

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

This thesis centered on the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. The title is: **Understanding Gilgamesh: his world and his story**. The aim was to get a better, perhaps more comprehensive understanding of the *Epic* as a whole. Two issues were pursued: (i) a closer look at the *world* (sources) of Gilgamesh and (ii) an appraisal of the *story* as literature (discourse). The following hypothesis was proposed: ***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.***

The first part of this thesis examined the *sources* – the world of Gilgamesh. The investigation was fairly extensive and covered a wide range. A historical overview was given: history for *Gilgamesh* starts in Sumerian times and reaches into the Middle Babylonian period, the time during which the *Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* was finalised. Besides history, Mesopotamian religion, culture, language and particular ideologies were also illuminated as these developed in the course of time. Many of these are also reflected the literary development of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*.

Consequently the literary evolution of the *Epic* itself was sketched – its Sumerian origins, the Old Babylonian reworking of the poems into an *Epic*, and the final changes wrought during the Middle Babylonian period, probably by Sîn-lēqi-unninni. Some teasing questions – the rejection of Ishtar and the addition of tablet XII - were also addressed. Furthermore, the academic life of the *Epic* was pointed out: *Gilgamesh* was certainly an entertaining story, but it definitely formed part of the formal academic curriculum for scribal training.

And finally it appeared that life of the *Gilgamesh Epic* did not end during or after the Middle Babylonian period. Somewhat like Sleeping Beauty he was abruptly

put to sleep when Nineve was sacked, but noisy archeologists disturbed him – some thousand years later than Sleeping Beauty! And eventually he was kissed awake by the overawed George Smith, almost stripping himself naked with excitement.

Today Gilgamesh seems alive and well and present in many guises: translations, poems, music. Why?

The second part aimed at looking at Gilgamesh from a recent angle. Because Gilgamesh is a text, a literary angle was chosen. Two literary theories were briefly outlined, and then appropriated to the *Standard Babylonian Epic*.

Firstly the *Epic* was analysed in terms of its *narrative structure* according to the model of Gérard Genette. This analysis conveyed the artistic beauty of the *Epic* in terms of its unique rhythm: events that either rush forward or slow down with deliberate intention. The journey towards the Cedar Forest is long and monotonous. Likewise there seems no end to Gilgamesh's mourning over his friend's decease. On the other hand the fight with Humbaba is violent and intense. The return to Uruk is sudden and final.

The interesting aspect of *focalisation* illuminated that Gilgamesh is actually the one that is looking at his life. Together with Genette's definition of *narrator*, it becomes clear that Gilgamesh is also telling his own story. However, this inside-out interweaving means of narrating is done so skillfully that the *penny drops* only after reading the very last lines of the *Epic*. And the reader is re-directed back to the very beginning, to start reading yet again, suddenly realising that he or she had not understood at all.

However, it appeared that a structural narrative analysis was not comprehensive enough. Therefore a response-oriented theory was sought. Jauss's theory of reception-aesthetics seemed appropriate, especially because he also emphasises the historical reception of texts. Consequently his *seven*

theses of reception aesthetics were examined in some detail. This section was shorter than the one on Genette, mainly because many of the background historical issues and the literary development of the *Epic* were dealt with in chapter 3.

What Jauss's theory did illustrate, was that the *Gilgamesh Epic* never ceased to communicate with its readers. Jauss's theory has two key concepts: *horizon of expectations* and *aesthetical distance*. The communicative capabilities of a text depend on whether it is able to keep the interests of its readers alive in these two matters. Therefore it has to retain its contact with the past, but equally important, it also has to address burning issues of the present: and if that is not enough, a text should also anticipate future questions.

In this sense Jauss's theory explains why *Gilgamesh* did not become *obsolete literature*, like most of its contemporaries. *Enūma Eliš* which is as *Gilgamesh* one of the better known literary texts of ancient times, attracts attention mainly because it is so different from the *Creation Narrative* of the Bible.

It appeared that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a broken narrative. In the first sense, the meaning is literally. The clay tablets on which the *Epic* is recorded, are broken. Pieces and fragments are scattered over the world. George (2003:977-986) indicates the whereabouts: Aleppo, Ankara, Baghdad, Berlin, Boğazkale, Chicago, Istanbul, Jena, Jerusalem, London (the most of the *Gilgamesh* tablets are in the British Museum), New Haven, Oxford, Philadelphia, the private collection of Schøyen in Norway, and some other private collections by anonymous owners. Thus: a very broken narrative in a very real sense.

The *Epic* originated and developed also in a rather broken way. The first seeds were sown on Sumerian soil – perhaps these first compositions were not intended as poetic achievements at all. A more likely scenario is that the jester of the court needed an income to fill his belly. Further he had to keep the king happy, therefore he performed to keep his job and to save his life.

But whatever the case, the Sumerian poems underwent radical changes and took on a completely new shape – that of an *Epic*. Somewhat positivistic, the new narrative conveys heroic traits. Gilgamesh is very much the king-hero who *surpasses other kings*. He embarks on dangerous journeys, he manages to establish an everlasting name. Even the death of his friend compels him to venture into yet another unknown region: the region of Uta-napishtim, the Distant.

Positivism is broken down by sober reflection. The self-confidence of Youth has made way for Mature introspection. Gilgamesh is a man broken by sorrow and failure. Life is difficult. Life is complex. Life is a broken narrative.

So, in the last instance the *Epic of Gilgamesh* tells the story of one man. His story may be the story of anybody, anywhere, any place, any time. His story is the story of human broken-ness – anybody's story. It is a story of success and honour, but it is also a story of failure, loss, humiliation and shame. Yet there is hope: from the walls of Uruk Gilgamesh gathers the broken and scattered fragments of his life and assumes responsibility, here and now.

The broken narrative of *Gilgamesh* is the broken narrative of life.