

## The *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Old Testament: Parallels beyond the Deluge<sup>1</sup>

Gerda de Villiers (UP)

### ABSTRACT

*This article examines several parallels between the Gilgamesh Epic and the Old Testament. Due to the limited space for articles and due to familiarity with the material, comparisons between the Babylonian account of the Deluge and the Flood narrative in Genesis 6-9 are omitted. Instead, the focus is on less obvious parallels not necessarily stressing the resemblance between two narratives but rather illuminating a worldview that the Old Testament shares with the rest of the Ancient Near East.*

### A INTRODUCTION

Since the sack of Nineveh in 612 BCE by the Median-Babylonian alliance, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* lay buried beneath the rubble of the demolished libraries of king Ashurbanipal's royal palace for almost 2500 years (George 1999:xxii). After these many years, interest in archaeology, especially in Assyrian matters was growing in England and Europe towards the latter half of the nineteenth century (McCall 2001:10), mainly due to curiosity about the Bible and whether all of it was true. In 1872 an Englishman, George Smith, while working in the British Museum, came across the eleventh tablet of the *Gilgamesh Epic*, incidentally the best preserved tablet of the lot and also the one that contains the Babylonian Flood narrative. When Smith realised what he was reading and what the implications were, he was so overcome by excitement that he rushed about the room and started to undress himself, to the amazement of those present (George 1999:xxiii; McCall 2001:14).

The parallels between the Babylonian recount of the Deluge and Genesis 6-8 are indeed striking, and emphasise that the origins and development of the Bible lie in the soil of the world of the Ancient Near East. An edition by Alexander Heidel, first published in 1946 bears the title *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, however, the focus is still very much on the similarities between the two Flood narratives. Unfortunately, for a very long time the eleventh tablet obscured the rest of the *Gilgamesh Epic* to such an extent that the two are often confused with each other, or regarded as synonymous.

---

<sup>1</sup> References to the *Gilgamesh Epic* concern the *Standard Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* as transliterated into Akkadian by Simo Parpola 1997, unless otherwise indicated.

However, since Heidel's first publication a myriad of tablets – or rather, fragments of tablets of the *Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* were uncovered, mainly at Kuyunjik (Nineveh) (see George 2003 Vol II). Almost like a giant jig-saw puzzle this beautiful, compelling story unfolded: the story of one man torn apart by grief over the loss of his best friend, his obsessive fear for death and his futile search for everlasting life. This is a story about finding the meaning of life within life itself. No god or faith helps Gilgamesh through his troubles, he has to work out for himself what life is all about. The *Gilgamesh Epic* is thus a very 'human' story, in the words of Hansen (2001:24) even being something of a 'hype' in the twenty-first century.

This article aims at two points: to illuminate that the Old Testament and the *Gilgamesh Epic* have more in common than the recount of the Deluge and to open up some Ancient Near Eastern perspectives on the world and life that also permeate the Bible. Furthermore, the parallels between the two Flood narratives will not be discussed in this article.

## **B CREATION**

The *Gilgamesh Epic* relates mostly (but not exclusively) to the biblical book of Genesis. This is rather surprising if one takes into account that Old Testament scholars date the final shape of Genesis rather late – post exilic at the earliest (see Scheffler 2000:162, 163), and the *Gilgamesh Epic*, by the mouth of *Sin-leqi-unninni* somewhere between 1300-1100 BCE (George 2003:28-33; George 1999:xxiv-xxv; Schrott 2001:16-17; Tigay 1982:12). However, the *Gilgamesh Epic* is not the Babylonian creation epic – the *Enuma Elish* is the epic that deals with the creation of heaven, earth, humankind and how Marduk became head of the Babylonian pantheon. Yet the *Gilgamesh Epic* conveys some concepts of creation that were common in the Ancient Near East, concepts that the Bible shares to a greater or lesser degree.

In the *Gilgamesh Epic* the women of Uruk request the creator goddess Aruru to create someone who is just as big and strong as Gilgamesh to curb the unbridled energy of this youthful king of the city. Consequently Aruru washes her hands, pinches off some clay, casts it onto the steppe and Enkidu comes into being (I:84-86). Several Ancient Near Eastern myths attest to Aruru who creates humankind from the clay of the earth (see Holloway 1991:331; Tigay 1982:193-197), furthermore, clay was a significant image in this world (Damrosch 1987: 112). Not only was clay related to the creation of humankind, but also to its death. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh laments repetitively that his friend has turned into *clay* (X:72, 144, 245). When Uta-napishtim looks outside from his ship after the waters of the Deluge have withdrawn, he sees that all of humanity had turned to *clay* (XI:134).

