Section 10.2: Mesopotamian Literature, Part 2 (The Epic of Gilgamesh)

As a way of ending the course and tying together as many threads as possible, in this last lecture I'd like to address one of the greatest treasures the ancient world has left us, the Epic of Gilgamesh.

But before you read the transcript of my lecture below, please do the following:

- Read pp. 158-160 and p. 174 in your textbook.
- Also read the introduction to Andrew George's translation of the Epic of Gilgamesh; focus on pp. xxvii-li. [If you weren't able to buy the book, I've scanned those pages and put them in the Files section of the Canvas site. Look for a file named "Gilgamesh Introduction George."]
- If you'd like, there's also a helpful lecture by Andrew George on YouTube: https://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=gilgamesh+epic+text&docid=607990158395837755&mid=AD54A6DB766E5C832E38AD54A6DB766E5C832E38&view=detail&FORM=VIRE

The quiz for Section 10.2 will be based on (1) the assigned reading for Section 10 in the course textbook, (2) this lecture transcript and (3) the introduction to George's translation (see above).

From those reading assignments, I will expect you to have grasped:

- the basic plot of the Epic of Gilgamesh;
- how and why the text was written down;
- who read it and how it was used in antiquity;
- how modern scholars have pieced the text together from multiple sources written in different languages and time periods;
- and the themes and ideas in it which still resonate with audiences today.

As we saw in the last lecture (Section 10.1, *Enuma Elish*), reading and studying a work of Mesopotamian literature can open the door to exploring informative and fascinating parallels between the Bible. In doing so, we can shed valuable light on both and illuminate the bedrock on which many of our own literary traditions are built. As you have learned from your reading assignment for this class period, the story of Gilgamesh, despite its antiquity, is remarkably modern and has much to say to our world. Though the text is badly damaged, it's clear that it is a masterpiece now brought back to life through the efforts of scholars who have been working on the epic for well over a century. As the Assyriologist and translator Andrew George says, many of its missing pieces are very likely to come to light and with luck will present us with the entire text one day. Until then, however, there is still much we can do to understand its importance in the evolution of ancient civilization and to enjoy the beauty and brilliance of the tale it tells.

Let's survey seven passages which highlight that genius and, in particular, inform us about biblical traditions.

1. Gilgamesh and the Nephilim (Tablet I.45-72)[1]

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, the title character is described as part mortal and part god, but superbeing though he is, he's no altruistic Superman.

> Where is there one who can rival his kingly standing,
> and say like Gilgamesh, 'It is I who am the king'?
> Gilgamesh was his name from the day he was born,
> two-thirds of him god and one third human.
>
> It was the Lady of the Gods who drew the form of his figure,
> while his build was perfected by divine Nudimmud…
>
> A triple cubit was his foot, half a rod his leg.
> Six cubits was his stride,
> …cubits the front part of his …
>
> His cheeks were bearded like those of …
> the hair of his head grew thickly as barley.
> When he grew tall his beauty was consummate,
> by earthy standards he was most handsome.
>
> In Uruk-the-Sheepfold he walks back and forth,
> like a wild bull lording it, head held aloft.
> He has no equal when his weapons are brandished,
> his companions are kept on their feet by his contests.
>
> The young men of Uruk he harries without warrant,
> Gilgamesh lets no son go free to his father . . .
> By day and night his tyranny grows harsher,
> Gilgamesh, the guide of the teeming people!
>
> It is he who is shepherd of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,
> but Gilgamesh let no daughter go free to her mother…

A similar sort of hybrid *ubermensch* is also seen in the Bible. Semi-divine beings called in Hebrew the Nephilim, often translated "sons of God," populate the world in the earliest verses of the Bible.

> There were giants in the earth in those days; and also after that, when the sons of God came in unto the daughters of men, and they bare children to them, the same became mighty men which were of old, men of renown. (Genesis 6:4)

[1] All translations are taken from Andrew George's *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (Penguin).

Though the Bible never explains where these Nephilim come from, their role is critical. After they mix with mortal women, they engender an arrogant breed of creatures more than human but less than divine, driving God to flood the earth and obliterate their kind. In a like manner, Gilgamesh misbehaves because of the arrogance born of his natural superiority.

