CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

When I started working on this thesis in 2000, I wished to take an Akkadian text as my point of departure, not an English or any other translation of the *Epic of Gilgamesh.* The only Akkadian text I had at my disposal was that of Simo Parpola (1997) which consists of the cuneiform signs as well as their transliteration. My own translation of the *Epic* is based on this rendering. Towards the end of my research work, Andrew George's edition of *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic, volumes I and II* appeared in 2003 – last year. This is a major work of intense research of more than sixteen years, which substitutes more or less all other research that has been done on *Gilgamesh* up to now. Besides the scholarly exposition of the evolution of the *Epic,* a critical examination of the many extant sources and a discussion of various other aspects, George's two-volume edition also includes a transliteration and a translation of the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh.*

The translation I did according to Parpola's version does not differ significantly from that of George, however, the references to some of the lines in the tablets do. This is mainly due to the way that Parpola reconstructed the text. Parpola's text is not a critical edition of the *Epic.* The aim is to provide an *up-to-date-reconstruction of the Standard Babylonian version of the Epic that can be profitably used both in teaching and research* (Parpola 1997:ix). For this purpose different tablets and fragments from different periods are included, as well as elements from earlier versions especially where these may fill in some major gaps in the Standard version.

Parpola may be criticised for *smoothing out the folds* too easily, thereby creating a misleading impression of the original text. Nevertheless, it provides a sufficient basis for a sensible translation of the *Epic,* therefore I use it as point of departure in this thesis. Thus, where I do refer to tablets and lines, I

do so according to Parpola's 1997-edition. Furthermore, the concern of my research is the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the story it tells: source-critical issues -- for example the merits of the different sources, variant readings and other matters so forth -- will not be discussed.

My earlier MA-thesis (*Gilgamesh sien die Diepte: van Skande tot Eer,* 2000; see also the article by De Villiers & Prinsloo 2002:23-43) is based on Parpola's edition and it includes an Afrikaans translation of many of the relevant passages. Therefore this thesis requires the basic minimum of translations: the best and most recent English translation is of course that of George (2003). His earlier work, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (1999), is also excellent, but does not include an Akkadian transliteration as well.

After the completion of this thesis I plan to translate the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in Afrikaans as this had not been done yet, and also had I been requested to do so by some of my professors, colleagues and friends who seem interested.

1.   MOTIVATION FOR RESEARCH

Recently there seems to be a renewed interest in the ancient world and its civilizations. Documentary programmes on television feature Ancient Greece, Rome, Egypt, Israel, ancient civilizations of the Far East, Mexico, and also of Mesopotamia. All these civilizations had stories: some are lost forever, some left their remains in the form of artifacts. With the help of archaeology some stories can be re-told, albeit only partly.

Stories from the ancient world become available to the modern – or post-modern – world of science and technology in various stages of broken-ness. The worlds of these stories are mostly strange, far remote and fascinating. The film-industry seizes the opportunity to elaborate imaginatively on stories – both history and fiction – from the ancient world: some movies are indeed worth while seeing, others border on the bizarre.

Recently the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is receiving its due share of attention as one of the *ancient stories* that captures modern imagination. A Dutch newspaper *De Volkskrant* (Hansen: 16 November 2001) states: *Het oeroude Gilgamesj-epos beleefd een opvallende wedergeboorte. In Duitsland lijkt – misschien door toedoen van meestervertaler Raoul Schrott – zelfs sprake van een hype.* It seems as though the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is reborn in a stunning way. *De Volkskrant* proceeds with a brief summary of the *Epic* and evaluates it as follows: *De afwezigheid van een zingevende god maakt Gilgamesj paradoxaal genoeg tot een hoogst modern werk. En literair is het bepaald opwindend: het fraaie verhaal, de prachtische beelden, het gedreven ritme, de effectieve herhalingen (het wemelt van letterlijk herhaalde regeles die juist daardoor een eigenaardige kragt krijgen).* Gilgamesh discovers the meaning of life not by means of any divine revelations, but in a very human way. This is one of the reasons that the ancient *Epic* appeals to its modern recipients. Furthermore, the review in *De Volkskrant* refers to the exciting literary composition of the *Epic:* an important issue that will also be addressed later in this thesis.