In *Genesis* God creates the biblical Adam from dust (Gn 2:7). And after his serious blunder of listening to his wife who listened to the snake, God tells him:

“*In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you shall return*” (Gn 3:19).

On first sight there are differences: Adam is created from dust and Enkidu from clay. And the rather indifferent Aruru is a far cry from the loving touch of YHWH Elohim in Genesis 2. Nevertheless there is a striking similarity: both these accounts of creation share the concept that humankind is created from a substance of the earth – whether wet or dry – and to this substance he or she will return at the end of his/her life. From which humans were taken is to which they eventually shall return.

### **C PARADISE LOST, PARADISE RE-INVENTED**

The Garden of Eden is the place where Adam and Eve exist in harmony with each other, with nature and with God. Likewise the initial existence of Enkidu is sketched in peaceful pastoral language: he eats only grass and his friends are the gazelles and the wild animals at the drinking-hole (I:93-95). These back-to-nature scenes are often idealised in modern thinking: nature conservation is paramount in most campaigns to save Planet Earth. However, the ancient worldview was exactly the opposite: everything revolved around conquering nature and promoting civilisation (Westenholz & Westenholz 2003:443; Damrosch 1987:94). Civilisation meant an ordered world, artificial irrigation, agriculture (Westerman 1984:58), in other words, humankind conquering nature. In fact, the *Gilgamesh Epic* portrays “nature” and “civilisation” as direct opposites to each other like the “steppe” to “Uruk” (Westenholz & Westenholz 2003:443; Damrosch 1987:94) – and at that stage like Enkidu the savage to Gilgamesh the polished city bloke. Enkidu’s lifestyle is frowned upon, considered to be inferior, consequently it becomes necessary to civilise the brute and to teach him manners. This task is executed by Shamhat, the prostitute: she introduces him to human nature by means of sex (I:171-186).

The nature-civilisation opposite is not so explicit in die Genesis 2-3 narrative. What is significant though, is the role of a woman. In both narratives a woman takes initiative to introduce a man to something he was previously unaware of, something that helps him cope with reality beyond naivety. Soon after this introduction the motifs of loss and gain, and of death become evident. Adam and Eve lose the privilege of living in the Garden of Eden in the company of God. Death becomes a reality. Out there they have to work hard to survive.

What helps the first humans to cope with life outside Paradise? Knowledge. God forbade Adam and Eve to eat from the *tree of knowledge from good and evil* (Gn 2:17), for then they will surely die. Yet it is from this very tree that they eat, from which they gain the knowledge that will help them survive until they die. Equipped with knowledge they toil the earth and start to build a culture – civilisation.

About Enkidu Damrosch (1987:95) states: *Enkidu's sexual knowledge has brought him godlike wisdom*. After his pleasure of having sex with Shamhat for six days and seven nights non-stop, he becomes fully human, civilised. Yet civilised life appears to be complex. Enkidu loses his old friends, the animals, they run away from him. He goes to Uruk and meets Gilgamesh the king, who becomes his best friend and comrade. Together they defeat monsters and gods. But for holding the honour of the gods in contempt, Enkidu dies an untimely and shameful death. This is the bitter price of civilisation (Westenholz & Westenholz 2000:444). Only equipped with the knowledge that he gained at the feet of the prostitute is Enkidu able to survive the challenges of civil life.

Thus, in both narratives the role of knowledge introduced by a woman to a man becomes evident: knowledge alters a state of existence, yet simultaneously also aids the result of this change.

## D THE SNAKE

With its introduction in Genesis 3 the snake immediately raises a number of obvious though unanswerable questions: is he really only a *creature that God made* (v 1)?; then why can he speak?; how come that he has superior knowledge – he even has insight into God's intimate plans!; is he really the Devil/Satan of Revelations 12:9, 20:2 and Romans 16:20 (see Emmrich 2001:10; also Kapelrud 1993:57)?

The ambivalent nature of snakes is reflected in his attribution עָרוֹם: either clever or cunning, or both. Snakes were well-known in the world of the Ancient Near East, several serpent species inhabited this dry hot desert-like region (see Pilch 2001:239-240). On the one hand they were feared for their deadly poison, on the other hand they were held in respect, even worshipped for their healing potential. Numbers 21:4-9 recounts the events of Moses raising the bronze serpent in the desert to heal the people that were bitten by poisonous snakes. In fact, 2 Kings 18:4 attests to a cult connected with that bronze serpent – *the children of Israel burned incense to...Nehustan*. Eventually this cult was destroyed by Hezekiah.

