

CHAPTER 2

THE STANDARD BABYLONIAN GILGAMESH EPIC

Introduction

Why is it necessary to give an exposition of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* at all?

Jimmy Loader (2003:315) refers in an article to the *motif of the tower* that occurs in the *Gilgamesh Epic* (Tablet VI, lines 60-62 – his footnote). Unfortunately this is not the case: tablet VI of the *Gilgamesh Epic* deals with Gilgamesh's rejection of Ishtar's marriage proposal. Furthermore, no tower is built in the *Gilgamesh Epic*, definitely not Esagila, as Loader states in the same breath in the same sentence.

So, an important reason for this exposition is that not everybody who reads this thesis, not even renown scholars, may be acquainted with the contents of the *Epic*, except perhaps in very broad terms. Quite often the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is confused with the Babylonian *Epic of Creation – Enuma Elish*. [Marduk is rewarded with the building of a palace in this *Epic*.] And although the *Gilgamesh Epic* does refer to the creation of one man – Enkidu – it is not concerned with how the world, the animals and humans came to be.

Otherwise the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is known for its parallel with the Biblical recount of the Deluge. This is part of a partial fact. The *Gilgamesh Epic* does contain the Babylonian Flood-narrative, but this happens to be written on only one of the twelve tablets, namely tablet XI. Also, this Flood-narrative is in fact an older *Epic* in its own right, namely the *Atrahasis Epic*. This older *epic* is incorporated into the *Gilgamesh Epic* for a particular purpose, which will become clear in the course of the discussions within this thesis.

Therefore, before entering into a discussion of the *sources* and the *discourse* of the text, as a point of departure I shall now give a detailed exposition of the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* in the form of a coherent narrative.

However, it should be kept in mind that the extant sources of the *Epic* are anything but neat and coherent – on the contrary! All the tablets are damaged to a greater or lesser degree. At some places it is impossible to even guess what may have been recorded. The edition of George (2003: Volume II) indicates the fragmentary state in which the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* appears today. The exposition that follows gives a false impression of a beautiful easy-flowing story. More likely it is a matter of *cut 'n paste* – episodes that cohere are strung together, the gaps are pleated. So, I apologise to the scholars who are struggling to make sense from the sources at their disposal. To their knowledge I am very much obliged, however, I state again – I do not aim at another critical edition of the *Gilgamesh Epic*. The purpose of this thesis is twofold: (i) to illuminate the context of the origins and development of the *Epic*; (ii) to highlight its narrative moments.

Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh* is the final product of a narrative that went through many evolutionary phases. Almost 1300 years separate the beginning from the end. There were the first short Sumerian *Bilgames* poems, the *Old Babylonian Epic*, the *Middle Babylonian* one, and then finally the *Standard Babylonian Epic* as it is known today. These processes of transmission will be attended to in the following chapters.

At this stage the familiar literary terms will be appropriated. No explanations are given concerning strange names or deities at this stage. These will be dealt with in following chapters.

1. The narrative

Tablet I

The opening lines of the *Epic* are a prologue, an introduction to the narrative as well as a brief summary of it. The narrator is anonymous. He – most probably he – proclaims the worldwide glory of someone who saw the Deep,

who shall be remembered for his wisdom, who disclosed a secret and who brought back reports of what had been before the Deluge. But this one's path was long and difficult, a road less traveled, a way of many trials and tribulations. He nevertheless completed the journey, he became wiser than any on earth, and he engraved what he had learnt on a stela for the sake of posterity. What the reader is about to read, are these very words. A clue is given to who this person may be: he also built the rampart of Uruk-the-Sheepfold where holy Eanna, the sacred storehouse is.

The narrator addresses an open invitation to whoever is paying attention to draw closer, to have a look at these remarkable walls, to take hold of the threshold of ancient times, to come closer to Eanna, the abode of Ishtar. Future men or kings will not parallel this structure. Now the narrator extends his invitation: he invites his recipients to climb the walls of Uruk, to walk around, to survey its foundations that were laid by the Seven Sages and examine its brickwork of fired bricks. From these walls the view on the city and its surroundings is excellent: a date-grove, a clay pit and the temple of Ishtar. Uruk comprises a large area of cultivated as well as uncultivated ground.

Now the narrator urges his recipients to go right into the heart of the city itself. He or she is to search the copper tablet box, unlock its bronze clasp, open up the door to its secret, pick up the tablet of lapis lazuli and then read it out aloud: this is the story of Gilgamesh.

Gilgamesh is lauded as a king who surpassed all other kings, whose heroic deeds attest to his fearless conduct. He was the trustworthy one in battle who formed the vanguard as well as the rear, he opened passages through mountains, dug wells and he restored the many cult-centers that were destroyed by the Deluge. Gilgamesh also crossed the wide sea to the sunrise, exploring the whole world in search of life, a search that led him to Uta-napishtim the Distant.

