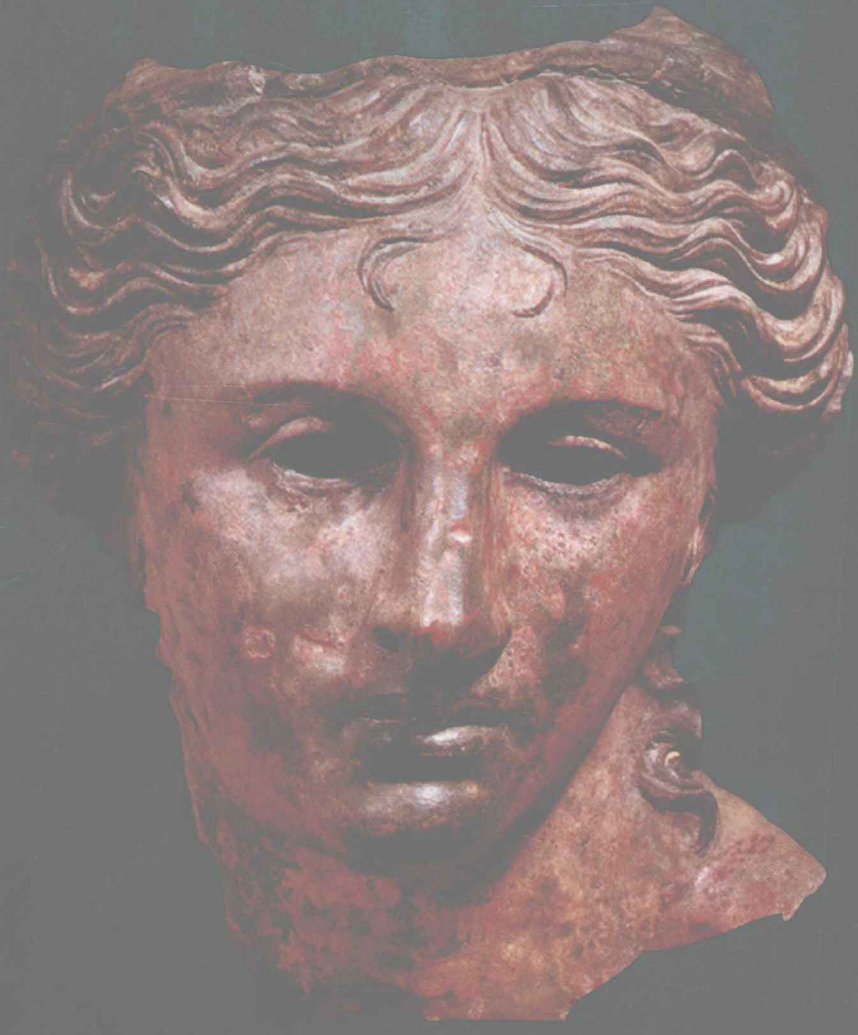
Readings in Ancient History

Thought and Experience from Gilgamesh to St. Augustine

NELS M. BAILKEY



FIFTH EDITION

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Thought and Experience from Gilgamesh to St. Augustine

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Preface

Readings in Ancient History is an anthology of sources designed for Western Civilization and ancient history survey courses. It offers more than one hundred selections from the literature of the peoples of the ancient Near East, Greece, and Rome. Like all literature, they reflect thought (ideas) and experience (institutions)—political, economic and social, religious and cultural. Most ideas are the rationalizations and theories that accompany and support institutions—in our own day, for example, democracy and capitalism—that people set up to solve the problems confronting them. In antiquity, as today, institutions and their accompanying ideas were replaced, however reluctantly, when they failed to solve the new problems that inevitably arose with changing conditions. And because the various problems that emerge in the course of one civilization tend to be similar to those that appear at a parallel point in the history of other civilizations, the solutions devised to solve them tend also to be similar. As a consequence, broad patterns of parallel development in the institutions and ideas of civilizations become discernible. This has led in recent years to an emphasis, as in this book, on the comparative method of studying civilizations. Patterns—also called models and paradigms—of such developments are described in some detail in various of the introductions to the reading selections in this volume. The introductions also give the reader the opportunity to exercise critical thinking. Are the generalizations in the introductions supported by the evidence in the accompanying readings?

My intent overall in this book is to stimulate the reader's interest and comprehension—the objective set by an ancient Hebrew historian:

> We have been careful, that they that will read may have delight, and that they that are desirous to commit to memory might have ease, and that all into whose hands it comes might have profit. (II Maccabees 2:25)

N. M. B.

I Shall Make You Love Books More Than Your Mother,
and I Shall Place Their Excellence Before You.
—The Instruction of Dua-Khety,
Middle Kingdom of Egypt

I Invite the Reader's Attention to a Record
of the Infinite Variety of Human Experience.
—Livy, History of Rome

Most of Us Have Decided to Explore
the Varied Nature of Mankind by Seeking It
in Its Ancient Setting, A Wondrous Window Indeed.
—Chester G. Starr,
Past and Future in Ancient History

Readings in Ancient History

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NEAR EASTERN CIVILIZATIONS

Is there a thing whereof men say,
"See, this is new"? It
Hath been already, in the ages
Which were before us.
Ecclesiastes 1:10

Relief of Scribes, Eighteenth Dynasty.

