produces what should become recognized as the standard text. Read it and sense all the wisdom and complexity of the original. . . ."  
—*The Times* (London)

"A very readable version in stately verse. . . . Warmly recommended. . . . Retains just enough of the strangeness of the original and its robust imagery to capture its essence, and by smoothing the fragments into a coherent narrative he highlights the work's essential themes."  
—*The Washington Post*

"Here is the wisdom and lyrical beauty of yore rendered, offered us anew, by a distinguished, ever-so-knowing translator and poet who has given so many of us a wondrous education these past years. Mitchell connects us to treasures of the past brought alive by his broad and deep sensibility."  
—Robert Coles, James Agee Professor of Social Ethics, Harvard University

"Stephen Mitchell's fresh new rendition of mankind's oldest recorded myth is quite wonderful in its limpidity and the immediacy of its live emotions."  
—Peter Matthiessen, author of *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*

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"Since its discovery, the 3,500-year-old Mesopotamian saga has been rendered into English countless times. Not until now, however, has it found a translation capable of evoking its great power—a translation vigorous in its narration, translucent in its poetry and incisive in its depiction of our clever, struggling, frail humanity. Stephen Mitchell's *Gilgamesh* is a masterpiece of storytelling, or re-telling."

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"A powerful translation of an eerie and unsettling ancient epic. . . . The most pellucid version of the epic yet to have been written in English, but . . . most startling and admirable . . . is the fact that Mitchell has not sacrificed a sense of the weird on the altar of readability."

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"As narrative verse, this *Gilgamesh* gently entrances and enthralls. Its liquid, intimate four-stressed lines . . . negotiate the rapid shifts between everyday pleasures, heroic feats, and blazing visions in this mythic world where the sensual and spiritual always intersect. Mitchell manages to slip the mesmerizing incantations of the verse . . . into his reader's bloodstream."

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"Remarkable: a rendition that, while taking no great liberties with the text, somehow makes it available as a work of literature, rather than as a set of fragments from a vanished cosmology. . . . The lines of verse move swiftly, gracefully . . . the diction is simple and clean, evoking the sense of a time when the world was new and first being named. Reading this *Gilgamesh* gave me a sense, for the first time, of understanding Rilke's devotion to the poem."

—*Newsday*

"Henceforth, no person can consider himself . . . fully educated without having read, in addition to the Bible, Homer, and Shakespeare, this oddly humane and curiously modern story."

—*Sun-Sentinel* (Ft. Lauderdale)

"Mitchell, the noted translator of many of the world's seminal spiritual texts, has reached back to ancient Mesopotamia to bring out a version of . . . literature's first hero story that speaks to modern times."

—*San Francisco Chronicle*

"Mitchell's version of *Gilgamesh* . . . clips along like an action novel. With its contemporary language and modernized narrative, it would find enthusiastic readers even among those who have no interest in classic literature."

—*City Paper* (Baltimore)



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*To Katie*

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# INTRODUCTION



## THE OLDEST STORY IN THE WORLD

In Iraq, when the dust blows, stopping men and tanks, it brings with it memories of an ancient world, much older than Islam or Christianity. Western civilization originated from that place between the Tigris and the Euphrates, where Hammurabi created his legal code and where *Gilgamesh* was written—the oldest story in the world, a thousand years older than the *Iliad* or the Bible. Its hero was a historical king who reigned in the Mesopotamian city of Uruk in about 2750 BCE. In the epic, he has an intimate friend, Enkidu, a naked wild man who has been civilized through the erotic arts of a temple priestess. With him Gilgamesh battles monsters, and when Enkidu dies, he is inconsolable. He sets out on a desperate journey to find the one man who can tell him how to escape death.

