

The conceptualisation of morality in ancient religions at the hand of the Gilgamesh Epic



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This article addressed 'The conceptualisation of morality in ancient religions at the hand of the Gilgamesh Epic'. After pointing out that ancient languages do not have words for neither morality nor religion, I discussed the following incidents in the Epic: he who saw the Deep; the immoral conduct of a king; the slaying of Humbaba; Ishtar and a death penalty; and a visit to Utanapishtim, the Distant. I alluded briefly to the way that the Epic ends. The aim was to examine whether ancient societies had a concept of morality and what role, if any, did religion play.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: The conclusion was that religion played a very minor role, and that morality in ancient societies was a human endeavour.

Keywords: ancient; religions; Gilgamesh; Epic; morality.

Introduction

For these seminars regarding the conceptualisation of the development of morality, I was asked to address the Conceptualisation of Morality in Ancient Religions, to understand how the conceptualisation of morality developed through the ages. However, I faced some serious problems. Firstly, ancient languages do not have a word for 'religion' and secondly, the concept of morality in a 21st century Western world (the context in which this seminar was to take place) is vastly different from how morality was understood 3000 years ago. It seemed almost immoral to impose post-modern Western ideas on a pre-modern ancient Near Eastern civilisation without knowing them – how they lived, what they were thinking, how they conducted their lives and by which standards and norms. All we have are some archaeological remains and texts – broken and fragmented texts.

The Epic of Gilgamesh

With regards to the topic of morality, although there was not a specific word for it, the ancient world certainly did have an idea of what is right and what is wrong. This is evident in the various Law Codes drawn up by the rulers, of which the Law Code of Hammurabi (1755–1750 BCE) is probably the best known and is proof of the wisdom of the king (Van der Toorn 2007:25). But there are others; the law code of Ur Nammu (2100–2050) is probably the oldest extant law code in the world.¹ Law codes in the ancient world were intended to establish a just society, to protect citizens, and to maintain law and order in the society.

However, morality in the ancient world is revealed not only by law, but also by wisdom, as wisdom texts likewise consider and give advice on what is right and what is wrong. For the purpose of this seminar, I have chosen to focus on the Epic of Gilgamesh. Firstly, both Andrew George (2003:32–33) and Karl van der Toorn (2007:21) agree that the Epic of Gilgamesh is wisdom literature from the perspective of ancient scribes as well as modern scholars. Therefore, there may be some points of contact between a pre-modern and a post-modern world after all. Secondly, the Epic of Gilgamesh is a masterpiece of all literary works from ancient times to the present. It is the oldest document which we may call 'literature' in the sense that it tells a story;² and thirdly, literature, more than legal or other official documents, reflect the values and morals of its time. Thus, speaking of morality in ancient times, the Epic of Gilgamesh seems to be a suitable point of departure.³

1. See Mark.

2. It is not a poem or a hymn – an epic is a long narrative poem that tells a story.

3. All translations are from George (2003). I have translated many parts of the Epic myself, but that is in Afrikaans. See my unpublished MA thesis: Gezina G. de Villiers, *Gilgamesh sien die Diepte: van Skande tot Eer*, Universiteit van Pretoria, 2000.

Note: Original Research - Special Collection: Morality in history.

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The Gilgamesh Epic has a very long history of development from its Sumerian origins to its final Standard Babylonian version (see George 2003:4–28). I am aware of these issues, but I do not consider it relevant for the purpose of this article. I shall focus on the Standard Babylonian Version (SBV hereafter) which took shape at about 1100 BCE (Salles 2009:83; Van der Toorn 2007:22). Where appropriate, I shall refer to the Old Babylonian Version (OB hereafter). At this point, it suffices to say that the SBV was a reworking of the OB by a scribe, called *Sîn-lēqi-unninni* (George 2003:28; Van der Toorn 2007:23) beginning with the words ‘*ša naqba īmuru*’ – he who saw the Deep. These words considerably change the mood of the OB version which simply bursts with the confidence of an invincible king Gilgamesh. The addition of the prologue of which the words are repeated at the end of the eleventh tablet, reflects ‘sombre meditation, is less confident and more introspective ...’ and ‘... holds much in common what we call wisdom literature’ (George 2003:33).

