The Epic of Gilgamesh
By Vickie Chao

A long, long time ago, there was a kingdom called Uruk. Its ruler was Gilgamesh.

Gilgamesh, by all accounts, was not an ordinary person. He was actually a superhuman, two-thirds god and one-third human. As king, Gilgamesh was very harsh. His people were scared of him and grew wary over time. They pleaded with the sky god, Anu, for his help. In response, Anu asked the goddess Aruru to create a beast-like man who had the same strength as Gilgamesh. He called the wild man Enkidu and let him roam free in the forest.

At first, nobody knew about Enkidu. But then, a hunter spotted him near a waterhole three days in a row. He was terrified and ran home to tell his father what he saw. His father urged him to go to Uruk and relay the story to Gilgamesh. So he did. Just as the father had predicted, Gilgamesh gave the young man a beautiful woman named Shamhat and asked him to use her as bait. After the young man returned, he and Shamhat went to the forest to wait for Enkidu. When Enkidu finally showed up, Shamhat seduced him. She made him fall in love with her. This new experience made Enkidu a changed man, and the animals felt it, too. For the first time, they did not welcome him to their crowd. Worse yet, he could no longer run alongside them as he used to do. Turning around, he went back to Shamhat. She comforted him. She told him that she would take him to Uruk. She would show him how to eat, speak, and dress properly. She would introduce him to Gilgamesh. And she promised him that Gilgamesh was the only man worthy of his friendship.

True to her words, Shamhat taught Enkidu everything she knew. The only thing she did not count on was the terrible clash between Enkidu and Gilgamesh. When Enkidu met Gilgamesh the first time, he found the man appalling. Right away, he challenged the king and engaged him in a fierce fight. But he lost. After the defeat, Enkidu accepted Gilgamesh's superiority. They hugged and became best friends.

Always eager to build a name for himself, Gilgamesh wanted to have an adventure. He wanted to go to the Cedar Forest and slay its guardian demon, Humbaba. Enkidu did not like the idea. He knew Humbaba from his days running wild in the forest. He tried to talk his best friend out of it. But Gilgamesh refused to listen. Reluctantly, Enkidu agreed to go with him.

After several days of journeying, Gilgamesh and Enkidu at last reached the edge of the Cedar Forest. Their intrusion made Humbaba very angry. But thankfully, with the help of the sun god, Shamash, the duo prevailed. They killed Humbaba and cut down the forest. They fashioned a raft out of the cedar trees. Together, they set sail along the Euphrates River and made their way back to Uruk. The only shadow cast over this victory was Humbaba's curse. Before he was beheaded, he shouted, "Of you two, may Enkidu not live the longer, may Enkidu not find any peace in this world!"

When Gilgamesh and Enkidu arrived at Uruk, they received a hero's welcome. The goddess of love, Ishtar, saw how handsome Gilgamesh was. She wanted to be his lover. But Gilgamesh refused and taunted her. With her pride bruised, Ishtar went to see her father, Anu. She begged him to let her use the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgamesh and his city. She threatened to smash the gates of hell if Anu did not give in to her wish. Seeing no other option, Anu agreed and unleashed the Bull of Heaven. As mighty as the Bull of Heaven was, it was still no match for Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Once again, the two teamed up and slew the beast.

After that episode, Enkidu fell sick. To his dismay, he found out that his illness was a punishment from the gods. As it turned out, the gods held a meeting among themselves. They wanted to hold somebody responsible for the death of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Since Gilgamesh was two-thirds god, he was forgiven. That meant Enkidu must die for insulting the deities.

Needless to say, Enkidu found the whole thing extremely unfair! While he lay dying, he lamented his fate. He cursed the hunter who found him. He cursed Shamhat who seduced him. But after the sun god had a chat with him, Enkidu felt calm again. He realized that he did have a good life, however short it had been. That final realization set his mind in peace. Several days later, he died.

Enkidu's death shattered Gilgamesh completely. For a long while, he could not do anything at all. As he mourned for his personal loss, he
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came to realize that he himself would eventually die, too. That thought terrified him! Panicked, Gilgamesh decided that he had to pay a visit to a man named Utnapishtim. He once heard that Utnapishtim and his wife were the only humans to whom the gods had ever granted eternal life.

To find Utnapishtim, Gilgamesh had to travel through dangerous grounds. But he did not care. Along the way, he met many who tried to dissuade him. Being stubborn, he cast their warnings aside and pressed on. After crossing the Waters of Death (with the help of a ferryman named Urshanabi), he finally faced Utnapishtim in person.

Utnapishtim told Gilgamesh how he became immortal.

