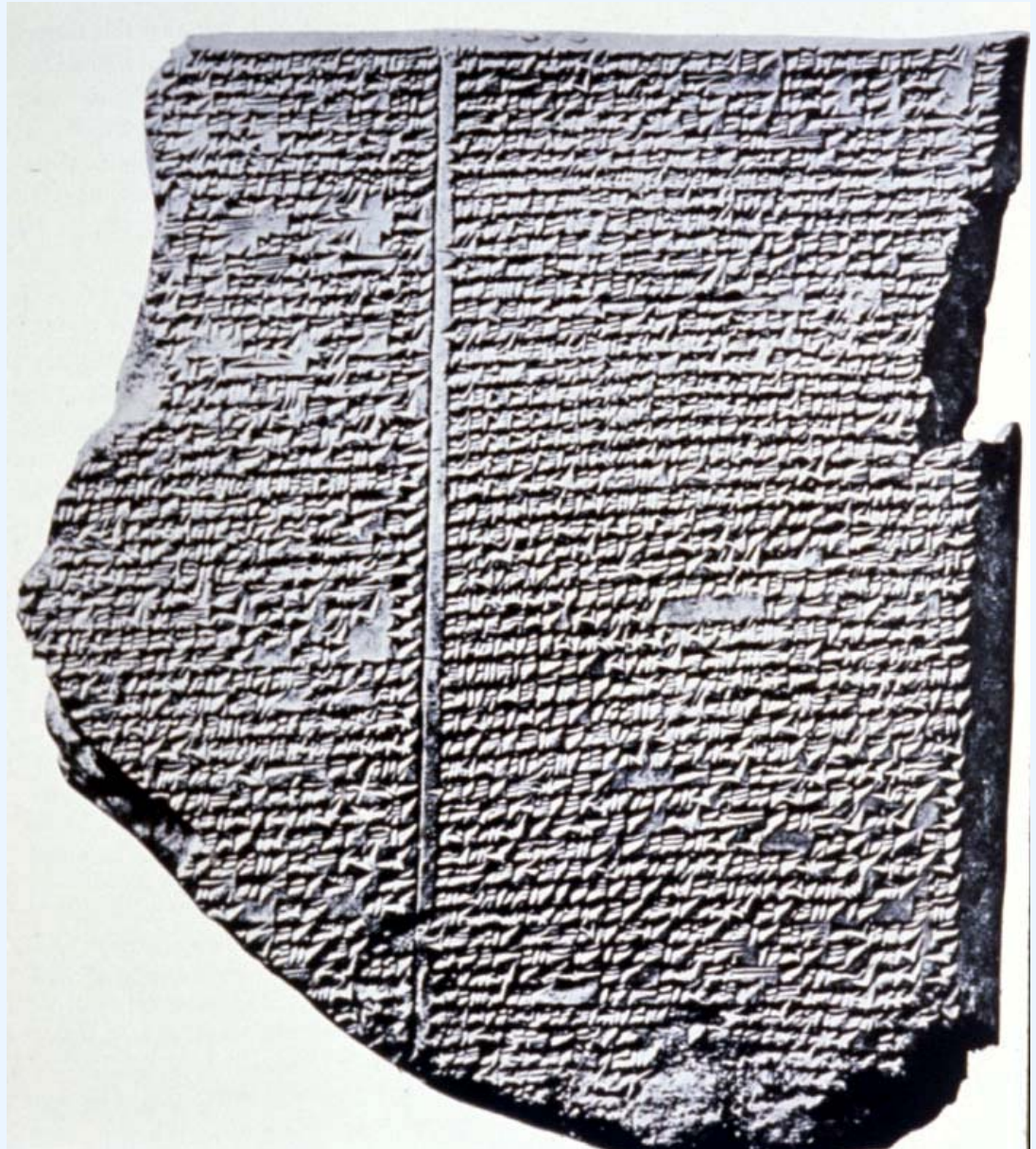


THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

The
Cuneiform
Text of
*The Epic
of
Gilgamesh*



THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

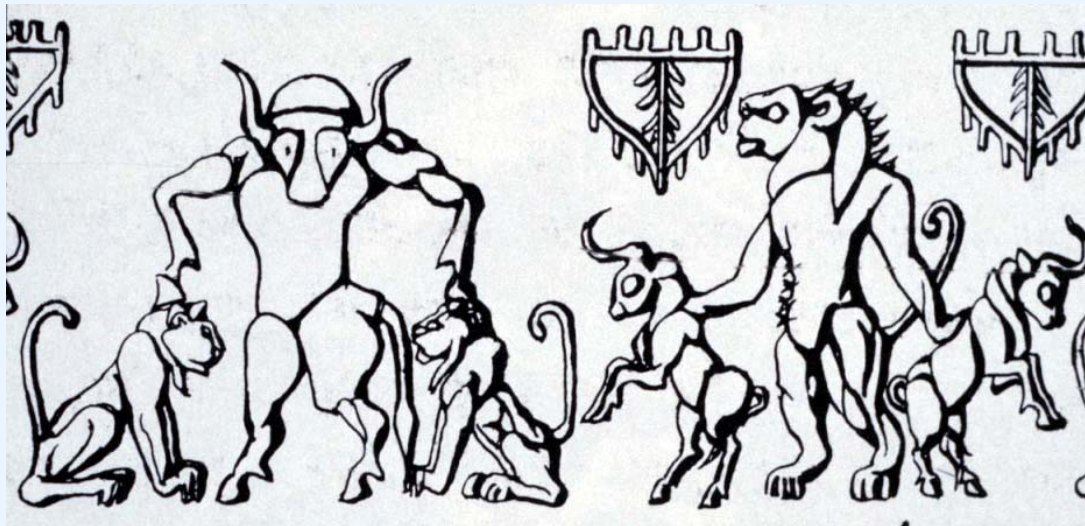
History of the Text

- the Sumerian **epic** is now lost
- most important extant versions of ***The Epic of Gilgamesh***:
 - Old Babylonian version (ca. 1800 BCE)
 - Assyrian version (ca. 700 BCE)
- modern editors have reassembled the story from fragments such as these
- in this context, coherence is impossible