Ša naqba īmuru

‘*ša naqba īmuru*’. These are the words with which the Gilgamesh Epic opens. It means, ‘he who saw the Deep.’ *Naqba* – the Deep – is the key word in the phrase. *Naqba* or *naqbu* has two meanings. It can refer to the totality of everything, or it can indicate the *Apsû*, the deep body of underground freshwater – the cosmic realm of the god Ea, who is believed to be the source of all wisdom (George 2003:444). The first two lines of the Epic read: ‘He who saw the Deep, the foundation of the country, who knew ... was wise in everything ...’ These words are repeated in lines 3 and 4, but in line 3 the ‘he’ is replaced with ‘Gilgamesh’. Thus, it becomes clear that Gilgamesh is the one who saw the Deep, acquired from Ea the necessary wisdom to uphold law and order in society as decreed by the gods (George 2003:445).

In lines 29, 44 and 45, it becomes clear that Gilgamesh is a leader, king of Uruk. In the Ancient Near East, it was widely accepted that kingship descended from heaven, that the deities bestowed kingship on humans and that kingship was regarded as a divine office (Jamme & Matuschek 2014:232; Schneider 2011:118; Sonnabend 2014:81). Lines 35 and 36 of Tablet I attest to Gilgamesh’s divine origins: son of the earthly ruler Lugalbanda and divine goddess Ninsun, and line 48 describes him as two thirds god and one third human.

The prologue continues to laud Gilgamesh as a king who ‘goes to the fore as a leader, and also goes at the rear, as a trust to his brothers’ (I:31–33). These lines concur with the expectations of early Babylonian rule. The king should be to his subjects as a ‘shepherd to his sheep. He should guide them, protect them, and rule and judge them fairly’ (George 1999:xlvi). His office included the following responsibilities: give sound advice on all kinds of matters; oversee labour; undertaking building projects; administer cities; provide protection for the land and its citizens; provide an abundance of means for survival; perform necessary rituals and offerings to the gods (Schneider 2011:119). Building cities and

surrounding them with fortifying walls, building temples for the gods and maintaining or restoring cult centres were especially important in Mesopotamia: ‘it was a matter of divine agency and of human imitation of the divine wisdom in building’ (Van Leeuwen 2007:73). Furthermore, the king also had religious functions to carry out, namely, to perform appropriate rites (*mes*) that served the gods, for these reflected the order demanded by the gods, and ‘formed an integral part of wisdom’ (Beaulieu 2007:7).

Disgrace: The ‘immoral’ (unwise) conduct of a king

In the first 64 lines of the Epic, Gilgamesh seems to fit the bill of a perfect king. He is of noble, semi-divine birth (lines 35, 36 and 48). He built the walls of Uruk (line 11), a fortress that cannot be conquered (Comte 2008:164), there are date groves and clay pits in the city as well as the temple of Ishtar (line 22), he restored the cult centres that the flood destroyed and re-established the proper rites requested (lines 43 and 44).

Initially Gilgamesh appears to be and to do everything to be expected from a good semi-divine king, but soon a rather disturbing scenario unfolds: ‘Gilgamesh lets no son go free to his father; day and night he behaves with fierce arrogance; he lets no daughter go free to her mother ... no girl to go free to her bridegroom (I:67–76; see George 2003:448–449). Tyranny, abuse of power.⁴ Probably sexual harassment. Perhaps too much fun and games, – the nature of abuse of especially the men is not clear, but the point is, the young men and women of Uruk suffer because of the king’s immoral behaviour.