While the Biblical tale of the Nephilim is somewhat confusing — it looks to have been abridged for some reason — it bears clear parallels to the Epic of Gilgamesh, in particular, the audacity of a semi-divine "hero" who oversteps his rightful bounds and thus the gods must punish him to keep him in line. Also, at the end of the epic Gilgamesh's humbling journey to Utnapishtim, the sole survivor of the Flood, echoes the Hebrew God's intention to rid the world of the Nephilim's influence by sending the Great Deluge. Though these stories have different morals, each suited to its own culture, they both build upon a "fallen angel" motif which, no doubt, they shared in common with their neighbors as part of their Near Eastern heritage.

2. The Cedars of Lebanon (Tablet IV)

Another motif seen in both the Bible and the Epic of Gilgamesh concerns the Cedar Forest, an enormous and daunting woodland tract which once covered a large stretch of the Syro-Palestinian area. The depredations of humanity have erased almost all traces of it and today it's hard to imagine that only a few thousand years ago there was a great forest in that part of the world. History indeed offers no better lesson about the long-term consequences of ecological mismanagement.

But it's undeniable that once in this part of the world there was a thick wood of cedar trees which among other things provided the local populace with a livelihood. Not only could they export its timber but the trees also produced a valuable export commodity, their resin which has a sweet smell and was widely used in purification rituals. This economic asset manifested in ancient thinking as an opportunity for great exploits such as the journey taken by Gilgamesh and Enkidu to this forest where they kill the monster Humbaba (or Huwawa). In Sumerian times, it was a test of valor to challenge someone even to enter this wood — to the Sumerians it was a frontier that represented the edge of the world — thus, the "Conquest of the Cedar Forest" later became a trope, a conventional way of expressing a person's bravery and daring. More than one king lists this adventure among his feats of renown.

Indeed, as late as the Assyrian and Babylonian kings of the first millennium BCE, it was a royal prerogative to claim to have tamed this wild wood, even though the Near East was a much smaller world by the first millennium BCE. Indeed, it's doubtful there were very many cedars left in the Syro-Palestinian area in that day. Thus, by then little more than a vapid cliché, the irony-rich habit of vaunting victory over a nearby, nearly dead forest didn't escape the shrewd eye of the biblical prophet Isaiah, who was always on the lookout for hypocrisy among the heathen. At Isaiah 14:8-9, he sings a witty mock dirge upon the death of a recently deceased Babylonian king, saying:

> The whole earth is at rest and is quiet:
> they break forth into singing.

Yea, the fir trees rejoice at thee, the cedars of Lebanon, saying,
'Since thou art laid down, no lumberjack is come up against us.'

In other words, the braggart ruler of Babylon is dead so the forest feels safe and the trees sing: "Yippee! There's one less king to cut us down now!" Isaiah's mockery of this customary tradition among Mesopotamian royalty — a paradigm we now know is as old as the Epic of Gilgamesh — shows not only that Hebrews knew the literary and political tradition behind the vain boast but also that the Bible is deeply rooted in the context and content of ancient Near Eastern culture.

3. The Creation of Enkidu (Tablet I.101-104)

Except for the title hero himself, the most important character in the Epic of Gilgamesh is Enkidu, his best friend, a character created to channel the king's baser instincts in more profitable directions than harrying the people of Uruk with sex or games or canals or whatever. Notably, when the mother goddess Aruru takes "a pinch of clay" and molds Enkidu, her actions bear some likeness to the creation of Adam in Genesis.

The goddess Aruru, she washed her hands,
took a pinch of clay, threw it down in the wild.
In the wild she created Enkidu, the hero,
offspring of silence, knit strong by Ninurta. (EG I.101-104)

First, the name Adam has strong affinities with *adom*, the Hebrew word for "clay." Similarly, *adamah* means "dirt." This etymology is reinforced at Job 33:6: "Behold, before God I am as you are; I too was formed from a piece of clay." At Genesis 3:19, God even calls Adam "dust" explicitly: "For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return." The underlying message of this pervasive theme in ancient Near Eastern literature appears to be the fragility and transitory nature of mortal life. That is, mortals are dusty and fragile. They break as easily as a clay pot, which is an especially appropriate image for Enkidu, a character whose death will drive the narrative.