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

The Hero Gilgamesh

- **Gilgamesh** is part-mortal part-immortal
 - one-third human, two-thirds god
 - from this the story presumes that he will die
- complication: he's better than anyone around him and so he bullies everyone



THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

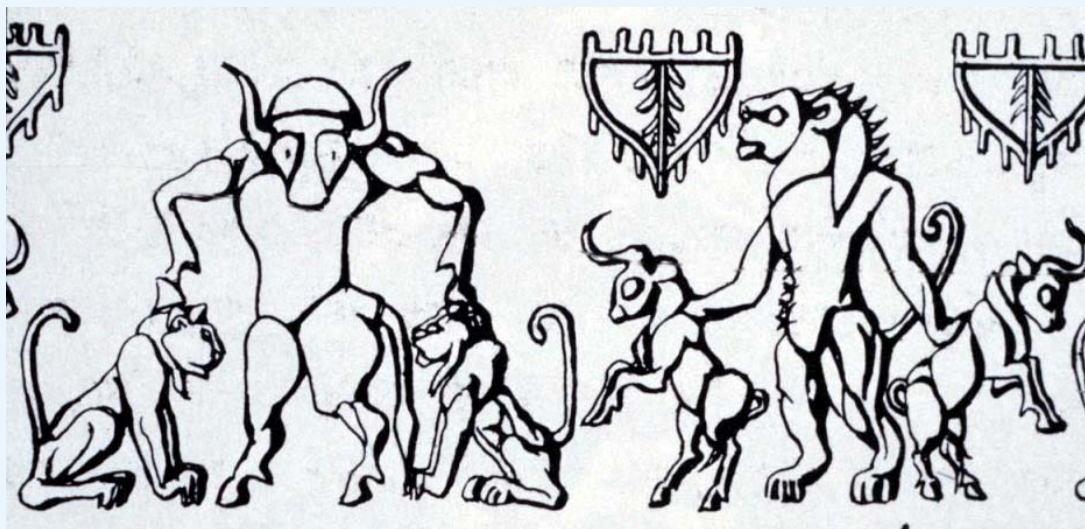
The Hero Gilgamesh

- cf. *Gilgamesh* I.67-8, 71-72

The young men of Uruk he harries without warrant,
Gilgamesh lets no son go free to his father . . .