Clearly this is not acceptable. The womenfolk of the city cry out to the gods. Two of them are mentioned in the text: Anu, the father of the gods, and Aruru, a creator goddess. They pay heed to the complaints and answer the request of the women, namely, to create someone equal to the king, a match for his brutal strength, someone to keep him occupied so that they may be left in peace.

Aruru creates Enkidu by casting a piece of clay on the steppe. He is a fully grown adult human, but initially lives in a primitive animal-like state. He is hairy, naked, and his companions are the gazelles at the waterhole. He is a vegetarian. Like them, he eats only grass and drinks water. He protects his friends. He uproots the snares that a hunter lays for the gazelles, and he fills up the pits that the hunter digs for his friends to fall in. He is the opposite of Gilgamesh, the cruel and inhuman ruler. Enkidu is half wild, more animal than human; he does not know civilisation and he preserves nature. Enkidu seems to be what may be described as a ‘moral’ being.

⁴Chrávát (2002:239) sees a link between Gilgamesh’s tyranny and oppression and particular historical and political events in Mesopotamia c.a. the 26th century BCE, namely the demise of the Sumerian city state Šuruppak because of forced labour obligation. However, this may be questioned if the Gilgamesh Epic is regarded as a wisdom text with pedagogical intentions.

But there is one grave problem: the hunter cannot earn a living! By protecting the animals, Enkidu prevents the hunter from making his life. Is this moral?

There happens to be two sides of the coin. What is regarded as moral conduct on the one hand (Enkidu), may be to the disadvantage of the other (the hunter). Although the Gilgamesh Epic is not primarily a text on morality but on wisdom, one needs to keep in mind that there are never clear-cut indications of what is right and what is wrong. It may never be possible to reach consensus on the conceptualisation of morality. And, as it will become evident later in the article, what was right in an ancient civilisation is completely unacceptable in a post-modern context.

The story continues. The hunter complains to his father and king Gilgamesh about the savage beast roaming the plains, and they give him both the same advice: take Šamhat the prostitute to tame him with her charms and introduce him to civilisation. According to the epic, Enkidu is immediately seduced, aroused and '[F]or six days and seven nights Enkidu, erect, did couple with Šamhat' (Tablet I:194; see George 2003:549). Having had his fill, he returns to his old friends, the gazelles, but they smell something has changed and run away. Enkidu follows them but cannot keep up; his powers are fading. Thus, he returns to Šamhat to ask her, but why? From her, he learns about his destiny: that he is to go with her to the city to counter the unbridled powers of the king and to become his companion.

Back to Uruk, they make a stopover at a camp of some shepherds (beginning of Tablet II). The herdsmen offer them bread and ale which Enkidu is hesitant to consume – after all, he knows only grass and water. Šamhat, however, assures him it's perfectly safe to try, and after Enkidu gobbles up seven goblets of beer and enough bread until he was sated, he started to sing, his hairy body was groomed, he was anointed with oil and turned into a (civilised) man (see the translation of George 1999:14). One may be quite amused by this anecdote: Enkidu, the free roaming child of nature, passive vegetarian (Schmidt 2019:40) becomes a civilised human being only after he overindulges in sex and becomes intoxicated by food and drink.

Or does that say something about 'civilisation'?

After some days spent at the camp of the shepherds, Šamhat and Enkidu proceed towards Uruk. After all, Enkidu is destined to become a companion for king Gilgamesh.

On their way they meet a stranger who tells them that he is going to a wedding in the city, and also that king Gilgamesh usually claims the privilege of *ius primae noctis*, before the bridegroom does. Enkidu gets to know culture (Comte 2008:164), but what he learns he does not like. He becomes furious, rushes to the house of the wedding where he blocks Gilgamesh's path.

Whether wisdom or morality, on this point the Gilgamesh Epic still seems to reflect on what is right and what is wrong, and the behaviour of Gilgamesh is certainly wrong. Power abuse and sexual abuse of those in a ruling position cannot be tolerated and must be stopped. Gilgamesh's tyrannical and abusive behaviour must be called to a halt.