Genesis 3, commonly known as the chapter about the Fall of humankind, portrays the snake as a cunning creature who deceived the humans causing them to sin against God and consequently deprived them of the chance of living for ever. The *Gilgamesh Epic* devotes six lines to the role of the snake (XI: 295-301). A tired humiliated king returns to his city. With him he carries a consolation prize – a plant that has rejuvenating properties. Although this does not guarantee eternal life, it has the possibility of postponing old age and death somewhat. As Gilgamesh goes down to bathe in a pool, he leaves the precious plant rather carelessly on the side. A snake, enticed by its pleasant odours, silently creeps up and snatches the plant. Gilgamesh is just in time to see the creature casting off its old skin, sailing away young and new.

In this regard two matters are important. The Ancient Near East regarded snakes as divine powers, representative of the chthonic realm (Kapelrud 1993:56). Furthermore, according to ancient myth, gods and humans may never be the same: humans may never ever reach the same zenith as the gods. And the only way that this can be prevented, is if the gods themselves intervene (Kapelrud 1993:54) in a way over which humans have no control.

Thus, snakes live inside the earth, they are dangerous and unpredictable in what they do, and humans cannot prevent them. Snakes have abilities that humans do not have. Therefore, snakes are more than ordinary creatures. They deceive humans by means of their greater powers, powers that lie beyond human control, powers that prevent humans from becoming like gods.

Genesis 3:22 may be significant in this regard: *Then the Lord God said: "Behold, the man has become like one of Us, to know good and evil. And now, lest he put out his hand and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever..."*

Seen in this manner, the motif of the loss of eternal life is more important than sin in Genesis 3 (Kapelrud 1993:60). Hard work, pain, sorrow and so forth, are not simply the punishment for a sin that had been committed, rather these misfortunes are the logical consequences due to the loss of eternal life. Life everlasting was a particular quality, when this quality was lost, death and decay came into view: life on earth is difficult!

The previous section of this article illuminated the role of knowledge that was transmitted to help humans survive the challenges of life. In this regard the snake paradoxically both deceived and helped the couple: through his deception they lost the possibility of living for ever, through the knowledge they gained, they obtained the necessary skills to adapt to this loss.

The *Gilgamesh Epic* and the narrative of Genesis 3 both employ the character of the snake to outwit a human being in a way that he or she was unprepared for. The result is the loss of the possibility to live for ever.

## **E OTHER PARALLELS**

### **1 Qohelet**

As remarked earlier, the *Gilgamesh Epic* has the most in common with the book of Genesis in the Bible. However, there are a few more shared concepts. The most obvious example is probably the resemblance between the *Gilgamesh Epic* and the book Qohelet or Ecclesiastes in the Bible.

Ecclesiastes 9:7-9 displays striking similarities to the speech of Siduri, the barmaid (which is recorded in the *Old Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, but omitted in the *Standard* one - Abusch 1993:1 provides an OB transliteration as well as an English translation). Haggard and worn, a grief-stricken Gilgamesh, desperately

in search of life everlasting arrives at the seashore of the Waters of Death where Siduri lives. She tells him that only the gods live for ever, human beings all die, sooner or later. And she advises him to *fill his belly, to be merry day and night, to feast, to play, to wear clean garments, to wash his hair, bathe himself, to take notice of the little one who holds his hand, and to enjoy his wife.*

This almost literal resemblance between the two texts is remarkable, given the fact that the *Old Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic* probably dates back to the time of the reign of Hammurapi (Schrott 2001:14), or at least somewhere between 1700 – 1600 BCE (George 1999: Ix) and the book Ecclesiastes, is like Genesis dated rather late by Old Testament scholars - as late as the Hellenistic period (250 BCE) according to Spangenberg (2000:209-213 & 222). For some reason or another, the Standard Version chose to exclude this counsel (see George 2003:32; Damrosch 1987:92 for possible explanations). Consequently the broader picture comes into focus.

Royal counsel was a typical literary genre in the Ancient Near East: kings wished to instruct their successors on the conduct of a 'good' king, and to warn them against pitfalls for which they should be on the lookout. The *Gilgamesh Epic* most certainly had such a pedagogic purpose (George 1999:xxv), just like the biblical books of Proverbs and Qohelet. This type of wisdom is often conveyed by means of a narrative, usually in the form of an autobiography in the third person, a fictitious royal autobiography known in Akkadian as *narû* literature (Van der Toorn 2000:24). The *Gilgamesh Epic* reflects this trend much more than Qohelet, yet they seem to reach the same conclusion.