It is he who is shepherd of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,
but Gilgamesh let no daughter go free to her mother.

- so the people of Uruk complain to the gods



THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Nephilim

- “sons of God” (*bene elohim*, Psalms 29:1)
 - cf. Genesis 6:4
 - There were giants (*nephilim*) 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.
 - no explanation of who the **sons of God** are
- the **Nephilim** (or their descendants) are the sinners God destroys in the Flood

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Nephilim

- cf. the Canaanite tradition of the **seventy sons of El and Asherah**
 - the entourage who follow the principal god El around
 - but the Canaanite term “sons” is literal, whereas the Hebrew term is figurative
 - cf. lightning as God’s sword



THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Nephilim

- the Nephilim are like Gilgamesh in that both are semi-divine being/s
- also, both overstep their bounds and cause problems
 - cf. the motif of the “fallen angel”
 - e.g. Satan in the Bible
 - Prometheus (the fire-bringer) in Greek myth

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

adom

- the gods decide to create Enkidu as a companion for Gilgamesh
 - a “playmate” who is like him and can interact with him on his own level
- the mother-goddess Aruru molds Enkidu from a lump of clay
 - he lives among the wild creatures and frees them from the hunters’ nets
 - the hunters complain to Gilgamesh

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

adom

- cf. the creation of Adam in Genesis 2:7
And the Lord God formed man of **the dust of the ground**
- also, cf. Job 33:6
Behold, before God I am as you are; I too was **formed** from **a piece of clay**.
 - Hebrew verb for “formed”: *qarash*
 - Akkadian verb: *karatsu*

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

adom

- *adom* is the Hebrew word for “clay”
 - thus, Adam’s name is a Hebrew pun on *adom* (or *adamah*, “dirt”)
 - implying humans are as fragile as clay, but also fired with the spark of divinity
- Enkidu is also described as “what Anu had thought of” (Tablet I.100)
 - cf. Genesis 1:26-7: “God made man in his own image”

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Acculturation of Man

- the Shamhat passage constitutes the most comprehensive parallel between *Gilgamesh* and the Bible
- the wild man **Enkidu** is subdued and becomes human (mortal)
 - cf. Adam who becomes mortal after his eviction from Eden

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Acculturation of Man

- the prostitute Shamhat “tames” Enkidu by teaching him about sex
 - Old Babylonian: “he possessed her ripeness”
 - “ripeness” = *inbu* (“fruit”)
 - cf. Eve
- then she feeds him, puts clothes on him and takes him back with her to Uruk

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Acculturation of Man

- Shamhat's food
- Enkidu's clothes
- his rejection by wild animals
- Uruk
- fruit of the tree of Good and Evil
- fig leaves
- eviction from the Garden of Eden
- Enoch (Cain's city)

Genesis 5:17: . . . and (Cain) builded a city, and called the name of the city, after the name of his son, Enoch.

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Humbaba

- Gilgamesh and Enkidu go off to fight Humbaba who lives in the Cedar Forest
 - cf. *cherub(im)*
 - *cherub* may be cognate with the Bab. *karabu* (“to be blessed”)



60 Mask representing Humbaba, the monster guarding the forest, who was slain by Gilgamesh.

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Cedars of Lebanon

- an enormous and daunting forest in the area of modern Lebanon
- in antiquity, destroyed by deforestation and ecological mismanagement
- felling these cedar trees serves as a test of valor for Assyrian and Babylonian kings, even as late as the first millennium **BCE**

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Cedars of Lebanon

- Isaiah 14:8-9, the cedars sing a clever mocking dirge of a recently deceased Babylonian king:

The whole earth is at rest and is quiet:

they break forth into singing.