A terrible fight breaks out between Gilgamesh and Enkidu, a fight that makes the doors quake and the walls shake (Tablet II:15; George 2003:563), but eventually they seem to recognise their equal strength, stop fighting, embrace and kiss each other. And from this moment on, they become firm friends.

The slaying of Humbaba

Peace in Uruk at last! Gilgamesh and Enkidu keep each other busy. But Enkidu is becoming depressed for two reasons: he does not have parents like other people, and he is no longer as strong as he used to be. Gilgamesh comes up with a solution: a death-defying adventure. Not only will this cure depression, but should they perish, they would have established an everlasting name for themselves. The adventure he suggests, is to go and slay Humbaba.

Who was Humbaba? 'His voice is the Deluge, his speech is fire, his breath is death' (II:278–279; see also Comte 2008:165). 'In order to keep the cedars safe, Enlil made it his destiny to be the terror of the people' (II:284–285; George 2003:571). Who was Enlil? Enlil, also known as 'Lord Wind', was the god who ruled the earth and its human inhabitants (George 1999:223). He was a fickle deity and his attitude towards humans was often ambivalent. Just like the wind he could be benevolent, but also violent and destructive. Enlil appointed Humbaba, the gigantic monster to watch over the Cedar Forest to protect it from human invasion (Salles 2009:83).

There are several problems here. Gilgamesh and Enkidu are undertaking a very dangerous endeavour. Humbaba is a terrifying monster. Then they are about to defy the authority of a god, who would certainly not be pleased by their act. With regards to morality and wisdom for that matter, is it justifiable to kill in order to get adrenaline going to overcome depression? Or to kill in order to establish an everlasting name and seek eternal fame? The answer would be no, in ancient as well as in modern times.

To make matters worse, if the guardian of the forest is killed, the forest will be open for humans to fell the cedars and do much harm to the environment. Although a blog cannot really be regarded as a source for scholarly research, I came across one where someone remarked that we should remember that the story – the Gilgamesh Epic takes place in modern day Irak, 'not exactly the place you think of when you imagine huge forests of trees. So, perhaps Enlil was right to put Humbaba there'.⁵ Perhaps the whole landscape would have looked different, had Gilgamesh and Enkidu not killed Humbaba.

5. See Matus n.d.

When the goddess Ninsun, mother of Gilgamesh, finds out what her son is about to do, she prays to Shamash, the Sun god, god of justice and righteousness. Ninsun says to Shamash: 'Why did you assign and inflict a restless spirit on my son Gilgamesh? For now you have touched him and he will travel to where Humbaba is' (III:46–48) ... 'until he slays ferocious Humbaba and annihilates from the land the Evil Thing that you hate' (III:53–54; George 2003:577).

Was Humbaba evil, as the epic portrays him? Or was he simply doing his job, a good job by protecting the forest?

At this point, any conceptualisation of morality really becomes blurred. From the blog I quoted and other comments, it appears that several modern readers think of Humbaba in a favourable way. Yet in the Epic he is portrayed as an Evil Thing, the very opposite of Shamash who stands for righteousness and justice. What is evil about him? Modern concerns are the protection of the environment and to prevent the exploitation of nature. On the contrary, the Epic seems to regard the Cedar Forest as the selfish possession of the gods, especially of Enlil and Humbaba is the evil guardian who protects this divine possession.

However, there is one more cheerful event in this chapter. Ninsun has finished her prayer to Shamash, then summons Enkidu to her. She says to him: 'You are not the offspring of my womb, but now your brood will be with the oblates of Gilgamesh, the priestesses, hierodules, and temple girls'. And she put the symbols around his neck' (III:121–124). In ancient Mesopotamia, there was a custom referred to as 'institutional adoption' (George 2003:462; see also Schimdt 2019:53). Temples took in orphans, foundlings abandoned by their families or children given up in times of famine, where they were looked after and raised by the temple women, and when they were older, they would work in the temple. They were also marked with a special sign – perhaps alluded to by the symbols Ninsun put around Enkidu's neck. This institutional adoption of homeless children seems like an act of compassion and care, which conveys something of morality in ancient societies. Although, I'm not sure what these orphanages looked like in reality. If one reads the novel of *Oliver Twist*, one shudders...