Although he is called an *offspring of Uruk*, he seems to have been of mixed parentage: his father was the mortal Lugalbanda and his mother immortal Ninsun, Lady Wild Cow. Two thirds of him was god, one third human. He was a most handsome figure; his impressive appearance was planned by Bēlet ilī herself.

The narrative proper starts abruptly and rather shockingly. Instead of a wise, admirable king, Gilgamesh is portrayed as an arrogant, even brutal figure that tyrannises his people day and night. The nature of his harassment is not stated explicitly, but provides enough reason for the women of the city to complain bitterly to Aruru. They remind her repeatedly that she created this king with his unbridled energies that he is now abusing to their detriment. And they pray that she now creates his double, his match, and one to occupy the restless king in order for his subjects to have some peace and quiet in their lives.

Aruru obliges, washes her hands, pinches off some clay and casts it onto the steppe – and Enkidu comes into being. He is a primitive, beast-like creature, very strong and very hairy, ignorant of humans, language and country. But he is quite harmless. He is happy to eat grass with the gazelles and to frolic with the beasts at the water hole.

A hunter spots Enkidu on three consecutive days. The hunter does not know about his benign nature and is frightened out of his wits by the savage appearance of the creature. Dumbstruck with fear and deeply worried he returns home together with his herds. Eventually speech returns to him and he relates to his father all that is happening on the steppe. There is a terrible creature out there that frightens him and interferes with his hunting activities.

His father advises him to go to Uruk and to relate his troubles to Gilgamesh. Then he is to go back to the steppe, but he must take Shamhat the prostitute

along with him. On approach of the savage the prostitute must take off all her clothes. The beast will see her, go for her and the herd, with which he grew up on the steppe, will spurn him. The hunter does as he was told: he repeats his troubles to the king and the king gives him exactly the same advice as his father did: Shamhat the prostitute is the answer.

The hunter and the prostitute proceed and undertake their three-day journey toward their destination. For another three days they sit down and await the arrival of the savage. Then, when he is eventually spotted, the hunter very briefly instructs the prostitute what she is to do and vanishes completely from the scene. Shamhat calmly does as she was told: she takes off her clothes and bares her sex, unafraid. Enkidu responds eagerly and they engage passionately in a lovemaking session that lasts six days and seven nights. Satiated by her pleasures, Enkidu wishes to return to the steppe and to his herd, however, as soon as the animals see him, they become aware that something had changed and they run away. Enkidu comes to the shocking realisation that his knees have become weak; he is unable to run fast enough after his former friends to keep up with them. But although his physical strength decreased, he gained intellectual insight and he returns to the feet of Shamhat to learn.

Shamhat completed her task to make a man out of a beast successfully. Now she is also ready to tell Enkidu what his real purpose in life is: he is to meet king Gilgamesh of Uruk. Enkidu is all too eager to proceed, but his purpose in mind is probably the one he was created for: he wants to challenge Gilgamesh to prove that the one who was born on the steppe is the stronger. But Shamhat gently reprimands him, reminding him that the three great gods, Anu, Enlil and Ea love Gilgamesh. And she adds, long before now, Gilgamesh had had two strange dreams and called his mother to reveal their meaning.

In the first dream the many stars of the heaven appear above Gilgamesh. Something like a bolt from Anu falls upon him. He tries to lift and to roll it, but it is too heavy for him. The crowd of Uruk gathers around it, kissing its feet. Then Gilgamesh himself discovers that he loves it like a wife. He caresses the object. Now he can lift it up and he places it before Ninsun's feet. Ninsun makes it his equal.

The clever Ninsun repeats Gilgamesh's words, explaining as she goes along. Her son is about to make a friend, one who will become a trustworthy comrade whose strength is reliable in all circumstances. She declares this friend as an equal to her son.

Gilgamesh has a second dream and relates it to his mother once again. This time it is an axe that lies in the town square of Uruk. A large crowd gathers around it. Gilgamesh loves it like a wife, picks it up and sets it down at his mother's feet. She makes it his equal. And Ninsun yet again repeats the dream, yet again explaining its significance in the same manner as before: a loyal and dear comrade who is also able to give good counsel is about to appear on the scene.

Tablet II

The opening lines of Tablet II records briefly that Enkidu and Shamhat was making love for six days and seven nights and that – apparently during this time – Enkidu forgot where he was born. Shamhat suggests that they proceed towards Uruk and Enkidu agrees. She takes him by the hand and leads him towards their first stop: a shepherds' camp. The shepherds immediately recognise the resemblance between the stature of Enkidu and the god-like body of Gilgamesh. They immediately organise a party, which later during the night becomes quite raucous due to Enkidu's overindulgence.