At the end of the *Epic* Gilgamesh finds himself exactly where he started: on the walls of Uruk. He looks back onto his not-so-successful life and comes to the conclusion: *make the best of the life that you have, whilst you are still alive.* Somehow, Qohelet, despite its rather negative outlook on reality, comes to exactly the same *carpe diem* conclusion: seize the day (Loader 1987:53).

Both Qohelet and the *Gilgamesh Epic* choose a particular literary genre: that of royal counsel. Qohelet conveys its wisdom primarily by means of short wisdom sayings; the *Gilgamesh Epic* does so by means of a narrative. Both realise that life is difficult, life is complex. Life is short, and full of unpleasant surprises. One's best intentions often backfire. Therefore, instead of moping about the past or hoping for a glorious future, one should make the best of the moment here and now – the present.

## **2 The mad king**

Ferguson (1994:326) points out five obvious parallels between the *Gilgamesh Epic* and the account of King Nebuchadnezzar's temporary derangement: (i) a king who boasts about his building achievements; (ii) the devastating consequences of maintaining an arrogant attitude towards gods or a God; (iii)

falling trees – or felling a particular tree; (iv) a guardian/watcher or watchers in the service of gods or a God; (v) the interpretation of dreams.

These five points are now very briefly illuminated. (i) King Nebuchadnezzar walks about his royal palace of Babylon, boasting about his building achievements (Dn 4:29-30). About 2000 years earlier king Gilgamesh of Uruk did exactly the same: he took Urshanabi the boatman to the ramparts of his city to show off his enterprising spirit (XI:315-318). (ii) Nebuchadnezzar boasts arrogantly about his mighty power and majesty without regards to Daniel's God, therefore he becomes temporarily insane. Gilgamesh and Enkidu prove their mighty strength by killing Humbaba, the guardian of the god Enlil's precious Cedar Forest, consequently the gods retaliate by taking Enkidu's life. (iii) Long dangerous journeys to far-off regions in order to fell trees, was important for a king's image in Ancient Mesopotamia. For Nebuchadnezzar the tables are turned – he is the tree to be felled. However, Gilgamesh and Enkidu do undertake a trip to the Cedar Forest to slay Humbaba. (iv) Watchers were important beings in the spiritual world of the Babylonians. Daniel 4:13, 17 and 23 refer to such 'watchers' – in the book Daniel these 'watchers' are angels in the service of God. Besides Humbaba the guardian of the Cedar Forest and servant to the god Enlil, the *Gilgamesh Epic* also refers to the Scorpion People who stand at the Twin Mountains to guard the entrance and the exit of the sun. (v) The case of *dreaming* is obvious: dreams that are dreamt and interpreted, either positively or negatively play a crucial role in both the Nebuchadnezzar narrative and the *Gilgamesh Epic*.

Ferguson's article (see Bibliography) argues that Nebuchadnezzar's insanity was fact, not fiction. (This point may well be debated.) The point of departure is that Nebuchadnezzar was probably well acquainted with the *Gilgamesh Epic*. Therefore Daniel implicitly refers to Enkidu when he tells the king what is going to happen to him. He (Ferguson 1994:326) states: *The king was warned that he would descend from the most exalted state of humanity to the lowest state of existence a Mesopotamian mind could conceive of. There would have been no plainer way to tell an educated Babylonian he would be humbled than to inform him that he was going to become like Enkidu.*

However, in my opinion the parallel lies not between Nebuchadnezzar and Enkidu, but between the two kings – Gilgamesh and Nebuchadnezzar, two proud kings who both came to a rather humiliating fall. After Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh becomes Enkidu reincarnated as it were. Indeed, Ferguson's reference to Enkidu's primitive existence as an awful humiliation is correct (see above), however, the two narratives of Gilgamesh and Nebuchadnezzar are parallel in the motif of two kings who somehow regress and become only temporarily insane – thereafter they seem to recuperate quite well.

### 3 Friendship

A last striking parallel between the *Gilgamesh Epic* and the Old Testament is the motif of a firm friendship between two men, cruelly interrupted by death. David laments the death of Jonathan and states that his love surpassed the love of women (2 Sam 1:26). Ninsun, goddess and mother of Gilgamesh interprets his strange dreams about heavy objects that fall from heaven and that he loves like a woman (I:239, 253,163,268). And after Enkidu's death, he covers the face of his friend *like a bride* (VIII:58).

Hardman (1993:2) considers the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu to be on the same level as the relationship between David and Jonathan. He prefers to use the term *homoaffectionism*, meaning *sex relationships which do not necessarily involve homosexual sex acts, but do involve strong emotional bonding, which may or may not include sexual conduct* (Hardman 1993:v). Such a relationship concerns two members of the same gender who are loyal to each other, who rely on mutual support and collaboration. Especially the latter was an important element with regards to civilisation, both for culture to progress and to wage war.