Tablet V ends with the slaying of Humbaba. Initially it seems as though the guardian gains the upper hand, but Shamash remembers his promise to Ninsun, he intervenes and blinds the monster with thirteen winds to help Gilgamesh and Enkidu overcome him with their weapons. They seek out the best timber, cut off as many cedars as they wish and travel back to the city ... with the head of Humbaba.

***The account of the journey to the Cedar Forest and the slaying of Humbaba serves as a reminder that 'right' in ancient times is 'wrong' in present times. When one reads the biblical account in 1 Kings 6–7 which describes King Solomon's building projects, namely the Temple and his palace, one becomes appalled at the amount of wood that

was used. Yet, Solomon is also known for his 'wisdom'. Gathering wood to decorate temple and palace is exactly why Gilgamesh and Enkidu went to the Cedar Forest. Clearly, nature conservation was not a priority in ancient times. From these observations I would suggest that in our discussion on a 'contextually appropriate conception of morality and an ethics of responsibility', we should also look at the relationship between humans and nature – we do have a responsibility towards our environment. The slaying of Humbaba is an ugly reminder of what it should not be. Maybe, just maybe, ...Humbaba should be awakened?

Ishtar ... a force to be reckoned with, and a death penalty

After Gilgamesh and Enkidu slayed Humbaba, the goddess Ishtar falls madly in love with Gilgamesh. Ishtar is the goddess of love and war (George 1999:223), known for her insatiable appetite for unbridled sex but also her violent temper if she doesn't get what she wants. Tablet VI begins with Gilgamesh returning from battle, washing his matted hair, cleaning his equipment. He shakes his locks down his back, casts away his dirty things and clothes himself in his kingly garments, and his crown (Tablet VI:1–5; George 2003:619). Ishtar cannot resist his beauty and proposes marriage to Gilgamesh, offering him sex, wealth and power – all that a man can wish for! But he spurns her, not because of moral principles, but because she has cursed all her previous lovers to some miserable fate, and he knows the same will happen to him. He reminds her of them (and others): Dumuzi to whom she allotted perpetual weeping, year after year; the lion for whom she had dug seven pits; the horse, once so proud in battle but to whom she allotted spurs and a lash; the shepherd who brought her bread and meat but whom she struck and turned him into a wolf, and whose own dogs now bite his thighs (Tablet VI:44–79; George 2003:622–623). Thanks, but no thanks, Ishtar, is Gilgamesh's response.

Livid with rage – for Ishtar is not used to rejection – she rushes up to the heavens and demands from her father, Anu, the father of the gods, to send the Bull of Heaven (the constellation of Taurus) to smite Gilgamesh in his palace. At first, he refuses because he knows the devastating consequences of a heavenly beast descending on earth, but Ishtar throws a temper tantrum, threatening to open the gates of the Netherworld and let out the dead to eat the living if her father does not comply. Anu gives in, and as he knew, Bull creates havoc, causing deep pits every time he snorts, and every time hundreds of people fall into a pit. However, Gilgamesh and Enkidu come to the rescue, kill the Bull, and celebrate their victory with the rest of the citizens of Uruk. Of course, this enrages Ishtar even more. She laments the killing of the Bull on the walls of Uruk together with the courtesans, prostitutes and harlots, but Enkidu ridicules her (Comte 2008:165), by tearing a haunch off the Bull and throwing it before her and threatens to drape its guts on her arms (George 2003:629). The tablet ends where the two heroes

celebrate their victories with the rest of the citizens of Uruk, but the very last lines mention that Enkidu had a most disturbing dream that he reveals to Gilgamesh in the next tablet.