Utnapishtim was once the king of Shuruppak. At the time, the gods were angry at mankind. They made a secret oath that they would destroy the world with a flood. One of the gods, Ea, wanted to alert Utnapishtim. But because of the oath, he could not tell him directly. So he whispered to the wall of Utnapishtim's house. Through it, the king learned of the looming flood. He followed Ea's advice and built a giant boat, big enough to load a pair of every animal on Earth. When the disaster struck, Utnapishtim, his wife, and the animals hid inside the boat. The Great Flood continued for seven days and seven nights. When it finally ended, the entire Earth had become a huge ocean. Utnapishtim and his companions were the only survivors. When the gods found out what had happened, they were very angry at Ea. But they eventually relented. Instead of making the couple die, they granted them eternal life.

At this point, Utnapishtim offered Gilgamesh a chance to be immortal. If Gilgamesh could stay awake for 6 days and 7 nights, he, too, could live on forever! Gilgamesh said he could do it. But as soon as he sat down, he fell asleep. Utnapishtim knew that Gilgamesh might deny falling asleep. So he asked his wife to bake a loaf of bread everyday and placed it next to him. By the seventh day, he woke Gilgamesh up. He pointed at the loaves and showed him their states of decay. Seeing how moldy and stale the first few loaves were, Gilgamesh fell silent. The evidence was strong. He had slept so soundly that he did not even know there were loaves of bread next to him! Luckily, Utnapishtim's wife took pity on him. She convinced her husband to tell Gilgamesh about a secret plant at the bottom of the ocean. Whoever ate it could become young again. Upon hearing it, Gilgamesh tied stones to his feet and sank to the bottom of the ocean. He plucked the plant and brought it back to the surface. But Gilgamesh did not eat the plant right away. He wanted to go back home and test it on some elders first. Before he left, he invited Urshanabi to visit his kingdom. The ferryman agreed. They sailed across the Waters of Death and headed toward Uruk. On the way home, Gilgamesh saw a spring and jumped in to take a bath. While he was having a grand time playing in the water, a snake smelled the plant and stole it. By the time Gilgamesh realized what had happened, it was already too late!

Now almost home, Gilgamesh asked Urshanabi to take a good look at Uruk. He urged the ferryman to check out the mighty walls and the sturdy foundations. As he stood admiring his own kingdom, Gilgamesh realized that searching for eternal life was useless. The only way for men to be immortal is to cultivate a great civilization. On that front, he was successful!

The Epic of Gilgamesh was the oldest tale ever told. Its first version probably came around during the 3rd dynasty of Ur (2100 B.C. - 2004 B.C.) Over time, the storyline changed a bit. But the main characters remained the same. By far, the most complete version was preserved on twelve clay tablets in the library of Ashurbanipal. (The last clay tablet was more or less like an appendix. It did not really flow with the rest of the story.) Ashurbanipal was a famous Assyrian king. He ruled the Neo-Assyrian Empire from 668 B.C. to 627 B.C.

For many years, scholars thought the Epic of Gilgamesh was a made-up story. But they are not so sure now. Historical evidence showed that there was an Uruk king named Gilgamesh. According to the Sumerian King List, Gilgamesh was the fifth king of the 1st dynasty of Uruk. To make the whole thing even more interesting, the Great Flood, told by Utnapishtim, was strikingly similar to a famous biblical tale -- the Noah's Ark. Were the two stories connected? Did they describe the same horrific event? Well, that might be, but we would never know!
The Epic of Gilgamesh

Questions

1. Of which kingdom was Gilgamesh the king?
   A. Ur
   B. Uruk
   C. Neo-Assyrian Empire
   D. Babylon

2. According to the Epic of Gilgamesh, who tamed Enkidu?
   A. Shamhat
   B. Anu
   C. Aruru
   D. Gilgamesh

3. How long did the Great Flood last?
   A. 6 days and 6 nights
   B. 7 days and 6 nights
   C. 6 days and 7 nights
   D. 7 days and 7 nights

4. Who warned Utnapishtim of the Great Flood?
   A. Aruru
   B. Anu
   C. Ishtar
   D. Ea

5. What would have happened to Gilgamesh if he had eaten the magic plant?
   A. He would have become a superhuman.
   B. He would have become young again.
   C. He would have been able to save Enkidu's life.
   D. He would have become immortal.

6. How was the original Epic of Gilgamesh kept?
   A. On clay tablets
   B. On cloth
   C. On paper
   D. On turtle shells

7. Who helped Gilgamesh and Enkidu fight Humbaba?
   A. Utnapishtim
   B. Shamhat
   C. Shamash
   D. Urshanabi

8. Which of the following about the Epic of Gilgamesh is correct?
   A. It was a completely made-up story; Gilgamesh never existed.
   B. It was probably the oldest story ever told.
   C. It was about the fifth king of the 1st dynasty of Babylon.
   D. It was the autobiography of the Assyrian ruler, Ashurbanipal.

During the year we will be reading and learning about many different myths. What is the reason myths are created? And, what lesson can be learned from the Sumerian myth "The Epic of Gilgamesh"?