Part of the fascination of *Gilgamesh* is that, like any great work of literature, it has much to tell us about ourselves. In giving voice to grief and the fear of death, perhaps more powerfully than any book written after it, in portraying love and vulnerability and the quest for wisdom, it has become a personal testimony for millions of readers



in dozens of languages. But it also has a particular relevance in today's world, with its polarized fundamentalisms, each side fervently believing in its own righteousness, each on a crusade, or jihad, against what it perceives as an evil enemy. The hero of this epic is an antihero, a superman (a superpower, one might say) who doesn't know the difference between strength and arrogance. By preemptively attacking a monster, he brings on himself a disaster that can only be overcome by an agonizing journey, a quest that results in wisdom by proving its own futility. The epic has an extraordinarily sophisticated moral intelligence. In its emphasis on balance and in its refusal to side with either hero or monster, it leads us to question our dangerous certainties about good and evil.

I began this version of *Gilgamesh* because I had never been convinced by the language of any translation of it that I'd read. I wanted to find a genuine voice for the poem: words that were lithe and muscular enough to match the power of the story. If I have succeeded, readers will discover that, rather than standing before an antiquity in a glass case, they have entered a literary masterpiece that is as startlingly alive today as it was three and a half millennia ago.

## ORIGINS

**G***ilgamesh* is a work that in the intensity of its imagination stands beside the great stories of Homer and the Bible. Yet for two thousand years, all traces of it were lost. The baked clay tablets on which it was inscribed in cuneiform characters lay buried



in the rubble of cities across the ancient Near East, waiting for people from another world to read them. It wasn't until 1850 that the first fragments were discovered among the ruins of Nineveh, and the text wasn't deciphered and translated for several decades afterward. The great poet Rainer Maria Rilke may have been the first reader discerning enough to recognize its true literary stature. "*Gilgamesh* is stupendous!" he wrote at the end of 1916. "I . . . consider it to be among the greatest things that can happen to a person." "I have immersed myself in [it], and in these truly gigantic fragments I have experienced measures and forms that belong with the supreme works that the conjuring Word has ever produced." In Rilke's consciousness, *Gilgamesh*, like a magnificent Aladdin's palace that has instantly materialized out of nowhere, makes its first appearance as a masterpiece of world literature.

The story of its discovery and decipherment is itself as fabulous as a tale from *The Thousand and One Nights*. A young English traveler named Austen Henry Layard, who was passing through the Middle East on his way to Ceylon, heard that there were antiquities buried in the mounds of what is now the city of Mosul, halted his journey, and began excavations in 1844. These mounds turned out to contain the ruined palaces of Nineveh, the ancient capital of Assyria, including what was left of the library of the last great Assyrian king, Ashurbanipal (668–627 BCE). "In amazement" Layard and his assistant Hormuzd Rassam "found room after room lined with carved stone bas-reliefs of demons and deities, scenes of battle, royal hunts and ceremonies; doorways flanked by enormous winged bulls and



lions; and, inside some of the chambers, tens of thousands of clay tablets inscribed with the curious, and then undeciphered, cuneiform (“wedge-shaped”) script.” Over twenty-five thousand of these tablets were shipped back to the British Museum.

When cuneiform was officially deciphered in 1857, scholars discovered that the tablets were written in Akkadian, an ancient Semitic language cognate with Hebrew and Arabic. Fifteen years went by before anyone noticed the tablets on which *Gilgamesh* was inscribed. Then, in 1872, a young British Museum curator named George Smith realized that one of the fragments told the story of a Babylonian Noah, who survived a great flood sent by the gods. “On looking down the third column,” Smith wrote, “my eye caught the statement that the ship rested on the mountains of Nizir, followed by the account of the sending forth of the dove, and its finding no resting-place and returning. I saw at once that I had here discovered a portion at least of the Chaldean account of the Deluge.” To a Victorian this was a spectacular discovery, because it seemed to be independent corroboration of the historicity of the biblical Flood (Victorians believed that the Genesis story was much older than it is). When Smith saw these lines, according to a later account, he said, “‘I am the first man to read that after more than two thousand years of oblivion!’ Setting the tablet on the table,” the account continues, “he jumped up and rushed about the room in a great state of excitement, and, to the astonishment of those present, began to undress himself.” We aren’t told if he took off just his coat or if he





continued to strip down further. I like to imagine him in his euphoria going all the way and running stark naked, like Enkidu, among the astonished black-clad Victorian scholars.