The Epic of Gilgamesh is not one of those treasured texts that were read throughout the ages – like the Bible, for example. On the contrary! During the time of king Ashurbanipal of the Neo Assyrian Empire, many copies of the *Epic* were made and kept in the royal libraries of Nineve. However, after the city was sacked by the Babylonian Median alliance (ca 612 BCE – see George 1999: xxii-xxiii), the clay tablets were also badly damaged and broken. Fortunately they were not completely destroyed, but the old *Epic* was gradually forgotten, until archaeological excavations started during the middle of the nineteenth century in that region.

The first critical edition of the *Gilgamesh Epic* appears in 1930 – that of RC Thompson. Many sources were not yet discovered by the time. Nevertheless, that was the beginning of an interest that was taken in an age old tale that

recently became something of a *hype* indeed!   What would be the reasons for this hype?

Thus, the *Epic of Gilgamesh* certainly deserves to be investigated by research.

2.   RESEARCH PROBLEM

At least two aspects of the *Gilgamesh Epic* have to be investigated: the context and the text, or in other words, the sources and the discourse. It is necessary to research these two areas for a more comprehensive understanding of the *Epic* as a whole, since there are many gaps in scientific work due to the one-sided nature of present studies.

There are many translations available of the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh.* Reference has already been made to the most recent and excellent English translation of George (2003). This is a literal translation, containing all the appropriate critical apparatus. Quite the opposite is the translation by Danny Jackson (1992) which is not actually a translation, but a *poetic paraphrase.* It captures the mood and the feeling of the *Epic,* and renders the flow and the plot of the narrative, but does so in English that is rather far removed from the Akkadian text.

Reference has also been made to the German translation of Raoul Schrott (2001) (see above). *De Volkskrant,* besides providing a summary of the *Epic,* furthermore reviews two recent Dutch translations: one by Theo de Feyter and another by Herman Vanstiphout. Most probably the *Epic* is translated in other modern languages as well.

Yet, does a *translation* of the *Epic* into a language that one can understand, guarantee that one also *understands the Epic?* Some of the translations do provide some background – like those of George and Schrott – but the

emphasis is on the *Epic* and its relevant historical and socio-cultural context. The scope of this thesis is wider: it aims to illuminate also the ideas and world views of the Ancient Near East that found their way into the *Epic*. An investigation of the various relevant sources is the first research problem that this thesis will address.

Furthermore, reference has also been made to the literary composition of the *Epic* (see above)*.* As far as *genre* is concerned, the term *Epic* poses a problem. The ancients themselves were not aware that the story of *Gilgamesh* would later be called an *Epic.* Even more serious for recent research is whether the *Epic* should be addressed as *poetry* or *prose.* Surely, the literary medium appropriated in the *Epic* is *poetry*, yet it tells a story that displays the same qualities as *narrative prose.* The literary composition of the *Epic* is the second aspect that this thesis will examine in some detail, since the genre position is not clear.

Accordingly the following hypothesis is proposed:

3. HYPOTHESIS

The hermeneutical dimensions of the Epic of Gilgamesh will benefit by a thorough examination of its (i) extra-textual sources and reception, as well as its (ii) internal textual narrative discourse.

4. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH

The following angles will be pursued:

4.1.   to read the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as a narrative;

4.2.   to investigate the sources of the *Epic* (religious, historical, political social, cultural, ideological) and its reception in modern times;

4.3.   to investigate the discourse - the literary composition of the *Epic*;

4.4.   to contribute towards a deeper understanding of the world and the story of the *Epic of Gilgamesh.*

5.   METHODOLOGY

The *Gilgamesh Epic* is, just like the Bible, an ancient text. The Bible is translated into most known languages and is one of the Books that are the most widely read over the whole world. No-one questions this matter. Judaism accepts the Old Testament as its Holy Scripture, Christianity regards both the Old and New Testament as God's revelation. Yet biblical scholars are intensely aware that there are vast differences between the world of the Bible and the world of today: to *understand* the Bible requires more than understanding the words. One must also have some understanding of the social system and customs that were part of the world in which the Bible originated (Malina 1993:1-3). Furthermore, besides the fact that the Bible is accepted as the *Word of God* by believers, this *Book* is also appreciated for its *literary communicative* aspects (see Tolmie 1999:6).