Yea, the fir trees rejoice at thee,

and the cedars of Lebanon, saying,

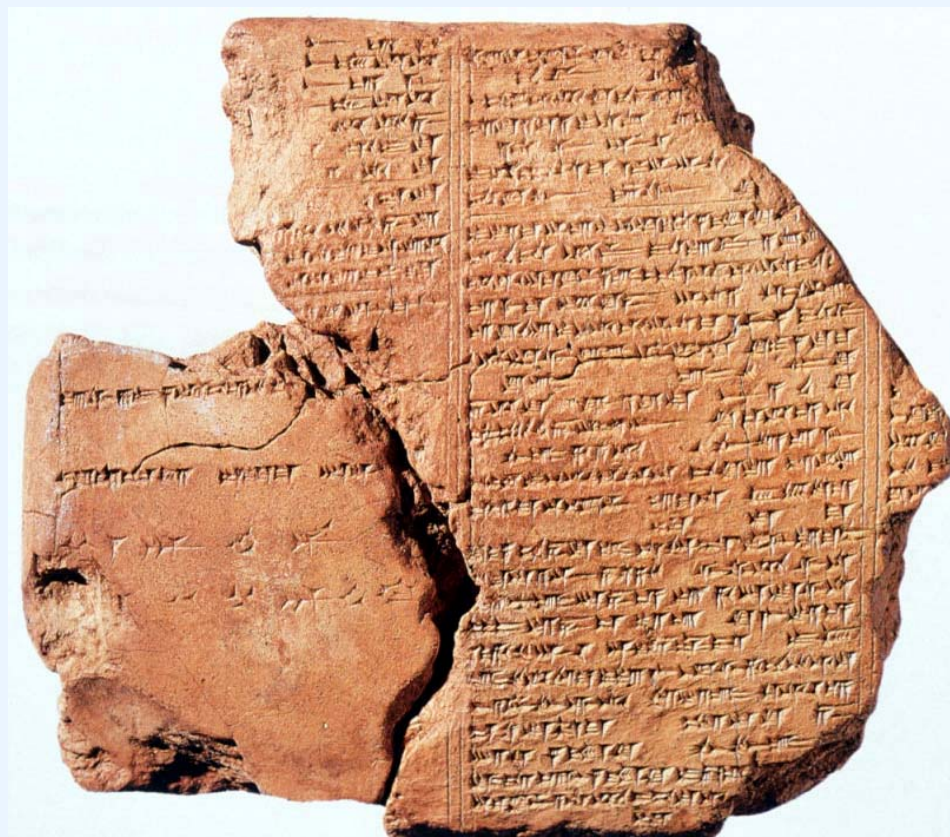
‘Since thou art laid down,

no feller is come up against us.’

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

The Death of Enkidu

- after killing Humbaba and cutting down many cedars, Enkidu and Gilgamesh return to Uruk
- Ishtar makes a pass at Gilgamesh
 - but he rejects her
- she sends the fire-breathing Bull of Heaven
 - a symbol of drought



Tablet 6: Ishtar's Revenge

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

The Death of Enkidu

- Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the Bull and throw its haunch at Ishtar
- she demands Gilgamesh's death but the gods decide to let Enkidu die in his place
- as Gilgamesh watches, Enkidu suffers a slow and painful death
- Gilgamesh panics about his own upcoming death and wants to become immortal

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

The Quest for Immortality

- he heads for the edge of the world where **Utana-pishti** lives
 - Utana-pishti is the Mesopotamian counterpart of Noah, the survivor of the Flood
 - the gods granted Utana-pishti immortality
- on the way to the edge of the world, Gilgamesh has to endure many ordeals
- ultimately, he runs into Siduri, the barmaid goddess, who gives him advice

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Wisdom Literature

- Siduri's advice is "wisdom literature"

Gilgamesh, where are you rushing to?