For the first time Enkidu encounters prepared food and drink. Bread and beer is put before him and he does not exactly know what to do with it. Once again Shamhat comes to the rescue and assures him that it is quite safe. Kings and gods consume bread and beer. And, just like with his first sexual experience he cannot stop once he started. He eats seven times from the bread, downs seven mugs of beer and becomes quite intoxicated, singing loudly. But his hairy body is washed with water and anointed with oil and at last he turns into a full human being. In return to the hospitality of the shepherds, he provides a service: while they sleep, he guards their flocks and scares away the wolves and the lions.

Now the time has come for Enkidu and Shamhat to depart for Uruk. As they enter the city they notice some excitement. They approach a young man and question him on the matter. He explains to Enkidu that a wedding is about to take place, however, Gilgamesh the king of Uruk has the privilege of coupling with the bride to be before the groom does so. On hearing these words Enkidu becomes enraged. He and the prostitute hurry towards the town square where all the action is taking place.

The crowd gathers around Enkidu, kissing his feet. But Enkidu, still very upset about the king's immoral conduct finds his way to the wedding house and obstructs Gilgamesh's path dramatically by putting his foot in the doorway. The king and the stranger from the steppe tackle each other like two young bulls – the fight is on. The walls shake. Gilgamesh is kneeling, his foot on the ground. Enkidu's anger subsides and he acknowledges magnanimously that Enlil destined Gilgamesh the king of the people. They kiss and form a friendship.

Gilgamesh introduces his new friend to his mother Ninsun. Her remark that he has no biological parents, as he is one who was born on the steppe seems to upset Enkidu. On hearing these words he becomes morbidly depressed. Concerned about his friend's tears, Gilgamesh asks him the reason for his

despondent state. Enkidu explains that the strength he once had has left him and now he has become weak: apparently easy-going city life is catching up. But Gilgamesh has the solution: a good adventure, preferably a death-defying one is just the answer to Enkidu's problem. Why do they not go down to the Cedar forest where the ferocious monster Humbaba dwells, and challenge him in his domain? And should they perish, at least they would have succeeded in establishing their name forever. What could be better?

But Enkidu is rather panic stricken at this suggestion. Gilgamesh only heard about Humbaba, but he, Enkidu had actually seen him during those wild days when he roamed the steppe with the beasts. His warning is repeated several times: from afar one can hear the rumbling noises that Humbaba makes, his voice equals the noise of the Deluge, his mouth is Girru the fire god, and his breath is death. But worst of all, Enlil appointed this monster for the sole purpose of protecting his Cedar Forest from unwelcome intruders.

Gilgamesh ridicules Enkidu's fears – he is simply talking nonsense. He reminds his friend of his past. After all, Enkidu was born and bred in the wild, lions and stray men were afraid of him. What had become of his courage? So, now they must hurry to the forge and require that the craftsmen make large axes in their presence. The request is carried out.

Gilgamesh addresses the townsfolk of Uruk, the elders and the young men of the city. He is about to take an unknown road and engage in an unknown combat. He asks for their blessing. He promises that he will celebrate the New Year Festival twice a year if he returns. Apparently the young men egg him on. However, Enkidu does not share the enthusiasm of his friend and of the young men of Uruk: he turns for support to the elders and repeats the horrors of Humbaba. The elders take Enkidu's warning seriously and reprimand their king for his youthful lightheartedness. They repeat Enkidu's words to Gilgamesh.

On hearing these words, Gilgamesh looks with a laugh at his friend...

Tablet III

Unfortunately Tablet III is badly broken. The broad outlines of the narrative can be constructed; most of the detail is lacking.

Apparently the elders of the city realise that they are unable to stop their young king in his tracks. They bid him farewell and plead that he does not rely on his strength alone, but that he trusts his faithful companion Enkidu. To Enkidu they entrust the safety of the king and wish them a safe return.

Before their departure Gilgamesh urges Enkidu to go with him to the temple of Ninsun. To his mother he repeats that he is undertaking an unknown journey and is about to engage in an unknown combat. He asks her blessing and wishes to return in time for the festivities.

Most of Ninsun's reply to Gilgamesh is missing, apparently she goes through some rituals, washing and anointing herself. Then she climbs up to the rooftop and places offerings, probably incense before Shamash. And she accuses him of creating a restless heart in her son, Gilgamesh. This is the cause of his dangerous mission. She reminds the god of the dangerous journey and the unknown battle that lies ahead for Gilgamesh and Enkidu. She also reminds him that Humbaba is the evil thing that he himself hates, and that the two youngsters are about to let him disappear from the earth. She requests the protection of Shamash and Aya the bride, as well as thirteen winds that may blind Humbaba in order for Gilgamesh's weapons to conquer him. The rest of Ninsun's words are lost.

