

Enkidu's deathbed realization



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The heartbreaking scenes in the seventh tablet of The Epic of Gilgamesh describe Enkidu's deathbed realization that his friendship with Gilgamesh was a one-sided affair. In this scene, Enkidu lies dying and feeling abandoned by Gilgamesh. In his death throes, "Enkidu's innards were churning / lying there so alone" (Kovacs 64). Just before he dies, Enkidu cries out "my friend hates me...my friend who I saved in battle has now abandoned me" (Kovacs 66). This agonizing deathbed realization of the limitations of their friendship calls for a reevaluation of the nature of the friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. At the outset, Enkidu and Gilgamesh have such inconsistent roles that Enkidu's deathbed realization seems it should have been obvious. As the story opens, Gilgamesh is described as taking advantage of his subjects. Although the nature of his acts is not entirely clear, we are left with the impression of Gilgamesh as undisciplined and out of control. Guided only by his "stormy heart" and great physical strength, Gilgamesh is not a good ruler and needs to be brought into line. There is no indication in the text that Gilgamesh is seeking a relationship with anyone, let alone a friend. Enkidu was created by Aruru to bring Gilgamesh into line. As ordained by Anu, Enkidu's role is not to satisfy Gilgamesh's need for friendship, but rather to bring Gilgamesh under control. Enkidu's needs are in sharp contrast to Gilgamesh. Unlike Gilgamesh, Enkidu is looking for a good friend. After his assignation with Shamash, Enkidu realizes that he has lost his animal friends and, "becoming aware of himself, he sought a friend" (Kovacs 10). Although it initially appears that his relationship with Shamash may satisfy this need, Shamash tells him to snap out of it, saying, "It is your wrong thoughts that must change," and steers him to meeting Gilgamesh in a spirit of friendship. While

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forces beyond the control of either Enkidu or Gilgamesh engineer this friendship, it appears that while Enkidu truly seeks a meeting of the heart, Gilgamesh merely needs someone to tone down his aggressive impulses. This inconsistency between the roles of Enkidu and Gilgamesh is repeated in other parts of the text. For example, while Gilgamesh's enthusiasm to journey and destroy the great Cedar Forest is particularly palpable (Kovacs 20-21), Enkidu is less sanguine. Worriedly, he appeals to the Elders, requesting them to "say to him [Gilgamesh] that he must not go to the Cedar Forest - the journey is not to be made" (Kovacs 20). Here, Enkidu is looking after his friend, while Gilgamesh is primarily after a new adventure. The reasons for this disparity are made clear in the next tablet. While Gilgamesh does not relent, Enkidu's role in this journey is clarified in the next table. The Elders advise Gilgamesh not to rely upon his "vast strength" but instead upon Enkidu. They urge him to "let Enkidu go ahead of you... Enkidu will protect the friend, will keep the comrade safe". According to the Elders, Enkidu's role is protecting Gilgamesh. This is consistent with the role initially assigned to Enkidu by the gods at the outset. Curiously, Gilgamesh has no such responsibility towards Enkidu. Despite Enkidu's entreaty, "My Friend, turn back!" (Kovacs 28), Gilgamesh persists in undertaking the perilous journey because the Elders have assured him that "Enkidu will protect the friend" (Kovacs 28). Gilgamesh does appear to have a brief moment in which considers acting on behalf of Enkidu, but this moment is fleeting. Just before he is slain, Humbaba prophesizes Enkido's early death, saying "he will not live the longer of the two" (Kovacs 28). Apparently, this gives Gilgamesh pause because Enkidu angrily asserts that "my friend, I have been talking to you but you have not been listening to me. You have

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been listening to the curse of Humbaba!" Although the meaning is not entirely clear, it appears that Enkidu does not consider this threat a meaningful one, whereas Gilgamesh, who is charged with having superior knowledge, is fully aware of the danger. Despite this awareness, Gilgamesh quickly overcomes his reluctance to sacrifice Enkidu. The foregoing evidence forces the reader to conclude that despite the many claims of friendship between Enkidu and Gilgamesh which pepper the text, this is not a friendship as understood in modern times. Enkidu's repeated and endearing acts of loyalty and friendship are never reciprocated in a meaningful way during his lifetime. This disparity in roles may be attributed to the parties having been placed on an uneven footing by the gods at the outset. Alternatively, it may reflect a relationship between one who was two-thirds god and one who was wholly mortal. Regardless of the reason, however, it is perplexing that true friendship remains beyond the reach of one described as "awesome to perfection" (Kovacs 4). Works Cited Kovacs, Maureen Gallery, trans. The Epic of Gilgamesh. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989