

FRIENDSHIP, RELIGION AND POWER DYNAMICS IN THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH

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ABSTRACT

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the oldest literary works in human history. Contemporary scholars consider the work as a perfect example of futility wherein characters search for friendship, religion and power in order to enjoy what the world offers. Even though less is known about religious institutions in the poem, there are certain clues in the work that allude to the importance spirituality is given that controverts the present view of ancient Mesopotamian culture. Friendship, religion and power themes as demonstrated in the Epic seems to be inextricably connected. The believe in killing of dissidents in order to destroy civilization and propel others into kingship as well as promote bureaucracy, reveals the struggle for power coupled with absence of freedom and political stability. Unlike Achilles who is thrilled by constant presence of death as a result of power struggle, Gilgamesh abhors and strongly condemns it as he believes death leads to the end of all human relationships. The illusions of a better and eternal life after death leads to constant power struggle between Gilgamesh and Achilles. Gilgamesh, the King of Uruk regards himself to be a god as he considers himself superior to others. Just like Gilgamesh, Enkidu considers himself a powerful man in regard to the way he treats his friends. Both Gilgamesh and Enkidu maintain nonerotic, unrivalled, covenantal friendship. They cherish and believe in each other. To demonstrate their true friendship, Gilgamesh rewards Enkidu with some of his most valued items and shares his power with him. The three themes of friendship, religion and power are revealed in the way Gilgamesh mourns Enkidu after his death. In the light of the foregoing, this article therefore examines the themes of friendship, religion and power at the hands of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Moreover, it analyses how true friendship, religion and power in the ancient Mesopotamian societies is in contrast with practice in the contemporary world. Finally, a summary of the article along with recommendations are made in the conclusion section.

Key Words: Friendship, Religion, Power, Gilgamesh, Ancient

1. INTRODUCTION:

The tale of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is perhaps one of the oldest literary works in human history that gives an account of an oppressive, mightiest, arrogant Gilgamesh, the King of Uruk who ruled the Mesopotamian kingdom between 2750 and 2500 BCE (Damrosch, D. and Pike, D., 2009). During his reign, Gilgamesh met and made a nonerotic, unrivalled, covenantal friendship with Enkidu (Fox, R., 2011). The contemporary scholars consider the work as a perfect example of futility wherein characters search for friendship, religion and power in order to enjoy what the world offers.

Even though less is known about religious institutions in the poem, there are certain clues in the work that allude to the importance spirituality is given that controverts the present view of ancient Mesopotamian culture (Lockard, C., 2007).

Friendship, religion and power themes as demonstrated in the Epic seems to be inextricably connected. The believe in killing of dissidents in order to destroy civilization and propel others into kingship as well as promote bureaucracy, reveals the struggle for power coupled with absence of freedom and political stability (Marinetto, M., 2007).

Unlike Achilles who is thrilled by constant presence of death as a result of power struggle, Gilgamesh abhors and strongly condemns it as he believes death leads to the end of all human relationships (Fox, R., 2011). The illusions of a better and eternal life after death leads to constant power struggle between Gilgamesh and Achilles.

Gilgamesh, the legendary King of Uruk regards himself to be a god as he considers himself superior to others. Just like Gilgamesh, Enkidu also considers himself a powerful man in

regard to the way he treats his friends. Both Gilgamesh and Enkidu maintain nonerotic, unrivalled, covenantal friendship. They cherish and believe in each other (Turner, B., 2011). To demonstrate their true friendship, Gilgamesh rewards Enkidu with some of his most valued items and shares his power with him. The three themes of friendship, religion and power are revealed in the way Gilgamesh mourns Enkidu after his death.