Eventually the goddess rises, smothers the incense-burner, she comes down from the rooftop and summons Enkidu. She tells him that although she did not give birth to him, she names him now after Gilgamesh's offerings, the various

priestesses and hierodules of the temple, and she hangs the appropriate symbols around his neck. By these gestures Ninsun has adopted Enkidu as her son.

Tablet III ends by having Gilgamesh and Enkidu perform some rituals before their departure. Just before they leave the city, the elders once again speak to Enkidu, asking him to take care of the king.

Tablet IV

Tablet IV narrates the journey towards the Cedar Forest. This happens in five stages which occur in exactly the same manner: Gilgamesh and Enkidu cover vast distances in a very short time, what should be done in a month and a half, they do in three days. They pitch camp, perform certain rituals in order to provoke a dream – which turns out for Gilgamesh to be a nightmare. He wakes up every time shivering with goose pimples all over him and speaks to his friend Enkidu who soothes him every time. Enkidu tells Gilgamesh that his dream is a good omen and that things will turn out for the better. This happens five times successively.

Just before entering Humbaba's region, and now very close to the Lebanon, Gilgamesh becomes tearful and reminds Shamash of Ninsun's prayer way back in Uruk. Shamash takes note and urges the two heroes to stand firm against Humbaba, and to tackle him before he has time to armour himself fully. On hearing Humbaba's roar, Enkidu is the one who trembles fearfully, and now Gilgamesh is the one who tries to encourage him. With words of bravado he reminds his friend of their great achievements previously.

The tablet ends with Gilgamesh and Endidu standing at the border of the forest.

Tablet V

Gilgamesh and Enkidu have reached the Cedar Forest and now they pause at its entrance to admire the height and the beauty of the cedars. They catch their breath, as it were.

Unfortunately the description of their venture into the forest and their first encounter with Humbaba is very badly damaged, either completely lost or consisting of isolated words only. The next coherent lines are Humbaba's speech. He insults Gilgamesh and Enkidu rudely, calling Gilgamesh a fool and describing Enkidu as the son of a fish, a turtle who knew no parents. He threatens to kill Gilgamesh and to feed his flesh to the birds. But Enkidu encourages Gilgamesh not to lose heart and to strike his mighty blow.

Action. They tackle the monster. The earth bursts and they shatter the mountains of Sirara and the Lebanon. Sadly enough it seems that Humbaba is gaining the upper hand. Gilgamesh and Enkidu stare death in the face. But then Shamash intervenes. He remembered Ninsun's request. And he raises the thirteen winds that blind Humbaba, handicap his movements and allow the weapons of Gilgamesh to conquer the monster.

Humbaba pleads for his life desperately. He praises Gilgamesh. He promises him all the trees he wishes to decorate his palace with. But Enkidu is not impressed. He advises Gilgamesh to turn a deaf ear and to do away with the monster on the spot. For this insensitivity Humbaba wants to kill Enkidu, but he also knows that his release lies with Enkidu: Enkidu is the one who can influence Gilgamesh. Nevertheless, Enkidu remains hard. Before Enlil finds out Humbaba must be disposed of. Indeed, those great gods, Enlil in Nippur and Shamash in Sippar are going to be very angry once they realise what had happened. Furthermore, by doing this, Gilgamesh shall fulfill his initial wish: to establish his name forever as the one who slay Humbaba.

It dawns upon Humbaba that he had lost. He curses Gilgamesh and Enkidu. He wishes them both a premature death – Enkidu first and Gilgamesh next. But with a merciless stroke of his axe Gilgamesh finishes off the monster. He is beheaded and his body is mutilated. Now the two heroes are free to venture deeper into the Cedar Forest.

They start by opening the veil of the dwelling of the Anunnaki – the great gods of the Netherworld. Then they proceed to cut off as many trees as they wish. Enkidu suggests that they use the wood to make a large door and install it at Nippur. They bind together a raft, and proceed towards their destination with Humbaba's head as trophy.

Tablet VI

Gilgamesh returns to Uruk as a hero. But he needs to do something about his filthy appearance. So he washes off the grime of battle and clothes himself into the appropriate robes of state. And in the process he becomes so attractive that the great Ishtar herself, the patron goddess of Uruk, the goddess of love and war, falls madly in love with him the moment she sees him. Shamelessly she proposes to the king. She promises him everything a man can wish for: sex, wealth and power.

However, Gilgamesh seems alarmed, even panic-stricken at this thought. He answers Ishtar. He knows his mythology. He insults her. He reminds her of her previous lovers whom she sentenced to some or other miserable existence. Worst of all, he knows the same macabre fate is awaiting him. He spurns the goddess.