The life you're after you'll never find.

When the gods made people,

They allotted death for humankind,

And held fast to life as their own.

You, Gilgamesh, keep your belly full,

Have fun, night and day.

Make each day a joyous feast,

Dance day and night, and play!

Wear fresh clothes that sparkle,

Wash your hair, take a bath.

Watch the little one that holds your hand,

Let your wife delight in your embrace!

That's the job of humankind (10.3.1-14)

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Wisdom Literature

- different from the "epic" tenor of the rest of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*
- practical advice about how to get by in life
- has a utilitarian and practical focus
 - often tinged with doubt and skepticism
- may include conflicting advice
- rarely involves sublime theology
- easy-to-read prose, for the most part
 - composed of "syntactic nuggets"
 - i.e. notable quotable axioms

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Wisdom Literature

- highly conservative
 - makes it difficult to date
- often set in royal courts
- advice centers around on how to survive amidst ceremony and intrigue
 - how to keep your name clean
 - how to stay on the king's good side
 - don't commit adultery
 - but not because it's a sin—because you'll get caught!
- thus, "My son, . . ." is frequently the addressee of wisdom literature

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Wisdom Literature

- several examples of Egyptian wisdom literature have been found
 - e.g. *The Instruction of Ptah-hotep* (Pritchard, 234)

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, . . .

- cf. Proverbs 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 person given to appetite. Don't be desirous of his delicacies: for they are deceitful food.

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Wisdom Literature

- also, many biblical parallels with *The Instruction of Amen-em-Opet* (Pritchard, pp. 237-243)
 - Chapter 2: "Don't rob the poor!"
 - cf. Proverbs 22:22: "Rob not the poor!"
 - Chapter 6: "Don't remove boundary stones!"
 - cf. Proverbs 22:28, 23:10-11: "Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set."
- but some changes are inevitable
 - Proverbs omits advice about dealing with floods
 - there is not regular flooding in Israel
 - also no mention of Egyptian gods of luck

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Wisdom Literature

- but in general the Book of Proverbs follows Egyptian texts at times very closely
 - possible contact through Solomon's court?
- n.b. *Proverbs* 22:17-24:22
 - begins with "Hear me . . ."
 - sounds like the opening of a work
 - ends with coda-formula: "My son, . . ."
 - sounds like the end of a work

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Wisdom Literature

- especially Proverbs 22:20
 - Have I not written to you **thirty** things . . . so as to make you know the certainty of these words . . . ?
 - Why “thirty”? there are many more than pieces of advice preceding this passage!
 - thus often (mis)translated as “excellent”
- cf. Amen-em-Opet, Chapter 30 (p. 243):
 - See thou these **thirty** chapters . . . They instruct . . . they make the ignorant to know . . .
 - this *is* Chapter 30 in the Egyptian text!
 - Proverbs preserves the Egyptian chapter number
 - thus an Egyptian text solves a textual problem in Hebrew!

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Utana-pishti and the Deluge

- after punting and sailing across the sea, Gilgamesh finally reaches Utana-pishti in the land that lies beyond the Ocean,
- Utana-pishti tells him the story of the Flood (Tablet 11)
 - many parallels with the Noah passage in the Bible!
 - cf. the marginalia in Pritchard's text

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Utana-pishti and the Deluge

- Utana-pishti puts Gilgamesh to several tests but he fails
- finally Utana-pishti shows him where to find a plant of rejuvenation
 - but a snake steals it
- Gilgamesh returns to Uruk



THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Walls of Uruk

- *Gilgamesh XI.324-7*

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.

- *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.

THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Walls of Uruk

- according to Mesopotamian tradition, the walls of Uruk were rebuilt by Gilgamesh after the Deluge



THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

Conclusion: What does *The Epic of Gilgamesh* in particular—and Ancient Near Eastern literature in general—teach us about the Bible and Ancient Israelite religion?

- the Bible “**demythologizes, historicizes, and moralizes**” the literature it inherited from its cultural context in the Ancient Near East