In the light of the foregoing, this article therefore examines the themes of friendship, religion and power at the hands of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Moreover, it analyses how true friendship, religion and power in the ancient Mesopotamian societies is in contrast with practice in the contemporary world. Finally, a summary of the article along with recommendations are made in the conclusion section.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the celebrated epic poetry from Mesopotamia which can be traced back to between 2150 and 2000BC. Some of the scholars believe that the work which starts with convention of a frame gives an account of a protagonist, oppressive, powerful, stubborn, proud and arrogant King Gilgamesh of Uruk who is the main character in the epic poem (Tigay, H., 2002). The people feared Gilgamesh. They had no option but to obey every word that came out of his mouth. In describing the King's character, one of the scholars states, 'I will proclaim to the world the deeds of Gilgamesh' (Ferry, D., 1992: 61). This statement clearly depicts the character, deeds and past of Gilgamesh.

Gilgamesh was lucky to find a friend, Enkidu. After the two met, they resolved to maintain nonerotic, unrivalled, covenantal, eternal friendship. The two considered themselves superior than anyone else. They could not fathom anyone who tried to rival their superiority in the society. Together and with the help of goddess Ninsun (Gilgamesh's mother), they planned and eliminated the keeper of the woods and the fearful Humbaba.

The friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu made both to constantly check on each other. Gilgamesh checked on Enkidu's self-centeredness while Enkidu could check on Gilgamesh's restless and powerful energies and interests (SparkNotes ed., 2004). Some scholars have interpreted the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu as an eroticized, homosexual love affair while others consider it a male bonding relationship that involves homoerotic traits (Dalley, S., 1998).

According to Ferry, the legendary King Gilgamesh is 'full of himself' and this undeniably makes him to abuse the powers he has been granted by the society (Ferry, D., 1992: 62). For instance, he hysterically engages in sexual intercourse with young and innocent virgins in the name of being a god. He also takes the life of Humbaba in order to become immortal after the death of his close friend Enkidu is announced. Gilgamesh however is afraid after he realized that his quest to become immortal after the death of Enkidu could not be achieved (Maier, J., 2001).

Even though less is known about religious institutions, religious symbolism in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is enormous. Most of the religious rituals performed in Mesopotamia involved offering of sacrifices to the gods, practice of shamanic magic, observance of festivals, interpretation of dreams and sex (Lockard, C., 2007). The gods in the Epic are depicted to be powerful, all-knowing, arbitrary beings capable of meddling with the mortals' affairs at anytime and at will. For instance, the gods constantly interfered with Gilgamesh and Enkidu's affairs (Schneider, T., 2011). Such interference, for some scholars, was a symbolic representation

of elements in the natural world (Schmidt, M., 2019), while others consider that it was meant to be a reflection of human psychology (Matus, D.) and (George, A., (1999).

The story of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* ended with the invitation of Urshanabi to the gates of Uruk. Urshanabi was able have a spectacular view of the greatness of Mesopotamia city, its high walls, well-choreographed mansonwork, its beautiful foundation stones and the calmness within the city. All these aspects symbolize the human feelings *i.e.*, human mortality, vanity of youth power, political instability, aging world and lust for life (Comte, F., 2008).

3. THE THEME OF 'FRIENDSHIP' IN THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH:

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, friendship is a significant theme that is used to showcase changes amongst the key characters in the poem. Friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu is the most revered in the poem. Both had a complex but necessary friendship. Gilgamesh is half human and half divine while Enkidu is half human and half wild animal. Their friendship was thus different and complex based on the fact that it was an interaction of human, animal and god together (Jim K., 2016). The two are brought together in order to balance their weaknesses and strengths.

Enkidu who is portrayed as an introvert and wild creature that was brought up amongst animals is completely transformed after he began interacting with human beings. Such interaction changed Enkidu's life who initially had less knowledge about human beings. When he particularly met Gilgamesh, Enkidushunned his wild character, embraced a noble demeanor that eventually made him to draw closer to civilization (Damrosch, D. and Pike, D., 2009). He gained wisdom and later became acquainted with the finer things in life.

Friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu not only had an impact on Enkidu. It also made Gilgamesh to change his oppressive, arrogant, stubborn and dictatorial character to one of a hero and role model. Gilgamesh actually became a better ruler after he met Enkidu. This laid a perfect opportunity for Enkidu to be able to achieve his goal.