Ishtar retaliates. Livid with rage she ascends to the heavens. She accuses Gilgamesh by her father Anu and her mother Antum. She throws a temper tantrum that would put any two year old to shame. Her father, Anu realises that his daughter probably provoked the king; however, his soothing words

only enrage her furthermore. She demands another monster: the Bull of Heaven to smite Gilgamesh in his palace. If her father refuses, she threatens to break down the doors and the bolts to the Netherworld and allow the dead out to eat the living. Anu warns her that the Bull can cause severe damage to the crops of Uruk – after all, he grazes in heaven – but Ishtar remains adamant. Anu gives up. He places the lead rope of the Bull in her hands. Ishtar and the Bull proceed towards Uruk.

The Bull causes damage as far as it goes. By its first snort a large pit is opened and a hundred men fall into it. This happens again, and another hundred men disappear. When it snorts a third time, again a pit is opened, and now Enkidu appears to be one of the victims. But Enkidu, hero that he is, jumps up, grabs the Bull by its horns, throws foam into its face and calls his comrade Gilgamesh to take on another fight. The people of Uruk witness a spectacular show as the two heroes slay yet another monster. Gilgamesh finishes it off by stabbing it with his sword into its thick neck. He and his friend take out its heart and set it before Shamash, prostrating themselves in a gesture of worship and honour.

But Ishtar is not impressed. She goes up to the walls of Uruk, throwing another temper tantrum. She jumps and dances, she curses Gilgamesh and she bemoans the death of her beloved pet. Enkidu becomes so irritated by her words that he tears off the right flank of the Bull and hurls it into her face. He threatens to disfigure her just like he and Gilgamesh did with the Bull and to drape its intestines around her arms. Then Ishtar calls together all her different cultic personnel to mourn the tragic and brutal death of the Bull.

Gilgamesh on the other hand calls together all the craftsmen of the city to come and admire his trophy: the width and the thickness of the Bull's horns. And he brings an anointment offering to Lugalbanda. The horns he hangs in his chamber.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu wash their hands in the Euphrates, take hold of each other and joyfully and triumphantly they proceed through the streets of Uruk. A paean is sung for the two heroes. And afterwards Gilgamesh throws a great party for all and everyone in his palace that carries on until everybody more or less passes out.

Enkidu has a dream – an ominous one – a nightmare. He wakes up rather disturbed, arouses his friend and asks worriedly: why are the great gods in counsel?

Tablet VII

Enkidu relates his dream to Gilgamesh. The great gods Anu, Enlil, Ea and Shamash are in counsel. They discuss the events of the recent past. Gilgamesh and Enkidu had killed both the Bull of Heaven and Humbaba. The general feeling among the gods is that they had overstepped their boundaries. They pushed their luck too far. Their time has run out. One of them must die. Enlil decides on Enkidu, however, Shamash tries to intervene, but without success. The die is cast. And Gilgamesh and Enkidu are overcome by sadness.

Indeed, Enkidu becomes very ill. Apparently delirious with fever he launches a series of angry curses, starting with the door as though it is a human being. Gilgamesh becomes anxious and suggests that he intercedes on behalf of his friend at the great gods. He also promises to fashion a statue from priceless gold. But Enkidu laments that everything is useless. Once Enlil made up his mind, there is no turning back. Enlil's decisions are final. However, Enkidu does turn to Shamash, requesting some more curses: one on the hunter who saw him the very first time, and one on Shamhat the prostitute who introduced him to civilisation. But Shamash intercedes for Shamhat. He reminds Enkidu that civilised life was not so bad: he got to know the food of gods and kings, he was clad in beautiful garments, and best of all, he met his

faithful comrade Gilgamesh. Shamash furthermore predicts that Gilgamesh shall honour him after his death, he shall mourn him and neglect his appearance, and clad only in the skin of a lion, he shall roam the steppe.

Somehow the words of Shamash seem to calm Enkidu down, and he withdraws his curse on Shamhat. However, he becomes increasingly ill. He has a pain in his stomach. He lies alone. Then he summons Gilgamesh and tells him of a terrible dream he had the previous night: the heavens shouted and the earth answered. Somewhere in between was he, Enkidu. A young man with a dark eagle-like face seized him. He had hands like the paws of a lion, nails like the claws of an eagle. He bound Enkidu and led him away, deeper and deeper into the realm of the Netherworld until they reached the center, the abode of the Queen – Ereshkigal. In short, Enkidu had a vision of being dragged off into hell.

He pleads desperately that his friend may not forget him – ever. Then for twelve consecutive days Enkidu's illness becomes worse and he calls deliriously and anxiously to Gilgamesh.

Tablet VIII

Gilgamesh starts preparing the mourning rites for his friend. He calls all and everyone to mourn for Enkidu: the townsfolk of Uruk, the trees, the wild animals and the rivers. He claims that he himself shall weep bitterly over his friend like a wailing woman.