### F CONCLUDING REMARKS

What this article did not cover – also due to restrictions on the allotted space – is the similarity between the origins and development of the *Epic* and the Old Testament: from oral transmissions towards written material, texts that were shaped and reshaped over a long period of time until a final *textus receptus*. A further (hermeneutical) step – also not expounded in this article due to the reasons mentioned – would be to question whom the narratives were addressed to and what the burning questions in the community were, in other words, the audience and the socio-historical circumstances of the text come into focus.

The scope of this brief article was thus narrow, giving a bird's-eye view on the world common to the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East. Its focus was rather on those motifs and concepts that the Old Testament and the *Gilgamesh* share. These motives and concepts were well-known in the Ancient Near East and at the disposal of the authors of the time. Narratives were creatively woven around existing reflections on creation, life and death, nature and civilisation, knowledge, wisdom, kingly conduct, friendship and so forth. In the final instance it appears that a text – any text – is inseparably rooted in its context, permeated by the prevalent ideas of its time.

### BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Abusch, T 1993. 'Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial' in Cohen M E, Snell D C & Weidberg D B (eds.). *The Tablet and the Scroll. Near Eastern studies in Honor of William Hallo*, 1-14. Maryland: CDL Press,.

- Damrosch, D 1987. *Narrative Covenant. Transformation of Genre in the Growth of Biblical Literature*. San Francisco: Harper & Row.
- Emmrich, M 2001. 'The Temptation Narrative of Genesis 3:1-6: A Prelude to the Pentateuch and the History of Israel.' *The Evangelical Quarterly* 73(1), 3-20.
- Ferguson, P 1994. 'Nebuchadnezzar, Gilgamesh and the Babylonian Job.' *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37(3), 321-331.
- George, A R 2003. *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic. Introduction, Critical Edition and Cuneiform Texts, Volumes I & II*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- George, A R 1999. *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Great Britain: Barnes & Noble Books.
- Hardman, P D 1993. *Male Bonding from Gilgamesh to the Present*. San Francisco: Division, GLB Publishers.
- Hansen, W 2001. 'In het vuur gehard: Gilgamesj-epos na vijfduizend jaar nog steeds onverwoestbaar.' *De Volkskrant*, 16 November 2001.
- Heidel, A 1971. *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Holloway, S W 1991. 'What Ship Goes There: The Flood Narratives in the Gilgamesh Epic and Genesis Considered in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Temple ideology.' *ZAW* 103(3), 328-355.
- Kapelrud, A S 1993. 'You Shall Surely not Die,' in Lemaire A & Otzen B (eds.). *Histories and Traditions of Early Israel*. Leiden: E J Brill.
- Loader, J A 1987. 'Prediker,' in Burden, J J & Prinsloo, W S (eds.) *Tweegesprek met God*. Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 49-56.
- McCall, H 2001. *Mesopotamian Myths*. London: The British Museum Press.
- Parpola, S 1997. *The Standard Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh*. SAACT 1. Neo Assyrian Text Corpus Project.
- Pilch, J J 2001. 'A window into the Biblical world: Snakes in the Hebrew Bible.' *The Bible Today* 39, 239-243.
- Scheffler, E 2000. 'The Exilic Literature (586-539 BCE),' in Boshoff W, Scheffler E & Spangenberg I (eds.), 142-167. *Ancient Israelite Literature in Context*. Pretoria: Protea Book House.
- Schrott, R 2001. *Gilgamesh Epos*. München: Carl Hanser Verlag.
- Spangenberg, I 2000. 'The Literature of the Hellenistic period (333-63 BCE),' in Boshoff W, Scheffler E & Spangenberg I (eds.), 199-238. *Ancient Israelite Literature in Context*. Pretoria: Protea Book House.
- Tigay, J H 1982. *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Van der Toorn, K 2000. 'Did Ecclesiastes Copy Gilgamesh?' in *Bible Review*, February 2000. 24-30.
- Westenholtz, A & Koch-Westenholz, U 2000. Enkidu the Noble Savage? in George A R & Finkel I L (eds.), *Wisdom, Gods and Literature. Studies in Assyriology in Honour of WG Lambert*, 437-451. USA: Eisenbrauns,.
- Westerman, C 1984. *Genesis 1-11. A Commentary*. Great Britain: SPCK.

Gerda de Villiers Faculty of Theology, Department of Old Testament Telematic, University of Pretoria. E-mail: [gerdadev@mweb.co.za](mailto:gerdadev@mweb.co.za)