

The epic of gilgamesh

Literature



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How does the Epic of Gilgamesh reflect certain ideals about kingship in Mesopotamian society?

The Epic of Gilgamesh contains a number of ideas about kingship in ancient Mesopotamian society. Through the conduct of Gilgamesh, kingship is portrayed as the only form of government and that it originated from the gods. Kingship was an ordained and elevated social position given to humanity for their prosperity and the development of great cities such as Uruk. Kings were supposed to play a central role in the development of the society through their military leadership, performance of priestly functions, acting as lawgivers and building the city (Dalley 49).

Concerning the relationship between the gods and kings, the Epic of Gilgamesh notes the importance of kings forming closer ties with the gods. The ideal king is the one who rules by the help of the gods, which means he must always consult them for their actions. The close ties between the gods and the king is exhibited by Gilgamesh's heritage where it is noted that his mother was the wife of Lugalbanda, the supreme god of the empire.

Therefore, the nature of Gilgamesh as the king composed of both divine and human nature. Whilst he was made of flesh and blood, his unity with the gods was established in his spiritual, his psyche or soul making him an entity composed of divine essence and matter. This is true because Ashur was the heavenly father of the king with Gilgamesh being Lugalbanda's son in flesh. The king is able to call upon this direct relationship with the gods during the time of need as seen from Gilgamesh's prayer to his deified father to ensure his expedition to the Cedar Forest in a success. The king is respectful to his gods as he kneels down when praying for the success of his mission and safe return to the city (The Yale Tablet, Y 216). Kings are not expected to be

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perfect and must therefore be supported even when their actions might expose the people to the wrath of the gods.

2) How do different episodes and changes in scenery in the epic serve as critiques of kingship?

There are number of episodes and changes in scenery that seek to indicate the king's excesses in performing his duties. Firstly, the people's critique of kingship is evident when the people go to petition the goddess to intervene and change their king; a number of his shortcomings are noted. The king is blamed for being harsh on other young men with the petitioners noting, "The young men of Uruk he harasses without warrant/Gilgamesh lets no son go free to his father" (Tablet I, 167, 168). Young women have also faced the wrath of the king as he takes any girl he finds including other people's brides. The petitioners complain:

[Though powerful, pre-eminent,] expert [and mighty,]

[Gilgamesh] lets [no] girl go free to [her bridegroom.]

The warriors daughter, the young mans bride,

to their complaint the goddesses paid heed.

(Tablet I, 175-177)

These characteristics of the king makes people to consider his rule tyrannical therefore wishing the goddess to intervene by sending someone who will regulate the excesses of the king.

Most of the decisions made by the king are also against the advice of those close to him as seen in Gilgamesh's decision not to head to advice from the elders and his friend Enkidu. When Enkidu learns of Gilgamesh's decision to go into the forest, he warns him not to do so based on his knowledge of Humbaba the guardian of the forest. Enkidu tries to convince the king

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against the idea claiming, “ That is a journey [which must not be made,]/ [that is a man who must not be looked on.]” (Tablet II, 218, 219). The elders in the assembly of Uruk are also against the idea and appeal to the king to reconsider his decision.

Works cited:

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