Yet, when Enkidu finally passes away, Gilgamesh is reluctant to accept the fact. He notices a strange kind of sleep that has seized his friend. Enkidu is not responding. He feels his heart but there is no heartbeat. Only then he realises that Enkidu had died. Gilgamesh covers the face of his friend like a bride, circles around him like an eagle, like a lioness whose cubs fell into a pit. He shears his head and rips off his garments as though they are soiled.

At the crack of dawn Gilgamesh calls upon several craftsmen to assist him in making a statue of his friend. Once again he promises his friend that everyone shall honour him and mourn his death: he vows that he shall become dirty and roam the steppe, clad only in the skin of a lion. Thereafter he starts preparing and collecting the various treasures to accompany his friend to the Netherworld in order to please the deities and demons down there. These gifts are described in considerable detail, ending with the last rite: Gilgamesh opens the door of his treasury, fetches a large table of precious wood and fills a bowl of lapis lazuli with honey. A likewise dish he fills with butter. Apparently these are decorated and displayed to the Sun god.

Tablet IX

Gilgamesh has sunken into a deep and dark depression. He is now wandering the steppe in an unkempt state, weeping bitterly over his friend. He is timid and bashful, petrified that he may die like Enkidu. He becomes obsessed by thoughts of death and dying, terrified of Death itself. The lions that he once slaughtered fearlessly, now frightens him. He prays to Sîn. And then, as though he tries to find a way out of his own obsessive circular reasoning, he makes a decision to take the road to the son of Ubara-Tutu.

That night he has dreams which apparently gives him new courage for life. Once again he takes up his axe and his sword and starts using them. Eventually he reaches the Twin Mountains where the sun rises and sets every day. Their tops touch the heavens and their foundations reach into the Netherworld. The terrifying scorpion-man and his wife guard their entrance.

Initially Gilgamesh is scared when he sees them and covers his face in terror. But he manages to gather himself and approaches them. The scorpion-man and his wife appear more inquisitive than aggressive, or perhaps they only feel sorry for Gilgamesh on seeing his haggard appearance. However, they

do recognise that he is partly god, and they ask who he is and where he is going. He explains that he is on his way to Uta-napishtim, his forefather who stood in the assembly of the gods and adds that he himself is in search of everlasting life.

The scorpion man tries to tell Gilgamesh that this mission is an impossible one. Never before has anyone transgressed the path through the mountains. For twelve double hours the darkness is thick, and there is no light. But Gilgamesh stresses that he has no other option. For him there is no turning back.

At last the scorpion-man agrees that Gilgamesh may proceed. Without hesitating any longer, Gilgamesh takes the path of the sun. He needs to complete the journey through the Twin Mountains before the sun does, or everything was in vain.

This means a race against time. For eight double hours he rushes forth through a thick darkness that does not allow him to see before him or to look backwards. At the ninth double hour he feels the North wind on his face, however, he cannot see anything yet. He carries on through the next double hour, but only at the eleventh double hour he realises that he had completed the murderous journey in time. The sun is behind him. After twelve double hours he sees light. He advances towards the brilliance and finds himself in a stone paradise: stone trees bearing leaves and fruit of precious stones.

Catching his breath, Gilgamesh starts to walk around in this beautiful garden. But his presence is not unnoticed.

Tablet X

Siduri is a barmaid who lives at the seashore. Her potstands and her brewing vats are made of gold and she covers herself in veils. She spots Gilgamesh

from afar. His tattered appearance arouses her suspicions and she thinks to herself that he may be a robber or a murderer. And she bolts her door.

However, having come this far, Gilgamesh refuses to take no for an answer. He threatens to break her lock and her door if she does not open up. He is quite capable of doing so. Siduri obliges, but nevertheless remains cautious: if he was really the one who slay Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven, why does he look so bruised and battered?

Gilgamesh gives a very long explanation: the reason for his haggard appearance is the death of his beloved friend with whom he performed several other heroic deeds. And before Siduri has time to respond, he asks her the way to Uta-napishtim. If this fails, he is destined to roam the steppe for the rest of his life. But Siduri warns him: no one but Shamash has crossed the ocean for it is blocked by the Waters of Death. However, if Gilgamesh is really eager, he can find Urshanabi the boatman of Uta-napishtim in the midst of the forest, picking *urnu*. And most important, he has the Stone Things with him.

On hearing this, Gilgamesh takes hold of his axe and his sword and tries to overcome the unsuspecting Urshanabi with his force. He seizes the boatman, breaks the Stone Things and casts them into the sea. However, Urshanabi appears only mildly surprised, not in the least frightened, and asks Gilgamesh exactly the same question as Siduri did. And Gilgamesh gives him the same lengthy reply that he had given the barmaid: the death of Enkidu is the reason for this whole effort.