At the same time, however, in each work the newly formed creature also contains within him a spark of the immortal. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu embodies the lofty conception of Anu, the principal god of the Mesopotamian pantheon. He is "what Anu had thought of" (EG I.100). Likewise in the Bible, God makes "man in his own image" (Genesis 1:26-7). In both cases, the moral seems to be that humans may be made of clay but they're more than merely frangible ceramic, even if they're not fully divine.

4. Enkidu and the Acculturation of Man (Tablets I.167-223; P 66-71; II. 36-46; P 90-111)

The plot of the Epic of Gilgamesh really begins with the meeting of Enkidu and Gilgamesh.

Off went the hunter, taking Shamhat the harlot,
they set out on the road, they started the journey.
On the third day they came to their destination,
hunter and harlot sat down there to wait.

One day and a second they waited by the water-hole,
then the herd came down to drink the water.
The game arrived, their hearts delighting in water,
And Enkidu also, born in the uplands.

With the gazelles he grazed on grasses,
joining the throng with the game at the water-hole,
his heart delighting with the beasts in the water:
then Shamhat saw him, the child of nature,
the savage man from the midst of the wild.

'This is he, Shamhat! Uncradle your bosom,
bare your sex, let him take in your charms!
Do not recoil, but take in his scent:
he will see you, and will approach you.

'Spread your clothing so he may lie on you,
do for the man the work of a woman!
Let his passion caress and embrace you,
his herd will spurn him, though he grew up amongst it.'

Shamhat unfastened the cloth of her loins,
she bared her sex and he took in her charms.
She did not recoil, she took in his scent:
she spread her clothing and he lay upon her.

She did for the man the work of a woman,
his passion caressed and embraced her.
For six days and seven nights
Enkidu was erect, as he coupled with Shamhat.

When with her delights he was fully sated,
he turned his gaze to his herd.
The gazelles saw Enkidu, they started to run,
the beasts of the field shied away from his presence.

Enkidu had defiled his body so pure,
his legs stood still, though his herd was in motion.
Enkidu was weakened, could not run as before,
but now he had reason, and wide understanding.

He came back and sat at the feet of the harlot,
watching the harlot, observing her features.
Then to the harlot's words he listened intently,
as Shamhat talked to him, to Enkidu:

'You are handsome, Enkidu, you are just like a god!
Why with the beasts do you wander the wild?
Come, I will take you to Uruk-the-Sheepfold,
to the sacred temple, home of Anu and Ishtar,

'where Gilgamesh is perfect in strength,
like a wild bull lording it over the menfolk.'
So she spoke to him and her word found favor,
he knew by instinct, he should seek a friend.

Said Enkidu to her, to the harlot:
'Come, Shamhat, take me along
to the sacred temple, holy home of Anu and Ishtar,
where Gilgamesh is perfect in strength,
like a wild bull lording it over the menfolk.

'I will challenge him, for my strength is mighty,
I will vaunt myself in Uruk, saying "I am the mightiest!"
There I will change the way things are ordered:
one born in the wild is mighty, strength he possesses.'

… Her words he heard, her speech found favor:
the counsel of a woman struck home in his heart.
She stripped and clothed him in part of her garment,
the other part she put on herself…

By the hand she took him, like a god she led him,
to the shepherd's camp, the site of the sheep-pen.
The band of shepherds was gathered around him,
talking about him among themselves.

'This fellow — how like in build he is to Gilgamesh,
tall in stature, proud as a battlement.
For sure it's Enkidu, born in the uplands,
his strength is as mighty as a rock from the sky.'

Bread they set before him,
ale they set before him.
Enkidu ate not the bread, but looked askance.

How to eat bread Enkidu knew not,
how to drink ale he had never been shown.