Gilgamesh never had a good friendship with his subjects. He considered himself a demigod and superior in all ways to the rest of the humans and could never fathom anyone who posed a challenge to him in leadership in the Mesopotamian society. Many individuals as well as gods were totally annoyed with the way Gilgamesh was treating them and his oppressive, stubborn and partying styles. They therefore sought the help of gods to contain him as they feared that he could interfere with their divine heritage and even rock the pillars of heaven. To counter the eminent threat, the gods came up with a plan to create Enkidu out of clay but who instead of helping the society to counter Gilgamesh, ended up being his great friend (Epic of Gilgamesh, 96).

Because of the solid friendship that existed between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Enkidu is made a subject of all Gilgamesh's adventures. They both decide to go to the forest to enjoy its nature and to cut down some trees to facilitate the construction of their god's monumental palace. But they had to face Humbaba, a scary demon charged with preventing any mortals from gaining entry to the forest. Even though Enkidu initially disagreed with the idea of facing head-on Humbaba and despite the risks involved, he was eventually prevailed on by Gilgamesh and they both resolved to fight Humbaba whom they considered a threat to their status, lives and friendship.

When Ishtar, the goddess of love and beauty tries to destroy Gilgamesh with a Bull of Heaven after he rejected her advances, Enkidu comes to his aid by seizing the Bull's tail and then

yelling at Gilgamesh to use his might to slay the Bull down. After the death of the Bull, Enkidu publicly celebrated Gilgamesh's achievements and thereafter proceeded to sleep together as heroes. It is at this point we note that it was because of the unwavering friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu that the two were able to eliminate Humbaba.

After confirming the death of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, Enkidu became seriously sick a day after. On his death-bed, he cursed all those who made him to visit Uruk where he met his brother and close friend Gilgamesh. He contemplated of the great pain and distress that his friend Gilgamesh was to suffer after his eminent death. For a whole day, Enkidu wept and became very sad after he realized that he could never spend time or see his new found brother, Gilgamesh. This continued until Enkidu finally died twelve days later (Comte, F., 2008: 165).

Enkidu's death was devastating and a big blow to Gilgamesh who mourned him for days. It made Gilgamesh realize that men are mortal. His friend's death touched him deeply and this can be depicted from the words he says: "My friend, whom I love deeply, who went through every hardship with me, Enkidu, whom I love deeply, who went through every hardship with me, the fate of mankind has overtaken him (Epic of Gilgamesh, 10)."

To continuously show his deep regard for Enkidu, Gilgamesh not only mourned him but he also replaced his royal garments he was wearing with that of animal skins and went ahead to let his hair outgrow. Besides, he "hovered around [Enkidu] like an eagle ... He paced to and fro, back and forth, tearing out and hurling away the locks of his hair. He ripped off and threw away his fine clothes like something foul (Epic of Gilgamesh, 133)."

Gilgamesh who initially did not acknowledge the possibility of him facing death, later realized that death is indeed inevitable. He was unable to believe that he had been left alone. For this reason, he could not leave Enkidu's body even after the maggots attacked it. He stayed besides the body till the end and beyond. He was confounded with immense emotions for his true friend. In his words, he says: "My friend whom I so loved, who went with me through every hardship ... Six days and seven nights I wept for him. I would not give him up for burial until a worm fell out of his nose (Epic of Gilgamesh, 138)."

Enkidu's death made Gilgamesh to begin researching on ways to make himself immortal which however could not be possible (Lockard, C., 2007). He thought that by doing something great, the society that he oppressed and betrayed would forgive and remember him forever. To him, that was equivalent to living an eternal life. Gilgamesh's foregoing acts clearly demonstrate the strong friendship the two had prior to Enkidu's death.

Another kind of friendship discussed in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the friendship between Achilles and Patroclus. The two were beloved companions, inseparable, had trust in each other and fought their enemies together (Epic of Gilgamesh, 261). They were totally in sync with each other and could as such be found spending most of their precious time with each other. In a number of occasions, they were caught roasting and serving meat together. Even though at one point Achilles had completely declined to accompany Patroclus to a battlefield, he ensured that Patroclus was well protected in the battle by the precious armor that his mother had given him and which meant the world to him. The giving of the armor portrayed the immense trust and friendship that existed between the two.