However, it appears that Gilgamesh has destroyed his last chance of crossing the Waters of Death with his own hands: without the Stone Things it is impossible to do so. Consequently Urshanabi instructs him to take his axe, to go down to the woods and to cut a number of wooden punting poles in the

place of the Stone Things: at least, these may help. Gilgamesh obliges immediately and he and Urshanabi get into the boat.

The journey that normally takes a month and a half they complete in three days. On reaching the Waters of Death, Urshanabi warns Gilgamesh that his hands are not to touch the water, its very drops are lethal. He may only use the wooden punting poles that he had cut.

Just like Siduri, Uta-napishtim spots Gilgamesh from afar and wonders by himself why the Stone Things of the boat is broken. He comes to the conclusion that the person who is approaching must be a stranger. Very interesting would be the recording of the encounter between Gilgamesh and Uta-napishtim, but these lines are completely lost in the text. However, Gilgamesh's long explanation about his dear friend's demise is repeated. Then he carries on to tell Uta-napishtim about his decision to see him in his distant abode, about his toils and tribulations thus far. At last he expresses the sincere wish that his depression may come to an end.

Uta-napishtim answers Gilgamesh in a very long monologue. He compares Gilgamesh to a fool who is unable to distinguish between nonsense and sound advice. The hard fact is that the gods had destined humans for death from the moment they created them. Gilgamesh is only exhausting his mind and his body by resisting this. Life goes on in all its spheres, death approaches silently and strikes suddenly, just like the great gods had decided. The time of death is known by the gods only, not by humans.

Tablet XI

Gilgamesh refuses to accept Uta-napishtim's reply. After all, on first sight Uta-napishtim does not really look any different from other human beings: how come that he had managed to be granted eternal life by the great gods?

Utanapishtim decides to disclose a secret to Gilgamesh: the secret of the Deluge. Long time ago the great gods decided to bring about a flood that would wipe out all life from earth. However, Ea split on them. He whispered into a reed hut where the man of Surripak, son of Ubara-tutu happened to be, instructing him to break down his house and load all his possessions into a ship. Uta-napishtim was quite happy to do so, but he saw an obstacle in his way: what was he to say with regard to the inquiries of the town folk into his strange behaviour? No problem, said Ea, his loyal servant could explain that Enlil was angry with him, so he would rather go down to the abyss to stay with his lord Ea. However, the people of Surripak could be certain that fowl, fish and food would shower them. More than plenty.

Consequently Uta-napishtim built a large ship that was as long as she was broad, just like Ea instructed him. He loaded his possessions, his family and kinsmen, some craftsmen and some animals. To Puzur-Enlil the boatman who sealed the boat, he gave his palace with all its goods.

Soon after, at the crack of dawn the terrible storm broke, wiping out everything in its way. So appalling was its destruction that even the great gods became terrified of what they had done. They rushed up back to the heavens, cowering like dogs before the entrance. First they wailed and they cried, later on they became dumbstruck, desperately clinging onto one another.

The storm lasted for six days and seven nights. On the seventh day a quietness came. Uta-napishtim opened the porthole of his ship. On seeing the absolute devastation, he broke down and cried. Eventually his ship came to rest on Mount Nimus. For seven days the ship remained there. On the seventh day Uta-napishtim released a dove, but it returned because it could find no resting place. Then he released a swallow, but the same thing happened. At last Uta-napishtim let out a crow. The bird circled and flew away, because it realised that dry land was not far away.

On setting his feet onto firm earth, Uta-napishtim brought an offering in the direction of the four winds. The gods, now famished through lack of human offerings for such a long time, smelled the sweet aroma coming from Uta-napishtim and like flies they swarmed around him and his offering. Bēlet-ilī took a vow never to forget what has happened. However, Enlil was forbidden to come to the gathering because he was the one who had brought about the Deluge. But of course Enlil did not stay away, and appeared very angry indeed because some life seemed to have escaped the destruction. Nintur blamed Ea for this, but Ea pleaded innocent. He insisted that it was Enlil who originated the flood, at the same time diplomatically suggesting that a better way to diminish human population would be by means of wild animals, famine or pest. After all, he did not disclose the secret of the gods: Atrahasis had a dream in which he saw it all.

And Enlil was impressed. On hearing these words he went into the ship, he took Uta-napishtim and his wife by the hand and declared them immortal, just like the gods. Then they were taken away to live forever at the mouth of the river. But, at the end of this long story Uta-napishtim reminds Gilgamesh: his situation was unique, Gilgamesh's case is quite different. There is not going to be another Deluge.