FEW ASPECTS of civilization in the ancient Near East hold the attention of modern students for long as they hurry on to the serious study of the Greeks. As pertinent today as it was in the first century A.D. is the observation of the Jewish historian Josephus of "the current opinion that, in the study of ancient history, the Greeks alone deserve serious attention" (*Against Apion,* I, 2). The achievements of the Greeks were indeed phenomenal, and the broad range of their thought and experience is recognized in such statements as "The Greeks went over the same road before us." The reading selections in this section reveal, however, that the peoples of the ancient Near East produced ideas and institutions that deserve comparison with those of the Greeks.

Religious developments in the ancient Near East are particularly significant not only because they constitute a legacy that was handed on to later civilizations but also because they provide a complete pattern of development from lower to higher forms of religious belief and practice. The three phases of this pattern, and the changing values that give meaning to life in each phase, can be summarized as follows.

The earliest period in the history of a civilization is commonly called a heroic age because the values that give meaning to life are connected with a life of heroic action on earth. Material success and the prestige which comes from the accomplishment of notable deeds are the paramount goals of life, and a person's success is measured by glory or fame as a hero. The boast of a nobleman of the Old Kingdom of Egypt, "I filled an office which made my reputation in this Upper Egypt. Never before had the like been done in this Upper Egypt," reflects the same heroic outlook on life as the words of the valorous Sumerian hero Gilgamesh, who could not be deterred from combat with a fierce dragon: "If I fall, I shall have established my fame. 'Gilgamesh fell, they will say, in combat with terrible Huwawa.' "

When we turn to the religious beliefs of this first, or heroic, age of the Near Eastern civilizations, we find that they shared the same materialistic interest in this earthly life. Death, which cuts short the exciting life of action, was dreaded as the worst of evils. To offset this catastrophe, people sought some means of prolonging their earthly existence and avoiding the final journey to what the Sumerians called the "land of no return." The relationship between mortals and the gods, who were cut from the same heroic pattern as mortals, was purely material and premoral—premoral in the sense that rewards and punishments meted out by the gods had nothing as yet to do with the kind of conduct that was based upon man's love for his fellow man. Religion was on a materialistic cash basis: people believed that the more they gave to the gods in the form of sacrifices, the more they would be rewarded. This close reciprocal relationship was viewed as completely satisfactory to both parties, and this fact is the main theme of the earliest religious literature. "Well tended are men, the cattle of god," states an early Egyptian text, "he made heaven and earth according to their desire."

The values of the heroic age and their accompanying religious beliefs and practices did not continue forever. In each of the civilizations we shall examine time brought changes which resulted in a collapse of the old order. Largely as a

result of what is often called a "time of trouble"—a term for social calamity which was first used by the ancient Hebrews—old practices and beliefs were swept away amid political, economic, and social disintegration. "No sudden change of outward affairs," wrote Boethius in the sixth century A.D. as he viewed the collapse of his Roman world, "can ever come without some upheaval in the mind." The ancient Near Eastern civilizations were affected in the same fashion by similar disastrous events. As a result, they turned away from the gods, who no longer seemed to answer the petitions of the sacrifice, and they rejected the pursuits and values of the heroic age. People lamented their sad lot in a new age empty of the old values; and while some sought refuge by immersing themselves in such new and, as it turned out, temporary values as romantic love and other excitements, others turned to the task of constructing a stable and meaningful way of life based on more permanent values.

The values of this new way of life were moral values, for it was discovered that the only way to restore order and stability to society was by laying stress upon right conduct by its members. A life of justice and righteousness, inspired by a love for one's fellows and a golden rule, became the goal for which to strive. Religion reflected this profound change in the values of life, and there arose moral religions in which rewards and punishments from the gods were thought to be based solely upon human conduct. The contrast between the old and the new in religion, the premoral and the moral, was put in one short sentence by an Egyptian sage who witnessed the collapse of the Old Kingdom and reflected upon that disaster: "More acceptable [to the gods] is the virtue of the upright man than the ox of him that doeth inequity." The prophet Micah proclaimed the same moral view at a similar moment in the development of Hebrew religious beliefs: "What does the Lord require of thee, but to do justly, and love kindness, and to walk humbly with thy God?"

The Epic of Gilgamesh:

The Sumerian Heroic Age

Folk epics are impersonal accounts of heroic deeds composed in a simple and forceful meter. They were at first unwritten, transmitted by minstrels who chanted them to the accompaniment of a musical instrument. They form the early literature of many civilizations and are of great interest not only for the tales they tell but also for the institutions and ideas which they describe.