The harlot opened her mouth,
saying to Enkidu:
'Eat the bread, Enkidu, essential to life,
drink the ale, the lot of the land!"

Enkidu ate the bread until he was sated,
he drank the ale, a full seven goblets.
His mood became free, he started to sing,
his heart grew merry, his face lit up.

The barber groomed his body so hairy,
anointed with oil he turned into a man.
He put on a garment, became like a warrior,
he took up his weapon to do battle with lions.

Seen another way, Enkidu's story bears an even greater resemblance than Gilgamesh's to Adam's in Genesis. In a story pattern scholars call the "Acculturation of Man," Enkidu's animal-like savagery is tamed and he assumes human attributes. He is at first a veritable beast who lives in the wild and co-habits with other creatures, until he meets the prostitute Shamhat who seduces him, after which his former friends, the animals of the wilderness, shun him. In despair, Enkidu returns to Shamhat who clothes him and like a mother teaches him how to eat, then takes him to the great city of Uruk where his adventures with Gilgamesh begin. They will ultimately end in his death.

Adam's story runs closely parallel to this. At first living peacefully amidst nature in the Garden of Eden, Adam meets Eve and his troubles begin. While the Bible doesn't speak directly of them having sex, the atmosphere is fraught with sexuality: both are naked, Eve serves as Adam's companion, and God tells them to be "fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth" (Genesis 1:28).

Most interesting of all, the text of Genesis centers around the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, popularly known as the "apple." In ancient Near Eastern culture, the words for both "fruit" and "knowledge" carry strong sexual overtones. *Inbu*, for instance, in Babylonian means both "fruit" and "sex," while "knowledge" in Hebrew can imply sexual intercourse as is well known from the Sodom and Gomorrah passage (Genesis 19:5). This is not to say that the Bible should be interpreted to be saying — or even implying — that Adam and Eve "knew" each other's "fruit" in the Garden of Eden, only that this passage shares with the Enkidu-Shamhat episode a strong aura of sexuality. And note that the woman in both cases shows the man the way to a more "knowledgeable" way of life, be it for his good or not.

After Adam "did eat" of the fruit Eve offered him, he incurs God's displeasure and is evicted from his idyllic existence amidst the animals and nature. In just the same way, Enkidu loses his connection to the wild after having sex with the prostitute Shamhat. Adam and Eve also sew on fig leaves to hide their nakedness much as Shamhat clothes Enkidu. Later, God condemns Adam to eat bread "in the sweat of thy brow," just like Enkidu whom Shamhat teaches to do the same (EG II.90).

Although the stories seem on the surface to end very differently — Enkidu leaves the wild behind and meets his new best friend Gilgamesh, while Adam and Eve are banished from Eden to a life of toil and pain — there's another notable parallel here. Both tales culminate in a city: Enkidu ultimately ends up in Uruk; and later in Genesis, Cain, we are told, "builded a city" (Genesis 4:17). It's worth noting that at this point in the Bible it's still very early in the history of the world. To judge from the narrative, how many people are there? Count them. Four: Adam, Eve, Cain and Abel, but then Cain kills Abel, which makes three. Where are the people who are supposed to inhabit Cain's new city? With so few possible inhabitants, why even build a city?

Despite these inconsistencies, the Bible includes this detail, because, no doubt, the Mesopotamian story pattern of the Acculturation of Man traditionally resolved in humans inhabiting cities. Urban communities are, after all, one of the more definitive features of our species. Indeed, the Greek philosopher Aristotle called man "the political animal," meaning the creature which lives in *poleis* ("cities"). In the Bible, this powerful narrative trope clearly overwhelmed any objection that it made little sense in the Hebrew adaptation of the story. If a man gets acculturated, he ends up in a city. Period. That's the power of literary tradition. Even when the Hebrews were tailoring the story pattern of the Acculturation of Man to their own purposes and were giving it a whole new context and meaning, they abided by the fundamental nature of its tried-and-true narrative framework: natural harmony leads to woman/sex/fruit/ knowledge leads to clothing/expulsion leads to urban life.

