

Analysis of the epic of gilgamesh

Literature



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The epic of Gilgamesh is the earliest primary document discovered in human history dating back to approximately 2,000 B. C. E. This document tells a story of an ancient King Gilgamesh, ruler of Sumer in 2,700 B. C. E. who is created gloriously by gods as one third man and two thirds god. In this epic, Gilgamesh begins his kingship as an audacious and immature ruler.

Exhausted from complaints, the gods send a wild man named Enkidu to become civilized and assist Gilgamesh to mature into a righteous leader.

However, Enkidu's death causes Gilgamesh to realize his fear of immortality and search for an escape from death. On his journey, Gilgamesh learns that the gods will not grant his wish and that he must accept his destiny (In Search of Eternal Life, 1). . By analyzing this story, one is able to deduce the ways it has entertained, educated, and enlightened the Mesopotamian culture in ancient times. It provides examples of ideal leadership, proper lifestyles, and gender roles.

The epic insinuates ancient Mesopotamian's perspective of an ideal kingship by illustrating malapropos behaviors of the Sumerian ruler. The epic reflects on the ruler's past explaining Gilgamesh disappoints his gods and the Sumerian city with his selfish behaviors such as sleeping with many women, including virgins (The Epic of Gilgamesh, 2). Consequently, his careless actions cause him to lose the trust and respect of his observers. This demonstrates that Mesopotamian society viewed these behaviors as inappropriate qualities for a honorable leader.

From this, we can conclude that Mesopotamians believed a successful leader needs to be able to create trustworthy relationships between others and

acquire the ability to demonstrate respect towards those who are in higher and lower political power than he or she. Further, the epic opens by depicting what a noble and divine leader Gilgamesh was. For instance, the author writes “ He went on a long journey... he engraved on a stone the whole story” (The Epic of Gilgamesh, 1).

This illustrates that he was a wise leader in part because he was literate. The author is praising Gilgamesh’s leadership by communicating his intellectual capabilities deserve respect. This, shows that ancient Mesopotamians believed that part of a great ruler’s value was revealed in their advanced intellectual capacities. The epic reveals that ancient Mesopotamia understood that the basis of a monarch’s legitimacy relied on the respect he carried for not only the beings whom he rules and those who rule over him, but also his knowledge.

The epic gives insight to the ways in which ancient Mesopotamians valued life. This becomes most obvious when Enkidu reveals to Gilgamesh his nightmare of the dark and enslaving afterlife as he is dying (The Epic of Gilgamesh, 2). This leaves Gilgamesh with extreme terror of death which provokes his desperate attempts to escape it. Giving death fearful and dark characteristics communicates that the afterlife is a harrowing experience and life is the individual’s harmonious experience.

This serves to establish that ancient Mesopotamians sensed that life was something to be cherished and conceived of in a positive light. In addition, Mesopotamian life views are also illustrated when Gilgamesh must accept that he will not receive his requests for immortality from the gods (The Epic

of Gilgamesh, 2). This suggests Mesopotamian society believed wise men should be grateful for their destiny and that he or she should not reach beyond what they are given.

In doing so, this would allow an individual to have immense respect for their limited time on earth which encourages them to live properly and happily. We can further deduce the perspective Mesopotamians had to living properly. For instance, the tavern keeper advises Gilgamesh that because his destiny does not include immortality he should be merry, embracing his wife and cherishing his child (The Epic of Gilgamesh, 2). This portrays that Mesopotamians believed the life of a joyous man should involve respectful, trust worthy bonds including love and commitment to a single wife.

The tavern woman's advice displays the ancient Mesopotamian society agreed that one should not live sleeping with multiple women, as Gilgamesh once did, but promoted a commitment toward one woman, a life sharing partner. Therefore, ancient mesopotamian society felt that life should be a harmonious experience filled with pleasant emotions and genuine relationships. Cultural artifacts, such as the primary document The Epic of Gilgamesh serve to entertain, educate, and enlighten. This epic can suggest a variety of insight to ancient Mesopotamian civilizations.

Primarily, in ancient times this story could have undoubtedly served as a form on entertainment as an epic tale but also as a form of male fantasy. For instance, the wild man Enkidu lays with a harlot for seven days in order to become a more civilized man (Rielly, 52). This scene is the product of a male fantasy which allows any male to escape from reality and into the epic.

In an educative sense, however, this scene can also serve to teach civilians in ancient times what an acceptable role of a woman was.

This message revealed that a woman's sexuality was an art that every woman should possess as a part of her femininity and that women should not be ashamed of it. Similarly, it also serves to educate the men of ancient times to recognize that a man is not a well rounded man until he is civilized, living by the laws and society of men. Moreover, after the seventh day of Enkidu and the harlot's experience he allows her to bring him home to a civilized society in order to feed and clothe him (Rielly, 53).

This signifies their new relationship and implies that she has taught him to have feelings beyond lust, that of which any animal can acquire. This is exceptionally important when considering the transitional phase from nomadic to urban lifestyles. This theme then persuades the ancient civilization to disregard behaving as free living animals, but to mature and excel as an individual who is civilized. The attachment they express for one another displays his love for her, emotions that a domesticated man can possess.

In addition, this epic can also serve as a product of historical and environmental realities. The end of this epic involves Gilgamesh learning of angry Mesopotamian gods destroying humankind by means of a massive flood (The Epic of Gilgamesh, 3). Authors such as Paul Adams believe that the story of the flood is based on the exaggeration of a real flood issues that occurred in parts of the Middle East (55). From this, we can conclude that

this epic enforced various teachings to the ancient Mesopotamian cultures that continue to be analyzed to this day.