

Role of god in the epic of gilgamesh

[History](#)



Since the creation of man and woman, humankind has sought to define the roles of society members and articulate the reason for mankind's existence on Earth. The ancient texts of The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Genesis chapter of the Old Testament discuss the duties and contributions of gods, men, and women, as well as the origins of knowledge and civilization. Through the stories' similarities and connections in plot and character interactions, gods are anthropomorphic and humans are god-like, and women are the bearers of knowledge, yet have a complex role relationship with men.

In both literary texts, the gods' interference with the lives of men causes the difficulties that mankind must contend with. These gods are not perfect; instead, these anthropomorphic gods are fallible, and human men are considered god-like. This is literally the case with Gilgamesh, who is the "suckling of the august Wild Cow, the goddess Ninsun," (Gilgamesh, I. 36). However, not only is Gilgamesh the son of a goddess, not merely a demigod, but "from the day he was born, two-thirds of him [was] god and one third human," (Gilgamesh, I. 47-48). Gilgamesh is both god and human, exhibiting the idea that the qualities of gods and humans overlap. This connection continues in the Old Testament, where "God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness,'" (Genesis 1. 26). God not only speaks as humans do (or vice versa), but he consciously decides to make humankind look like him. God is also described performing other human activities, such as when "They heard the sound of the Lord God walking in the garden," (Genesis 3. 8). These shared characteristics blur the demarcation between the characteristics of man and god. The intrusions of

gods are human-like as well. " It was the Lady of the Gods drew the form of his figure, while his build was perfected by the divine Nudimmud;" because it was the gods who created Gilgamesh as a tyrant, they must help the people of Uruk deal with him (Gilgamesh, I. 49-50). In Eden, God's creation of a forbidden tree is the creation of a struggle between obeying God and following one's desires. When " the Lord God commanded the man, ' You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; but the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat," God created a conflict; a conflict with an ending that his omnipotence must have foreseen (Genesis 2. 16-17).

Because God must have known the outcome of his test for man and woman, he arguably created the downfall of man. This Old Testament God also sums the commonalities between man and God when he says, "' See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil; and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever'" (Genesis 4. 22). Although mankind cannot share in the immortality of the gods, the nature of man and gods overlap. However, mankind has obtained knowledge from the gods.

In both accounts of the creation of man, women are the bearers of knowledge, and knowledge has a negative connotation. After Enkidu and Shamhat had known each other, " Enkidu had defiled his body so pure...but now he had reason, and wide understanding," (Gilgamesh, I. 199-202). Enkidu's interaction with Shamhat allows him to gain knowledge. Thus, Shamhat is the civilizing factor. Enkidu's education continues when " He came back and sat at the feet of the harlot, watching the harlot, observing her features, Then to the harlot's words he listened intently, [as Shamhat]

talked to him, to Enkidu,” (Gilgamesh, I. 203-206). Shamhat clearly educated Enkidu, especially when she describes Enkidu “[as yet so] ignorant of life, I will show you Gilgamesh,” (Gilgamesh, I. 233-234). This teaching interaction continues when “ Her words he heard, her speech found favor: the counsel of a woman struck home in his heart...By the hand she took him, like a god [she led him,]” (Gilgamesh, II. P 66-II 36). Shamhat is undoubtedly teaching Enkidu as though he were a child; she even teaches him to ““ Eat the bread, Enkidu, essential to life, drink the ale, the lot of the land!”” (Gilgamesh, II. P94-P97). The idea that women are the bringers of knowledge is evident in the Genesis story of the Fall as well. Although warned not to eat from the forbidden tree, “ when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened,” (Genesis 3. 6-7). The woman is the one who picks the fruit from the tree, and thus is the initiator of knowledge. She also shares the fruit and knowledge with the man, just as Shamhat taught Enkidu to eat and shared her knowledge. Just as Enkidu listened to Shamhat, the man has “ listened to the voice of [his] wife,” (Genesis 4. 17). This indicates negative connotation of knowledge, because it is the act of eating the fruit and gaining moral knowledge that causes God to curse man, ““ cursed is the ground because of you; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life...until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return,”” (Genesis 4. 17-19). When Enkidu saw Shamhat “ and [approached] her, his herd [spurned] him, [though he grew up amongst it,” (Gilgamesh, I. 142-145). Since Shamhat holds knowledge, when Enkidu knows her, he

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becomes knowledgeable as well, causing the wild animals to spurn him. This implies that knowledge is harmful, as it causes animals to shy away because it goes against their nature. These interactions between Shamhat and Enkidu and the woman and man exhibit the theme that women are the holders of knowledge, which has a negative meaning because this information goes against nature and what God has ordained.

Because women are blamed for the downfall of man and the introduction of knowledge, they are made partly subordinate to men. However, men are also culpable in the acquisition of knowledge. Although women may be the cause of immediate action, men are the root instigators. For example, in the creation of Enkidu, " They summoned Aruru, the great one: ' You, Aruru, created [mankind:] now fashion what Anu has thought of!" (Gilgamesh, I. 94-96). Aruru is subtly blamed for the creation of a god-like man, although she now is following the orders of Anu. In the taming of Enkidu, Shamhat did not come of her own accord. The hunter, the father of the hunter, and Gilgamesh all send Shamhat. The father orders his son to "[Go, my son, and] fetch [Shamhat the harlot,] [her allure is a match] for even the almighty!" (Gilgamesh, I. 140-141). Gilgamesh orders, "' Go, hunter, take with you Shamhat the harlot!" (Gilgamesh, I. 162). The complicated relationship between the equality and subordination between men and women is also expressed. Although women do hold knowledge, they are forced to obey men in some aspects. In Genesis, God decides to " make him a helper as his partner," (Genesis 2. 18). This phrase concisely captures the juxtaposing position of women - they are described as the helpers of men, indicating subordination, but are described as partners as well, indicating equality. An

interesting note concerning “ the rib that the Lord God had taken from the man he made into a woman,” is that the woman was made from the man’s rib, his side, denoting equality, whereas the creation of woman from his head would denote domination, and the creation of woman from his foot would denote subjugation (Genesis, 2. 22). The equality between man and woman is further emphasized when “ a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh,” because they become the same being (Genesis 2. 24). However, this is contradicted when women are cursed with “ desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you,” (Genesis 3. 16). Therefore, because women are the primary cause of knowledge, they are made subordinate to men; however, because men also have a culpable role in the attainment of knowledge, women also serve as equals.

In both stories, gods orchestrate the troubles men encounter. However, the differences between gods and humans are unclear because of the numerous shared qualities, one of which is knowledge. Knowledge is representative of morality and civilization. However, knowledge has a negative connotation because of its association with desire – civilization is the desire of excess in necessities, Shamhat shares her knowledge with Enkidu due to his desire of her, and the woman obtains knowledge because of her desire for the forbidden fruit. Because of women’s connection to knowledge through desire, the relationship between men and women fluctuates between equality and subordination. Although both literary texts share many similarities, the truth in each will vary between each human being. I personally do not believe that knowledge is inherently evil, nor that women

are to blame. I believe that both men and women played a role in the obtaining of knowledge, making them equals. I also believe that knowledge creates a struggle within every human being; however, it also acts as a guide for the choices humanity must make in life.