5. Siduri and Wisdom (Si ii.1 – iii.14)

After he and his friend Enkidu kill Humbaba and then Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh sets out on a quest for immortality. Along the way he stops at a tavern near the edge of the world and meets one of the more charming personalities in the epic, the barmaid goddess Siduri. He complains to her about losing Enkidu, and she answers by giving him some sound advice about life, telling him to enjoy what he's got and not seek for things beyond his grasp.

> [Gilgamesh said] 'My friend whom I loved so deeply,
> who with me went through every danger,
> Enkidu, whom I loved so deeply,
> who with me went through every danger:
>
> he went to the doom of mortal men.
> Weeping over him day and night,
> I did not surrender his body for burial —
> "Maybe my friend will rise at my cry!" —

‘for seven days and seven nights,
until a maggot dropped from his nostril.
After he was gone I did not find life,
wandering like a trapper in the midst of the wild.

‘O tavern-keeper, I have looked on your face,
but I would not meet death, that I fear so much.’
Said the tavern-keeper to him, to Gilgamesh:
‘O Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?

‘The life that you seek you never will find:
when the gods created mankind,
death they dispensed to mankind,
life they kept for themselves.

‘But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,
enjoy yourself always by day and by night!
Make merry each day,
dance and play day and night!

‘Let your clothes be clean,
let your head be washed, may you bathe in water!
Gaze on the child who holds your hand,
let your wife enjoy your repeated embrace!

‘For such is the destiny of mortal men, …’

Siduri’s response is an example of a very popular genre in antiquity, “wisdom literature,” the best and fullest example of which we have is the Book of Proverbs in the Bible. Wisdom literature provides practical, utilitarian advice about getting by in life. Its warnings are often tinged with doubt and skepticism and sometimes conflict with each other, but that’s not a problem. This isn’t philosophy. It’s common sense, and life isn’t always coherent.

Almost always phrased as terse commands, wisdom literature is very easy to read and grasp. “Don’t rob the poor!’ (Proverbs 22:22) “Don’t remove boundary stones!” (Proverbs 22:28, 23:10-11) Even some of the ten commandments could be seen as representatives of this genre: “Thou shalt not commit adultery,” which is just plain good advice. Note, however, that the Bible doesn’t say outright “because adultery is a sin,” though that implication is strong. The sense is equally strong that you shouldn’t commit adultery if you plan to stay alive and not get murdered by enraged spouse. Put simply, sexual fidelity is a better ticket to a long life.

Archaeological work has also uncovered a number of examples of wisdom literature from Egypt and Mesopotamia. One passage from the Egyptian proverb hoard called *The Instruction of Ptahhotep* is notable.

> If thou are one of those sitting at the table of one greater than thyself, take what he may give, when it is set before thy nose. Thou shouldst gaze at what is before thee. Do not pierce him with many stares, . . . Let thy face be cast down until he addresses thee, and thou shouldst speak (only) when he addresses thee. Laugh after he laughs . . . No one can know what is in the heart.

Compare Psalms 23:1-3:

> When you sit to eat with a ruler, consider diligently what is before you: And put a knife to your throat, if you are a person given to appetite. Don't be desirous of his delicacies: for they are deceitful food.

It's really no surprise to find such similar example of sound counsel in both Egyptian and Hebrew literature. Good advice is universal.

6. The Flood (Tablet XI. 57-206)

Gilgamesh at last arrives in the land across the sea where Utnapishtim lives, the man who survived the Great Deluge and is now immortal. His advice to the wandering hero is to forget his quest for immortality, and in making that case, he tells him about the great flood which he survived. As you read the following excerpt from the Epic of Gilgamesh, keep one eye on Genesis 6-9. We begin where Utnapishtim is describing the boat he built to ride out the storm.