Smith's announcement, made on December 3, 1872 to the newly formed Society of Biblical Archaeology, that he had discovered an account of the Flood on one of the Assyrian tablets caused a major stir, and soon more fragments of *Gilgamesh* were unearthed at Nineveh and in the ruins of other ancient cities. His translation of the fragments that had been discovered up to then was published in 1876. Though to a modern reader it seems quaint and almost surrealist in its many mistaken guesses, and is often fragmentary to the point of incoherence, it was an important pioneering effort.

Today, more than a century and a quarter later, many more fragments have surfaced, the language is much better understood, and scholars can trace the history of the text with some degree of confidence. Briefly, here is the consensus.

Legends about Gilgamesh probably began to arise shortly after the death of the historical king. The earliest texts that have survived, which date from about 2100 BCE, are five separate and independent poems in Sumerian, entitled "Gilgamesh and Aga," "Gilgamesh and Huwawa," "Gilgamesh and the Bull of Heaven," "Gilgamesh and the Underworld," and "The Death of Gilgamesh." (Sumerian is a non-Semitic language unrelated to any other that we know, and is as distant from Akkadian as Chinese is from English. It became the learned language of ancient Mesopotamia and was part of the scribal



curriculum.) These five poems—written in a leisurely, repetitive, hieratic style, much less condensed and vivid than the Akkadian epic—would have been familiar to later poets and editors.

The direct ancestor of the eleven clay tablets dug up at Nineveh is called the Old Babylonian version. It was written in Akkadian (of which Babylonian is a dialect) and dates from about 1700 BCE; eleven fragments have survived, including three tablets that are almost complete. This version, though it paraphrases a few episodes in the Sumerian *Gilgamesh* texts, is an original poem, the first *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In its themes and its form, it is essentially the same poem as its Ninevite descendent: a story about friendship, the death of the beloved, and the quest for immortality.

Some five hundred years after the Old Babylonian version was written, a scholar-priest named Sîn-lēqi-unninni revised and elaborated on it. His epic, which scholars call the Standard Version, is the basis for all modern translations. As of now, with seventy-three fragments discovered, slightly fewer than two thousand of the three thousand lines of the original text exist in readable, continuous form; the rest is damaged or missing, and there are many gaps in the sections that have survived.

We don't know exactly what Sîn-lēqi-unninni's contribution to the Standard Version was, since so few fragments of the Old Babylonian version have survived for comparison. From what we can see, he is often a conservative editor, following the older version line for line, with few if any changes in vocabulary and word order. Sometimes, though, he expands or contracts, drops passages or adds them, and functions not as



an editor but as an original poet. The two major passages that we know he added, the Prologue and the priestess Shamhat's speech inviting Enkidu to Uruk, have the vividness and density of great art.

The *Gilgamesh* that you are about to read is a sometimes free, sometimes close adaptation into English verse of Sîn-lēqi-unninni's Standard Version.\* Even scholars making literal translations don't simply translate the Standard Version; they fill in some of the textual gaps with passages from other versions, the Old Babylonian being the most important. I have taken this practice further: occasionally, when the Standard Version is particularly fragmentary, I have supplemented it with passages from the Sumerian *Gilgamesh* poems. I have also added lines or short passages to bridge the gaps or to clarify the story. My intention throughout has been to re-create the ancient epic, as a contemporary poem, in the parallel universe of the English language.

## CIVILIZING THE WILD MAN

**G***ilgamesh* is the story of a hero's journey; one might say that it is the mother of all heroes' journeys, with its huge uninhibited mythic presences moving through a landscape of dream. It is also the story of how a man becomes civilized, how he learns to rule himself and therefore his people, and to act with temperance, wisdom, and piety. The poem begins with the city and ends with it.

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\* See "About This Version," p. 65.