The death of Enkidu

In Tablet VII the great gods hold counsel. The luck of the two heroes has run out. Slaying both Humbaba and the Bull of heaven, they've pushed it too far. The gods then reach the decision that one of them shall die, to leave the other for the rest of his life mourning for his friend. The death penalty falls upon Enkidu and he is sent to the death camp (Comte 2008:165). To make matters worse, he is not to die in honour, like one who has lost his life in battle, but in shame, in sickness and in pain.

So, it happens. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh is devastated. He becomes deeply depressed and develops an obsessive fear for death. When he and Enkidu embarked on their journey to the Cedar Forest to slay Humbaba, death was a reality but not really a concern. After all, they would establish an everlasting name as heroes who had died in combat. But things have changed. Would Gilgamesh die as Enkidu? Not in honour but in shame? And this scares him. This fear drives him to an obsession – the obsessive desire to live forever.

Gilgamesh knows of one human being who did succeed in obtaining life everlasting, and that is Utanapishtim who lives at the very end of the earth, at the Distant, beyond the lethal Waters of Death. Bereft, Gilgamesh leaves his palace in a sorry state, and clad only in the skin of a lion, he roams the earth in search of its ends, in search of Utanapishtim who lives forever. Gilgamesh must learn his secret, the secret of everlasting life.

His trip takes him to the end of the earth where the Twin Mountains stand, where the tunnel of the sun runs from the one end to the next. The tunnel of the sun is guarded by a Scorpion man and his wife; and in order to reach Utanapishtim, Gilgamesh has to pass through this tunnel before the sun does. After explaining his quest, the Scorpion people let him pass. Thereafter, he reaches the seashore of the Waters of Death and a garden with bejewelled plants and trees where Siduri, a mysterious ale wife lives. She directs him to Urashanabi, the boatsman of Utanapishtim who is eventually persuaded by Gilgamesh to ferry him over the lethal Waters of Death to meet the one on whom the gods bestowed life everlasting.

A visit to Utanapishtim, the Distant

Beyond the end of the earth, at the Distant, Gilgamesh meets Utanapishtim and begs him to disclose the secret of everlasting life – just how did he get it?

And Utanapishtim tells Gilgamesh the story of the Deluge.⁶ A very long time ago, the gods created humankind so that

⁶The account of the Deluge is an older myth, the Atrahasis Epic, or the Babylonian Flood Narrative, inserted into the Gilgamesh Epic. In the Epic the reason for the Deluge is not mentioned, but for the discussion on morality and the role of religion

the humans could work, and the gods could rest. But in due course, the humans' building cities and digging canals made such a noise that the gods could bear it no longer. Enlil complained that all the racket hurt his ears and deprived him of his sleep. A permanent solution: wipe them all out.

All the gods seem to be in cahoots, but Ea secretly splits this secret to one who is sitting in his hut: Utanapishtim, also known as Atrahasis. Ea does this not because Utanapishtim is good or of high moral standards, but simply because Utanapishtim is Ea's favourite. And Ea does not speak to Utanapishtim directly, but whispers into a reed fence and a brick wall to repeat his words to Utanapishtim, to 'abandon riches and seek survival; spurn property and save life and put on board of the boat the seed of all living creatures' (XI:25–27; George 2003:705).

The monstrous nautical vessel is barely constructed when the storm breaks loose in all its rage. People fill the ocean like fish. All life on earth is destroyed mercilessly. Even the gods take fright about that which they have done. They abandon their earthly abodes and rush up to the heaven where they cower like dogs in fright (George 2003:711). 'What have we done?' they wail.