> 'By the fifth day I had set her hull in position,
> one acre was her area, ten rods the height of her sides.
> At ten rods also, the sides of her roof were each the same length.
> I set in place her body, I drew up her design.
>
> 'Six decks I gave her,
> dividing her thus into seven.
> Into nine compartments I divided her interior,
> I struck the bilge plugs into her middle.
> I saw to the punting poles and put in the tackle.
>
> 'Three myriad measures of pitch I poured into a furnace,
> three myriad of tar I … within,
> three myriad of oil fetched the workforce of porters:
> aside from the myriad of oil consumed in libations,
> there two myriad of oil stowed away by the boatman.
>
> 'For my workmen I butchered oxen,
> and lambs I slaughtered daily.
> Beer and ale, oil and wine
> like water from a river I gave my workforce,
> so they enjoyed a feast like the days of New Year.

‘At sunrise I set my hand to the oiling,
before the sun set the boat was complete.
… were very arduous:
from back to front we moved poles for the slipway.
until two-thirds of the boat had entered the water.

‘Everything I owned I loaded aboard:
all the silver I owned I loaded aboard,
all the gold I owned I loaded aboard,
all the living creatures I had I loaded aboard.
I sent on board all my kith and kin,
the beasts of the field, the creatures of the wild, and members of every skill and craft…

‘At the very first glimmer of brightening dawn,
there rose on the horizon a dark cloud of black,
and bellowing within it was Adad the Storm God.
The gods Shullat and Hanish were going before him,
bearing his throne over mountain and land.

‘The god Errakal was uprooting the mooring-poles,
Ninurta, passing by, made the weirs overflow.
The Anunnaki gods carried torches of fire,
scorching the country with brilliant flashes.

‘The stillness of the Storm God passed over the sky,
and all that was bright then turned into darkness.
He charged the land like a bull on the rampage,
he smashed it in pieces like a vessel of clay.

‘For a day the gale winds flattened the country,
quickly they blew, and then came the Deluge.
Like a battle the cataclysm passed over the people.
One man could not discern another,
nor could people be recognized amid the destruction.

‘Even the gods took fright at the Deluge,
they left and went up to the heaven of Anu,
lying like dogs curled up in the open.
The goddess cried out like a woman in childbirth,
Belet-ili wailed, whose voice is so sweet:

‘“The olden times have turned to clay,
because I spoke evil in the gods’ assembly.
How could I speak evil in the gods’ assembly,

and declare a war to destroy my people?

‘“It is I who give birth, these people are mine!
And now, like fish, they fill the ocean!”
The Anunnaki gods were weeping with her,
wet-faced with sorrow, they were weeping with her,
their lips were parched and stricken with fever.

‘For six days and seven nights,
there blew the wind, the downpour,
the gale, the Deluge, it flattened the land.

‘But the seventh day when it came,
the gale relented, the Deluge ended.
The ocean grew calm, that had thrashed like a woman in labor,
the tempest grew still, the Deluge ended.

‘I looked at the weather, it was quiet and still,
but all the people had turned to clay.
The flood plain was flat like the roof of a house.
I opened a vent, on my cheeks fell the sunlight.

‘Down sat I, I knelt and I wept,
down my cheeks the tears were coursing.
I scanned the horizons, the edge of the ocean,
in fourteen places there rose an island.

‘On the mountain of Nimush the boat ran aground,
Mount Nimush held the boat fast, allowed it no motion.
One day and a second, Mount Nimush held the boat fast, allowed it no motion,
a third day and a fourth, Mount Nimush held the boat fast, allowed it no motion,
a fifth day and a sixth, Mount Nimush held the boat fast, allowed it no motion.

‘The seventh day when it came,
I brought out a dove, I let it loose:
off went the dove but then it returned,
there was no place to land, so back it came to me.

‘I brought out a swallow, I let it loose:
off went the swallow but then it returned,
there was no place to land, so back it came to me.

‘I brought out a raven, I let it loose:
off went the raven, it saw the waters receding,
finding food, bowing and bobbing, it did not come back to me.

‘I brought out an offering, to the four winds made sacrifice,
incense I placed on the peak of the mountain,
Seven flasks and seven I set in position,
reed, cedar and myrtle I piled beneath them.

‘The gods did smell the savor,
the gods did smell the sweet savor,
the gods gathered like flies around the man making sacrifice…

Then at once Enlil arrived,
he saw the boat, he was seized with anger,
filled with rage at the divine Igigi:
“From where escaped this living being?
No man was meant to survive the destruction!”