As regards methodological approaches to the Bible, Sternberg (1985:14) suggests they *fall under no more than two heads:* source-oriented and discourse-oriented inquiries. Because the *Gilgamesh Epic* also falls into the category of *ancient texts,* this thesis will follow the approach suggested by Sternberg (above).

5.1.   Source-orientated inquiry

Source-orientated inquiry looks into the world behind the text. Usually some specific dimensions are addressed. These may be, for example, the *religious* convictions that were prevalent at the time of the text: what did the *religious picture* of the world look like? what were the beliefs? did religion change as time passed? was there religious conflict? – and so forth. A *historical* inquiry would ask *historical* questions: these pertain to the history of the people or

nation, for example: what were the major events or crises in the *history* of the people? The *language system* may also be examined: what are the underlying *linguistic nature* of the text? And lastly there are the so-called *geneticist* questions: these look into the origins and development of a text: what material found its way into a text? how did it originate – orally, for example – how was it transmitted? what concepts and ideologies are reflected, where do they come from? – and so forth (Sternberg 1985:15).

These are the type of questions that will be addressed to the *Gilgamesh Epic* in the first part of this thesis.

5.2. Discourse-orientated analysis

A discourse-orientated analysis focuses on the text itself. It aims at understanding the text as a *pattern of meaning and effect* (Sternberg 1985:15). The text and its immanent structures are examined, but also the meaning that these structures convey to the recipient is sought after. In this regard Sternberg (1985:15) questions: *Are the operative rules, for instance, those of prose or verse, parable or chronicle, omniscience or realistic limitation, historical or fictional writing?*

5.2.1 Epic: poetry or prose?

Earlier on (see section 2 above) it was mentioned that one encounters certain problems in ascertaining the *genre* of the twelve tablets that recount the adventures of Gilgamesh. It is called an *Epic:* thus, it resembles a narrative – it tells of events that happened, yet it is written in the style of poetry. Thus, an *epic* may be determined as *narrative poetry* (Roodt & Pieterse 1992:102).

The question that follows is: according to which rules should the operative rules in the text be analysed – those of *poetry,* or those of *prose*?

Damrosch (1987:39) states: *The major narrative forms in Mesopotamian literature of the second millennium BC were poetic epic and prose chronicle.* An *epic* displays poetic features: rhythm, parallelism, chiasmus and so forth. Furthermore, *epics* were meant to be performed in some way or another, either sung or chanted publically. Usually an *epic* deals with the adventures of a mortal hero – say for example a king – but also incorporates mythic material from the world of the gods, or of the interactions between humans and gods.

The term *chronicle* refers to *common forms of recording historical events. Chronicles* deal with the recording of historical events, for example the military exploits of kings. The style is straightforward prose, recounting only what is necessary and display little or no interest to portray the character of the king nor to give insight into his emotions or motivations of behaviour (Damrosch 1987:39). Thus, what is important to a *chronicle* is the political or military achievements of a specific king or a dynasty. Deep existential issues, the meaning of life, the limits of existence are matters that are left to an *epic.*

Thus, the difference between *chronicle* and *epic* is with regard to form: *chronicles are written in prose and epics are in verse* (Damrosch 1987:63). But, the question remains: should an *epic* be analysed according to *poetic* or according to *narrative* structures?

Fokkelman (1999:171) makes the following observation: narrative prose is considered to have a plot, a series of events*, actions and speeches that obey the chronological order.* Even the so-called disruptions in the chronological order serve to affirm this matter. Poetry, on the other hand, does not need any plot or events – often a poem is simply the expression of a poet's innermost feelings. This distinction between *prose* and *poetry* is quite obvious in the Bible: biblical narratives are written in *prose,* prayers, reflections, and so forth are written in *poetry.* Even the long dialogue section

within the book of Job is framed by *narrative prose* that actually tells the story.

In this regard Israel differed from her neighbours: they told their stories of men, gods and monsters in verse (Fokkelman 1999:172). In fact, it appears that Mesoptamian literature preferred poetry over prose for narrating events of cosmic, universal nature (Nemet-Nejat 2002:65).