Just like Gilgamesh, Achilles was equally heartbroken after the death of his close friend Patroclus. He thought he was responsible for his untimely death. He cursed why he couldn't stop Patroclus from leaving for the battlefield. He thought if he had declined to give Patroclus his armor, may be Patroclus could have changed his mind of going to the battlefield. He remained

restless, confused and distressed until Patroclus's body was retrieved from his enemies who wanted to mutilate it (Michael S., 1999). Despite the fact that Achilles was a brutal man who mercilessly tortured and killed others, when death met Patroclus, he was totally a different person full of love and compassion.

Achilles mourned Patroclus a similar way Gilgamesh mourned Enkidu. He replaced his beautiful garments with black mourning clothes, smeared his head and face with sunburn dust, plucked his hair with his bare hands, meticulously prepared his friend's body for the last rites by washing it clean, applying it anointed olive oil and wrapping it with soft clothes (Epic of Gilgamesh, 38).

Besides the friendship that existed between Gilgamesh and Enkidu as well as that between Achilles and Patroclus, the theme of friendship can also be seen in the way the people in the Mesopotamian society lived. For instance, the relationship that existed between Dumuzi and Inanna is often regarded as the key source of Solomon's love song to Sheba (Damrosch, D. and Pike, D., 2009). The Mesopotamian society believed that by engaging in exciting social activities, bonds grows stronger which in turn results in a strong relationship.

The people in the Mesopotamian society particularly women lived oppressive lives just like the in the present society. Genuine friendship between couples especially was at the low level. Because of patriarchy, women were expected to be only housekeepers and to remain faithful and obedient to their spouses' orders and desires. Even though they were second in command, they were never invited or given an opportunity to make decisions at public gatherings or at their own homes. This is also evident in the modern society particularly in capitalist societies (Marinetto, M., 2007).

There are a number of lessons that can be learnt from the friendship that existed between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. *First*, friendship is generally valued as it determines survival of humanity in the society. It is a symbol of survival to many. It is through friendship that people rely one another particularly in times of need just as Gilgamesh and Enkidu worked together in eliminating Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. Besides, friendship taught both men the fundamental human values *i.e.*, respect, love, trust and human dignity that are essential for human survival. These values made Achilles and Patroclus as well as Gilgamesh and Enkidu to forget about their basic natures and to forge a life-changing friendship that eventually brought out humanity in them.

Second, friendship is based on common traits. People who become friends are connected by common traits, status, behavior and values. For Gilgamesh to be comfortable, the gods had to create a soulmate and an equal in the form of Enkidu to match, reflect and fit Gilgamesh's status and characteristics.

Third, even though the present generation takes friendship for granted and consider it to exist naturally, some actually search for friends. This is depicted in how Gilgamesh and Enkidu had to search for each other. Achilles equally had to search for and retrieve Patroclus's body from his enemies.

Fourth, friendship makes persons gain wisdom. After Gilgamesh became friends with Enkidu, he realized that he faced an eminent punishment after he dies for the wrongs he committed in the society. This made him to seek a second chance in life. Enkidu is equally able to realize that there are finer things in life which he never knew of. Both Gilgamesh and Enkidu were therefore able to gain some wisdom from each other and realize that friendship that they never experienced before was indeed a good thing.

Fifth, friendship bring about change in persons' lives. Even though they did not know each other initially, Gilgamesh and Enkidu needed each other for their lives to be transformed. The same case applies to Achilles and Patroclus.

4. THE THEME OF 'POWER' IN THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH:

Power is considered one of the defining force in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as it symbolizes trump and glory in the vast Uruk Kingdom. The poem portrays most leaders in Mesopotamia to be leaders who could do anything including transforming themselves to be gods in order to create an impression of them ruling powerful kingdoms. By ruling such kingdoms, they could also become powerful individuals in the eyes of their subjects.