From *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 3rd rev. ed. with Supplement, pp. 73–75, 78–79, 84–85, 87, 89–90, 96. Translated by E. A. Speiser.

The Sumerians were the first people to produce epic tales of semi-legendary heroes, the most famous of whom was Gilgamesh, ruler of the city-state of Uruk (or Erech) about 2700 B.C. About 2000 B.C., or somewhat later, an unknown Babylonian collected some of the Gilgamesh stories, together with other tales, and wove them into a new whole. The following selections are from this Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh.*

The theme which gives unity to the varied heroic adventures described in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is that of death—the sudden realization that death will cut short the glorious career of the great hero and the frantic but unsuccessful search for some means of living forever. The story opens with an account of the friction between Gilgamesh and the nobles of Uruk, who claim that their ruler is acting tyrannically. (Their complaint that Gilgamesh drafted their sons to serve in his army is described in a separate epic tale; their charge in the tale below that he mistreated their wives and daughters is probably pure propaganda.) The nobles appeal to the gods for aid, with the result that Enkidu is created by Aruru, the mother goddess, to check Gilgamesh's "arrogance." Gilgamesh sends a temple prostitute to tame Enkidu's barbarous nature before he is brought to Uruk, where the two heroes fight to a draw and thereafter become fast friends. Together they set out on dangerous adventures, slaying the terrible monster Huwawa who guards the Cedar Forest for the storm-god Enlil, insulting the goddess Ishtar who falls in love with Gilgamesh—love that here, as elsewhere in the epic, contains no romantic element—and destroying the awesome Bull of Heaven sent by the angered Ishtar to kill Gilgamesh. When next Enkidu dies as the result of Enlil's displeasure over the slaying of Huwawa, Gilgamesh is panic-stricken by the sudden realization of the stark reality of death. His life is henceforth dominated by the one aim of finding everlasting life. This leads him to search out Utnapishtim, the one man to whom the gods have granted immortality, in order to learn from him the secret of eternal life. The remainder of the epic incorporates the story of the Flood (Selection 2), which originally existed as an independent tale. Utnapishtim relates how he obtained eternal life as a reward for the deeds he performed at the time of the Flood. But this unique event cannot be duplicated. As a parting gift to the dejected Gilgamesh, Utnapishtim tells him of the Plant of Life that grows on the bottom of the sea and renews the life of him who eats it. But once again Gilgamesh's hopes are ended when the Plant of Life is stolen from him by a snake. The epic ends with Gilgamesh's bitter lament over the failure of his quest; though snakes may hereafter slough off their old skins and eternally renew their youth, the sad lot of man is old age and death.

> He who saw everything to the ends of the land,
> Who all things experienced, considered all! . . .
> Two-thirds of him is god, one third of him is human. . . .
> The onslaught of his weapons verily has no equal.
> By the drum are aroused his companions.

Gilgamesh's despotic behavior leads to the creation of Enkidu.

> The nobles of Uruk are gloomy in their chambers:
> "Gilgamesh leaves not the son to his father;

Day and night is unbridled his arrogance.
Yet this is Gilgamesh, the shepherd of Uruk.
He should be our shepherd: strong, stately, and wise!
Gilgamesh leaves not the maid to her mother,
The warrior's daughter, the noble's spouse!"
The gods hearkened to their plaint,
The gods of heaven, Uruk's lords . . .
The great Aruru they called:
"Thou, Aruru, didst create Gilgamesh;
Create now his double;
His stormy heart let him match.
Let them contend, that Uruk may have peace!" . . .
Aruru washed her hands,
Pinched off clay and cast it on the steppe.
On the steppe she created valiant Enkidu, . . .
Shaggy with hair is his whole body,
He is endowed with head hair like a woman. . . .
He knows neither people nor land; . . .
With the gazelles he feeds on grass,
With the wild beasts he jostles at the watering-place,
With the teeming creatures his heart delights in water. . . .

Having heard of the animal-like Enkidu, Gilgamesh sends a harlot to civilize him by means of the unromantic, purely physical love found in heroic-age epic tales. Enkidu performs heroically.

The lass beheld him, the savage-man,
The barbarous fellow from the depths of the steppe: . . .
The lass freed her breasts, bared her bosom,
And he possessed her ripeness.
She was not bashful as she welcomed his ardor.
She laid aside her cloth and he rested upon her.
She treated him, the savage, to a woman's task,
As his love was drawn unto her.
For six days and seven nights Enkidu comes forth,
Mating with the lass.
After he had had his fill of her charms,
He set his face toward his wild beasts.
On seeing him, Enkidu, the gazelles ran off,
The wild beasts of the steppe drew away from his body.
Startled was Enkidu, as his body became taut,
His knees were motionless—for his wild beasts had gone.