However, Gilgamesh does have a slight chance of obtaining life eternal. If he manages to resist sleep for six days and seven nights, he will live forever. Eagerly Gilgamesh accepts this challenge. However, as soon as he squats down on his hunches, sleep blows over him like a mist. Uta-napishtim's wife feels sorry for the poor bloke and urges her husband to touch Gilgamesh in order to wake him up. But Uta-napishtim, having saved mankind from extinction also knows its deceitful nature. He orders his wife to prepare food for Gilgamesh, to put it down at his head and to mark off the days that he sleeps on the wall. Gilgamesh seems to sleep through it all. He wakes up, only to find the food at his head in stages of progressing decay. And he must

face the music: he is going to die. Desperately he asks Uta-napishtim if there is no other way out, but Uta-napishtim has had enough of the intruder.

Uta-napishtim informs his boatsman Urshanabi that he is also no longer welcome. He instructs him to wash Gilgamesh, to clad him in clean garments and to take him back to where he came from. Urshanabi obliges and he and Gilgamesh embark the ship. As they are about to sail, Uta-napishtim's wife intercedes for Gilgamesh once again, reminding her husband that their visitor has come a long and weary way. At least he deserves a parting gift. And Uta-napishtim decides to disclose yet another secret to Gilgamesh: at the bottom of the abyss grows a thorny plant. This plant will prick Gilgamesh's hands, but this plant also contains rejuvenating powers. Although everlasting life is not guaranteed, old age and death may be postponed somewhat.

Gilgamesh ties heavy stones onto his feet and sinks down to the bottom of the abyss. Almost drowning he manages to retrieve the precious shrub. With bleeding hands he rises to the surface. However, he is skeptical: Uta-napishtim appears to have many tricks up his sleeve. He tells Urshanabi that he will take it back to Uruk and first test it on the old people of the city to see if it really works. Only then will he dare to use it.

After twenty double hours they stop to eat. After thirty double hours they pitch camp for the night. Gilgamesh goes down to bathe in a pool of clear water. His precious gift he places rather carelessly on the edge of the pool. A snake smells it, silently creeps up. Gilgamesh is just in time to see the creature sailing away, discarding its old skin and emerging young and new. The plant did work after all – but for the wrong customer.

Gilgamesh breaks down and cries. He bemoans his fate to Urshanabi. He is tired, he has exhausted himself only for the benefit of the lion of the earth. All that remains is for him to return to where he came from.

So, Gilgamesh and Urshanabi return to Uruk. But strangely enough, on their return Gilgamesh does not seem downcast and deflated. In fact, he seems almost proud. He instructs the boatsman to go up onto the walls of Uruk, and he echoes the words of the narrator in the very beginning of the epic: do inspect closely the brickwork and its foundations, have a good look at the immediate surroundings, the city, the orchards and quarries, and the house of Ishtar.

Tablet XII

Gilgamesh has lost his toy – a ball that fell down to the Netherworld. His servant Enkidu responds to his lord's wailing and offers to go down and fetch it. Gilgamesh gives him several instructions on what he must not do in order to return unharmed: not dress himself in a clean garment, not anoint himself with sweet oil, not hurl or throw a stick, not carry a staff, not wear sandals, not make a noise and many more. But Enkidu ignores these instructions and the Netherworld seizes him.

The king, the son of Ninsun weeps bitterly for his servant Enkidu. He goes first to Enlil and then to Ea with his sorrow, but none of the two gods responds to his cries. Eventually he turns to Shamash who then brings up the shade of Enkidu from the Netherworld. Gilgamesh and Enkidu hug and kiss each other, overcome by the moment of reunion. Then Gilgamesh goes ahead and asks Enkidu many questions about the conditions in the Netherworld. It appears that those who have descendants that remember them are the happiest: many soothing offerings are brought to them. Those who died in honour on the battlefield are equally well cared for. Those who have no provider of funerary offerings really have a raw deal, they exist on the leftovers that are thrown away.

The tablet ends rather abruptly.

Remarks

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a strange and moving story. It recalls remote times, remote places and remote people who are not really fully human. It vibrates with a universal fear for death, no matter how religious or skeptical one may be. There is no hero, only an anti-hero. He starts off as a rogue and ends as a failure. The manner in which he eventually recuperates remains an open-ended question.

From the exposition above it should be clear that the last tablet, Tablet XII seems out of place. Most scholars agree that this tablet poses a problem to the flow of the narrative. They also agree that the narrative should end at the end of Tablet XI, with the return of Gilgamesh and Urshanabi to Uruk. Tablet XII, its addition and its purposes will be discussed in a following chapter.

The second part of this thesis considers only Tablets I – XI as the *Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*. The reason should be clear: Tablets 1 – XI is a coherent *narrative* with events that have bearing on one another. Furthermore, the *narrative* begins and ends at the same place: on the walls of Uruk, thereby framing the events with a neat *inclusio*.

The following chapter is looking at the *story behind the story* – the *sources* of the *Epic*. Where did it all start? Where did Gilgamesh come from, and what did his world look like? Thus, the next chapter pertains to the historical, cultural and ideological background of the *Epic*.