There are four kinds of power that can be drawn from the *Epic of Gilgamesh*: the immortal power, the culture and knowledge power associated with the legendary King Gilgamesh, the wild power linked to Enkidu and the male and female power (Fox, R., 2011). Amongst all, the immortal power was regarded as the most superior power that one could have achieved. For this reason, Gilgamesh desired to use his divine power in order to be immortal particularly after the simple death of his close friend, Enkidu caused by the gods. In his words, Gilgamesh says: "[T]he doom of mortals overtook him ... what became of my friend Enkidu was too much to bear, so on a far road, I wander the wild (*Epic of Gilgamesh*, 84)." However, his goal of becoming immortal could not be achieved. It is at this point that Gilgamesh realizes that "power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely" and that all men regardless of how might and powerful they might be in the society, they must suffer death.

In the very beginning of the poem, Gilgamesh is portrayed as a very arrogant, powerful, oppressive, stubborn dictator with vast wisdom and knowledge. The society considered him as the lord of wisdom who even knew very well the secrets of life before the flood. Gilgamesh had a huge appetite of controlling all subjects within and without his kingdom. For this reason, Gilgamesh was feared by majority of the people in the society simply because of his greed for power (*Epic of Gilgamesh*, 40). He took advantage of that and began slaying his opponents, conquering other Kings and taking control of their regions.

Even though King Gilgamesh was regarded a powerful god and with vast wisdom and knowledge, majority of the people in the society were unhappy with his ruling style. His lustful demeanor and vengeful attitude towards his subjects made the people feel betrayed. To check on his power, Aruru, one of the gods created Enkidu with an aim of eliminating Gilgamesh (Schneider, T., 2011). However, that was not the case. Enkidu rather became friends with Gilgamesh and this considerably boosted Gilgamesh's power instead of restricting the same (*Epic of Gilgamesh*, 40).

The theme of power is also depicted in Enkidu's lifestyle. Prior to becoming friends with Gilgamesh, Enkidu had little interaction with mankind as opposed to the animals in the forest where he lived most of his time. Enkidu's power could only be exercised amongst the animals that he led (Fox, R., 2011). In the poem, he could be seen leading the animals to the watering point to take water.

Immediately after he met Gilgamesh, he relinquishes his powers and submits to be a good companion to Gilgamesh. This however could not last for long as Enkidu died. His death compelled Gilgamesh to limit misusing his power as a King for fear of being mortal the rest of his life (Lockard, C., 2007).

In regard to male and female power, it was argued that while mortal women are not superior to mortal men, the goddesses wield more power than mortal men as they possess both

supernatural/ physical strength and intelligence to influence humanity. This can be demonstrated on how both Gilgamesh and Enkidu had to combine their efforts in order to defeat goddess Ishtar who had the advantage of the Bull of Heaven. It is said that “[T]hen Gilgamesh like a butcher, brave and skillful, between the yoke of the horns and the slaughter spot, he trust in his knife. After they had slain the Bull of Heaven, they bore its heart and set it before Shamash (Epic of Gilgamesh, 52).”

Gilgamesh’s victory over Ishtar proved his power and strength across his kingdom and beyond. The mortals regarded him as glorious and powerful and could imagine any other person who could defeat him after he had proved his record of defeating the gods of Uruk. It is however to be noted that after Gilgamesh lost his friend Enkidu, he lost his power over the gods.

5. THE THEME OF ‘RELIGION’ IN THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH:

Apart from the themes of ‘friendship’ and ‘power’ entailed in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the theme of ‘religion’ is as well dominant and pertinent in the Epic. In most parts of the Epic, the theme is seen in the concept of immortality *i.e.*, life without facing death. Even though the ancient people of Mesopotamia were strong believers in gods and afterlife, they were however not staunch believers of immortality (Jeffrey T., 2002).

In the Epic, the relationship between deities/gods (who were considered immortal) and the human beings (mortal) was majorly perceived via their staunch belief in anthropomorphism. Anthropomorphism is a condition in which people believe that the deities/gods take human form.