After six days and seven nights, the storm abates. Utanapishtim's boat crashes into a mountain, Mount Nebo. From there he sends out several birds to scout for dry land. First a dove, then a swallow, but both return, finding no perch available. The third bird, the raven flies off, and Utanapishtim knows, he is on *terra firma* now. He brings an offering to the gods, not because he is grateful, but because he knows they are starving, having been deprived of sacrifices for some time while the Deluge lasted, and their cults had been interrupted. As they catch scent of Utanapishtim's offering, they descend from heaven, and crowd around his jars filled with food and libations like hungry buzzing flies.

The mother goddess, Belet-ili vows to never let such a disaster happen again to her children. As promised, she lifts the beads of fly-shaped lapis-lazuli beads that Anu had made for her during their earlier courtship – this is of course the promise of the rainbow. Consequently, she accuses Enlil of causing the Deluge and forbids him to partake in Utanapishtim's offering. Yet he turns up, and is furious when he realises that some life had escaped the catastrophe. Ea, being known for his cunningness, is accused of splitting the secret, but he simply shrugs his shoulders and says that Atrahasis/Utanapishtim had a dream – to prevent someone from dreaming is of course impossible.

Enlil calms down and his anger changes into gratefulness – he fetches Utanapishtim and his wife from the boat and blesses them with life everlasting.

.....
in ancient times, it is important to take note why the gods decided to wipe out humankind with a Flood. After the creation of humankind, Enlil became annoyed with the noise they made – digging channels, building houses, temples, and palaces, and therefore he decided to wipe them out with a Deluge. Although the gods took oath never to let the plan of the Deluge leak out, Ea thwarted their schemes (Jamme & Matuschek 2014:231).

The end

Unfortunately, says Utanapishtim to Gilgamesh, there was only one Deluge for him, Utanapishtim, there is not going to be another for Gilgamesh. However, there is a slim chance: if he can defeat sleep (the younger cousin of Death) and stay awake for six days and seven nights, he may obtain life everlasting. Of course, Gilgamesh fails the test miserably.

By now Utanapishtim has had enough of Gilgamesh and instructs Urshanabi to ferry him back to Uruk. Gilgamesh is not to return, ever, and Urshanabi also seems to be fired from his job – he is not to return either. But Utanapishtim's wife feels sorry for the weary traveller who had come such a long way, and requests her husband to give Gilgamesh a parting gift at least. Utanapishtim discloses a last secret. At the bottom of the *Apsû* (Ea's domain) grows a thorny shrub that has rejuvenating capacities. It does not guarantee immortality, but those who eat from it, will not grow older.

Gilgamesh manages to retrieve the plant, but he does not trust Utanapishtim completely and decides to try it out on the senior citizens of the city before using it himself. As he and Urshanabi pitch camp for the night, he goes down to bathe in a pool of clear cool water. Rather carelessly he leaves the precious plant on the side of pool. He turns his back just for a moment, and in that time a snake is lured by the sweet odours of the plant. When Gilgamesh turns around, he is just in time to see the creature snatching the plant, casting off its old skin, and sailing away young and new. Gilgamesh breaks down and weeps bitterly.

The epic ends, echoing some lines of the opening prologue. Gilgamesh is back in Uruk, walking on the city-walls and speaking to Urshanabi. He does not seem deflated, in fact, he seems quite composed, even proud, boasting about his city, its walls, and its fertile soil. After seeing the Deep, he realises the quest for everlasting life is futile. The interest is in the living, in the present, in the here and now of life.

Remarks

Since the Ishtar-scenario (Tablet VI), the gods are not depicted in a respectful manner – on the contrary! Ishtar is portrayed as having no scruples when it comes to her sexual desires and as an immature brat who throws temper tantrums if she cannot get what she wants. Anu is a feeble father who gives in to his daughter's demands, even knowing the harm it will cause.

Enlil is mostly a negative character. He is the one that appointed the Evil Thing, Humbaba, to guard the Cedar Forest. Then there is the counsel of the gods, where a decision is to be made about the punishment for the hubris of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, for slaying Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven. According to a Hittite fragment, missing from the Standard Babylonian Version, Enlil is the one who decides

that Enkidu shall die (George 1999:54–55). In the Atrahasis Epic, the decision to wipe out humankind with the Deluge, is mainly that of Enlil. And when he finds out that there was a survivor, he is infuriated.