So, is the *Epic of Gilgamesh poetry* or *prose?*

Actually, it is both: it is a narrative in verse form. This thesis chooses to consider it as a *narrative.* Although the literary style is poetic, the *Epic* recounts events that follow chronologically one after the other. Yet the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is not a *chronicle:* the deep, innermost feelings of the hero are reflected unashamedly, movingly. These exploit the possibilities of poetic expression, but reaches beyond personal experience. It becomes a *narrative* in the true sense of the word.

Therefore, I shall treat the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as a *narrative* and conduct research into *textual discourse* by means of a *narrative* analysis*.*

6.   PREMISES

As I stated earlier on, my major references are the works of Andrew George (2003) and Simo Parpola (1997). Tigay (1982) has worked extensively on the *Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*: however, many new discoveries have been made since. In a certain sense George's 2003 edition is an updating of Tigay's work, nevertheless, the latter is also taken into consideration. For historical archaeological matters the work of Kuhrt (1995) served as a primary source for information.

I was fortunate enough to visit the British Museum towards the end of 2003

and see the fragmented state in which the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is today. One can but admire the work that Professor George and his colleagues are doing. Even the better preserved tablets are badly damaged. I had the image of a huge jig-saw puzzle of which most pieces are missing. Furthermore the cuneiform writing as such is very small, with my glasses I could barely make out any signs. Only then I realised the many hours of hard work, dedication and scholarly precision. This makes anyone who attempts to work on the *Epic of Gilgamesh* feel very humble indeed.

With regard to a *discourse analysis* I relied on Gérard Genette's *Narrative Discourse* (1980) as point of departure, mainly because this work of his is considered as one of the most prominent exponents of *structural narratology.* Other theorists like Bal (1978) and Rimmon-Kenan (1983) use most of his insights, occasionally criticising, occasionally elaborating on them. However, they do not propose any revolutionary new contributions.

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that the way in which ancient literature was composed, differed vastly from modern literary composition. Ancient literature was also structured according to certain patterns, for example, the number of times that the name of someone occurred in a text was extremely important. Seven, or a multiple of seven was a significant number in ancient texts and usually indicated that the person who carried this name was important. Thus Assurbanipal's name appears 49 times (7X7) in the so-called *Vassal Treaties of Eshahaddon (VTE)* (Steymans 2003:   108-109). But more often than not, it is impossible to count the names of characters in very ancient texts like the *Epic of Gilgamesh* for the simple reason that the text is so broken.

One may object to reading an ancient text by means of modern reading strategies. Yet these are the only strategies recently available: even if one is able to apply some ancient receptive strategies to ancient texts, one does so

from a recent point of departure.

To sum up: ancient texts are usually available only by means of secondary sources: either transliterations or even worse, translations. With regards to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* most translations correspond to the overall plot: a flight from death or a quest for life eternal – whichever perspective one may choose. But the actual words in which this plot is worked out, differ in the many different translations.

Ancient readers were not aware of what is today known as literary *genres. Epic* is a *coinage of convenience,* remarks George (2003:3) which designates a *long narrative poem describing heroic events that happen over a period of time.* So, once again one may question whether the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is an *epic* in the true sense of the word: Gilgamesh is not really a hero, in fact, in the second half of the *Epic* he becomes something of an anti-hero.

Besides *heroic epics,* many *epics* are also *national* by nature. *National epic* implies for George (2003:33) *a long narrative composition that…relates to the origin or identity of a people.* The aim of an *epic* is usually to shape an awareness of a national identity. Once again the *Gilgamesh Epic* does not quite fit the picture. *There is nothing of war in the Epic of Gilgamesh, only heroic combat between individuals and between men and monsters, and the grim struggle with death. No great crisis in the life of Babylonia takes the center stage, only great crises in the life of a man* (George 2003:33). This is what the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is all about.

Far from pretending to be exhaustive, this thesis wishes to initiate communication between ancient wisdom and post modern mind. *Understanding Gilgamesh: his world and his story* aims toward this process of communication.

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BIBLIOGRAPHY

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