The belief in gods was based on the fact that the gods were considered strong pillars of protection and were associated with bringing good fortunes in people’s lives (Schneider, T., 2011). Shamash, the sun god, Ishtar, the goddess of love and Anu, the god of the firmament were the most prominent gods that people could answer to during good and bad times as well as pray and offer sacrifices to on regular basis just to appease them. These three gods were believed to be very powerful individually and together (Schneider, T., 2011). There were also other multiple gods that people worshipped in the Epic.

Even though the gods were instrumental in protection of the people, they were however not kind-hearted. They were quite demanding and cruel particularly if offerings and sacrifices were not adequately given at the right time. The people therefore had to continuously ensure that they fulfil the gods’ demands otherwise they could face their wrath (Henry F., 1948).

The people believed that the gods had a spiritual and early connection. The gods regularly communicated with their worshipers on the earth. They could also hold meetings amongst themselves in the spiritual realm where human beings were strictly restricted from attending (Stephanie, D., 1989). Such meetings were specifically meant to take decisions on certain issues. For instance, multiple gods had to meet and make an important decisions relating to life or eradication of a species. However, minor decisions relating to *i.e.*, extending a helping hand to an individual could only be taken by a single god concerned. All in all, the fate of the people in the story mostly depended on the gods, whether it was a matter of life or death.

Besides the gods, people revered more in kings simply because they believed that ‘kingship was let down from heaven’ (Epic of Gilgamesh, 14). It is for this reason that Gilgamesh considered himself a product of divine creation. In this regard, some scholars opine that Gilgamesh was two-thirds of god and one-third human (Jeremy B. and Anthony G., 1992).

King Gilgamesh was however considered arrogant, stubborn, dictatorial and bloodthirsty (Epic of Gilgamesh, 2). When he began oppressing his own people, the residents of Uruk turned

to their gods for assistance. It was goddess Aruru who came to their rescue by creating Enkidu out of water and clay to counter Gilgamesh(Schneider, T., 2011). Aruru's plan however could not materialize as both Enkidu and Gilgamesh rather became great friends. Their friendship nonetheless could not last long as Enkidu died of a serious disease immediately after the duo killed the Bull of Heaven.

Enkidu's death made Gilgamesh to embark on a doomed mission of searching for immortality. Gilgamesh as well as the people of Mesopotamia, in general, believed that they could achieve immortality. It is important to note that various scholars have interpreted the search for immortality to refer to either the pursuit of knowledge or enlightenment (Lowell, E., (2005) or the yearn for power and mastery over one's own destiny (Jeremy B. and Anthony G., 1992).

6. CONCLUSIONS:

The themes of friendship, power and religion in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* clearly demonstrates the lowland of human abilities in practical life. Even with the help of Enkidu and the enormous power as well as the incredible divine nature of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh could not achieve immortality. The gods in the Epic are immortal and have exceptional power. Disrespecting them attracted instant sickness, disease and death, the same road that Enkidu travelled.

The themes of friendship and power as portrayed in the Epic by the rulers of the ancient Mesopotamia shows great similarities with the present day leaders. The current crop of leaders in society use their power and tend to do all they can to gain friendship from persons they deem to be beneficial in their lives. In the course of using their power, several people end up being oppressed and abused.

The religion as practiced in the ancient Mesopotamia is pessimistic. Nonetheless, it clearly outlines the basic human values of love and affection, friendship, respect and empathy particularly for the sick and dying persons, acceptance, humility, appreciation and self-direction. Modern religion is neither unique, it is equally similar in substance to the ancient Mesopotamia antecedents. For instance, several people still believe in supernatural gods for them to succeed in life. Some even fear their wrath if they go against the gods' wishes.

Gilgamesh's quest for everlasting life essentially questions the meaning of life for humans. Instead of craving for such life, the people should rather concentrate on building a strong relationship, observance of human values, acceptance of human limitations and creating an environment that is conducive for habitation regardless of threats from gods and religion.

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