With regards to the Deluge itself, when the gods realise that the storm has annihilated all life on earth, they take fright and flee to heaven, cowering like dogs, tails between their legs. And when the storm abates, they are famished, for six days and seven nights they have had no sacrifices from the humans on earth – whom they assume they have just wiped out. Then the aromatic odours of Utanapishtim's offerings reach their noses – they descend from heaven and crowd over his jars like buzzing flies. Certainly, the image of gods portrayed like cowering dogs and buzzing flies is not flattering.

Ea, despite being the source of all wisdom, does not play a strong role in the Epic, and where he does – in the account of the Deluge – he is more cunning than wise. He splits the secret of the gods, and when confronted, he lies cleverly.

The only god worthy of some respect is Shamash, the Sun god. He answers Ninsun's prayers; he does protect Gilgamesh and Enkidu on their journey to the Cedar Forest and assists them in their battle against Humbaba. Also, in the Hittite fragment mentioned above, at the counsel of the gods, he intercedes for Enkidu, saying that he is innocent and should not die – which made Enlil become very angry. I didn't mention it in the article, but as Enkidu lay dying, cursing many people and even objects in his pain, Shamash tried to console and comfort him. Yet, the righteousness of Shamash is missing in the account of the Deluge.

Conclusion

In this article, I addressed the topic of 'The Conceptualisation of Morality in Ancient Religions' at the hand of the Gilgamesh Epic. I also cautioned that ancient languages do not have words for either religion or morality. However, in the Epic of Gilgamesh it became evident that ancient societies did have an idea of what may be conceived as morality – namely that rulers should not oppress and abuse power, that an orderly and just society should be established, and that care for the less fortunate in that society should be provided. But religion hardly played any role. I completely agree with Douglas Matus that '[T]he belief system that informs the [Gilgamesh] epic's morality has more affinities with Greek and Egyptian religions than the dualistic Judeo-Christian tradition'.⁷ Like in the myths of ancient Greece and Egypt, also the deities in the Gilgamesh Epic do not set examples of moral conduct. They are too much like the humans they created!

Yet, the epic proposes that it will disclose some secret knowledge that Gilgamesh had acquired on his journey that left him 'weary but granted him rest' (George 2003:537), but

7. See <https://education.seattlepi.com/good-evil-forces-the-epic-gilgamesh-5376.html>.

it never explicitly states its nature or content. What did Gilgamesh learn? I conclude with the observations of some scholars. Beaulieu (2007) states:

The moral teachings of the epic center on the rejection of hubris, the acceptance of human mortality and ultimately on the submission to the fate and order created by the gods. (p. 7)

Van Leeuwen (2007) explains:

Nagbu refers not only to the deep waters in which Gilgamesh plumbs, but also to the wisdom he achieves through his quest. At the end (as in the beginning of the epic) the only monument to Gilgamesh's wisdom will be what he builds – the mighty walls of Uruk, whose foundations were laid by the seven sages. (p. 73)

Schmidt (2019) suggests:

We first encounter him as young (not yet a good king), though when we leave him at the poem's end, he has become the mature player promised to us in the opening lines: 'wise in all matters'. (p. 38)

The Gilgamesh Epic seems to convey a conceptualisation of morality (wisdom) wished by the gods but which they themselves are incapable to uphold. Humans, through the hard lessons of life, learn what is right and what is wrong, and live their lives accordingly. Besides the futile quest for everlasting life, the Gilgamesh Epic also questions the meaning of life, and finds the answer in the building of the mighty walls of Uruk, the date palms and clay pits within the city: life here and now. Morality/wisdom is to be executed by humans in the life that they live, regardless of gods or religion.

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Author's contributions

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