‘Ninurta opened his mouth to speak,
saying to the hero Enlil:
“Who, if not Ea, could cause such a thing”
Ea alone knows how all things are done.”

‘Ea opened his mouth to speak,
saying to the hero Enlil:
“You, the sage of the gods, the hero,
how could you lack counsel and bring on the Deluge?

‘“On him who transgresses, inflict his crime!
On him who does wrong, inflict his wrongdoing!
‘Slack off, lest it snap! Pull tight, lest it slacken!’

‘“Instead of your causing the Deluge,
a lion could have risen, and diminished the people!
Instead of your causing the Deluge,
a wolf could have risen, and diminished the people!

‘“Instead of your causing the Deluge,
a famine could have risen, and slaughtered the land!
Instead of your causing the Deluge,
a Plague God could have risen, and slaughtered the land!

‘“It was not I who disclosed the great gods’ secret:
Atra-hasis I let see a vision, and thus he learned our secret.
And now, decide what to do with him!”

‘Enlil came up inside the boat,
he took hold of my hand and brought me on board.
He brought aboard my wife and made her kneel at my side,

he touched our foreheads, standing between us to bless us:

'"In the past Utnapishtim was a mortal man,
but now he and his wife shall become like us gods!
Utnapishtim shall dwell far away, where the rivers flow forth!"
So far away they took me, and settled me where the rivers flow forth.'

As I'm sure you can see, the biblical parallels with this text are so many it's hard to know where to begin: the building of the craft, its measurements and levels, the animals and people put on board, the coming of the storm, how long it lasted, the landing on a mountain, the birds sent out — and note how many times the magic number seven shows up — the prominent role played by Noah's and Utnapishtim's wives, and how the Hebrew God and the Mesopotamian gods are both attracted to the savory smell of the post-Deluge offering. But perhaps most interesting of all is the resolution. The Igigi bicker among themselves over the folly of flooding the world, but God who has no one to quarrel with is left to express his regret for the devastation he wrought by setting the rainbow in heaven as a reminder to himself of his covenant with humankind never to flood the world again (Genesis 9:15). It's impossible not to conclude that these two narratives have drawn their inspiration for the same literary well.

7. Conclusion: The Walls of Uruk (Tablet XI.321-329)

If any morale emerges at the end of the Epic of Gilgamesh, it is that enduring fame is found not in immortality nor in feats of heroism, but in the building of cities. As he delivers the final lines of the epic proper, Gilgamesh tells Urshanabi, the boatman who brought him back to his home, to inspect the walls of Uruk closely.

Go up, Urshanabi, walk on the ramparts of Uruk.
Inspect the base terrace, examine its brickwork,
If its brickwork is not of burnt brick,
And if the Seven Wise Ones laid not its foundation. (EG XI.324-327)

To this, compare Psalms 48:12-13:

Walk about Zion (Jerusalem), and go round about her:
count her towers,
Mark well her bulwarks, consider her palaces;
that you may tell it to the generation following.

But while Tablet XI of the Epic of Gilgamesh concludes with the lines quoted above, Psalm 48 adds a final verse:

For such is God, our God, for ever and ever:
He will be our guide to the death.

Although the epic doesn't say so explicitly, the entire Gilgamesh saga points to much the same conclusion: our cities are our immortality or at least the symbols thereof. Where Psalm 48 ends by evoking the city of Jerusalem as evidence of God's strength and the promise he offers of salvation in death, the Mesopotamian hero has spent much of his life seeking much the same, an answer to the riddle of life and the mystery of death. And just like the psalmist, the broken and bruised King of Uruk at the end of journey finds the solution he's looking for in the fortitude of his own city, its towers and walls, what he now realizes is his greatest achievement, indeed, the crowning glory of all humankind. He now understands that we are the things we build. We die but we live on in them.

Thus, for all their seeming differences with the heathen hordes around them, the Hebrews in the end clung with remarkable loyalty to their ancient Near Eastern cultural heritage. If there ever was, this is proof of the truism: the more things change, the more they stay the same.