

Gilgamesh and Social Responsibility

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Abstract

This paper proposes that the Gilgamesh epic is constructed as an encoded expression of the wish of the people where it arose to have a more responsible king. The decoding builds to a deeply encoded structure, emerging as a precursor from which all other encodings are derived. Enkidu, Utnapishtim, and the episode of a spiny bush in the Great Deep decode as three assaults on the king's grandiose self-seeking, a character trait that supports his abuse and tyranny over Uruk's people. Shamhat, the priestess of Ishtar, decodes as the king's instrument with which to bring Enkidu under his own influence and to thwart Anu's reason for creating him—to balance the king. Ishtar decodes as one who creates indebtedness from the king to her in order to later express how the king defaults on his responsibilities. The subtlety of the encoding structure reflects the depth of anxiety in the people of the epic's time about their king sensing their anger, as well as the length of time over which the epic was elaborated.

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Introduction

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The story of Gilgamesh is the world's oldest known epic, dating back to approximately 2750 BC when an actual King Gilgamesh ruled the great walled city of Uruk in Sumeria. The epic has gone through many transcriptions, witnessed by its many cuneiform versions found at a variety of sites. However, the emotionally charged elements of the story remain essentially intact from one version to another, giving some assurance that interpretive work can successfully identify them.

The richness and novelty of the story together with its fragmentary remains have resulted in a great deal of commentary. Such themes as man's struggle with ultimate death versus a longing for immortality have been presented by Heidel (1949), Kovacs (1989), Renger (1978), Ray (1996), and Abusch (1993). Renger also discusses the epic as didactic to its original culture; Ray, along similar lines, sees it as advocating for humanism; and Abusch (2001) sees it as a growth challenge, calling Gilgamesh to engage in the stages of life and become a functioning member of society, in some agreement with the present effort. Efforts of this kind have compelling support within the surface-story elements of the epic. Along other lines, Jung (1983), with interest in interpreting the unconscious, sees the figure of Enkidu as Gilgamesh's shadow. The present effort also interprets unconscious expression, using psychoanalytic decoding as a tool to identify latent unifying themes in the epic.

The next section decodes the eleven books in sequence without explicitly identifying which decodings are precursor versus derivative, although the narrative suggests the distinction. This is done to build to the section after it where the precursor structure is explicitly noted.

All quotations from the epic are referred to Mitchell's (2006) work, based on an eleven tablet version of the story.⁶¹

Decoding Book One (sixteen pages)

The epic begins with a twenty-two line prologue that announces the grandeur of Gilgamesh. Book One begins with more of his praises:⁶²

Surpassing all kings, powerful and tall
 Beyond all others, violent, splendid,
 A wild bull of a man, unvanquished leader,
 Hero in the front lines, beloved by his soldiers –
 Fortress they called him, *protector of the people*
raging flood that destroys all defenses –
 Two-thirds divine and one-third human,
 Son of King Lugalbanda who became
 a god, and of the goddess Ninsun,
 Ellipsis of six lines
 he brought back the ancient, forgotten rites,
 restoring the statues and sacraments
 for the welfare of the people and the sacred land.
 Who is like Gilgamesh? What other king
 has inspired such awe? Who else can say
 “I alone rule, supreme among mankind”?
 The goddess Aruru, mother of creation
 had designed his body, had made him the strongest

⁶¹ The twelfth tablet is not included because of evidence that it is a later addition, discontinuous with the story on the first eleven. In fact, Enkidu, whom the gods create to rectify Gilgamesh—who becomes his beloved friend—dies in the eleventh tablet story but reappears alive and well in the twelfth.

⁶² Italics not mine.

of men – huge, handsome, radiant, perfect.

These verses emphasize Gilgamesh's power, both as a king and as an individual; they also call attention to his being two-thirds divine. Regarding his power, Mitchell notes his omission of a fragment describing Gilgamesh as having legs six cubits long, making him roughly sixteen feet tall. He is called protector of the people and is credited with restorations that work for the welfare of the people. Book One continues, passing now from positive to negative:

The city is his possession, he struts
 through it, arrogant, his head raised high,
 trampling its citizens like a wild bull.
 He is king, he does whatever he wants,
 takes the son from his father and crushes him,
 takes the girl from her mother and uses her,
 the warrior's daughter, the young man's bride,
 he uses her, no one dares to oppose him.
 But the people of Uruk cried out to heaven
 and their lamentation was heard, the gods
 are not unfeeling, their hearts were touched
 they went to Anu, father of them all,
 protector of the realm of sacred Uruk,
 and spoke to him on the people's behalf:
 the people cry out...
 "Is this how you want your king to rule?
 Should a shepherd savage his own flock? Father,
do something, quickly, before the people
 overwhelm heaven with their heartrending cries."

Although he is magnificent, Gilgamesh is a king who abuses his people, ignoring some of their basic rights and needs. From the

outset Gilgamesh is presented as a tyrant who abuses his people and acts so much against them that the people call upon the gods for help. The latter sets the stage for Enkidu, as shown in the next part of Book One:

Anu heard them, he nodded his head
then to the goddess, mother of creation,
he called out "Aruru, you are the one
who created humans. Now go and create
A double for Gilgamesh, his second self,
a man who equals his strength and courage,
a man who equals his stormy heart.
Create a new hero, let them balance each other
perfectly so that Uruk has peace."

The gods respond to Uruk's call for help by creating Enkidu, equal in strength to Gilgamesh but with a mission to end the king's tyranny by balancing him. Enkidu is wild like a forest animal and has yet to be awakened to man's culture. Enkidu is created psychologically below Gilgamesh.

Next, a trapper chances a view of Enkidu and, terrified of his immense strength and resentful that Enkidu has torn out his traps, goes to his father for advice. His father advises him to seek help from King Gilgamesh, "the strongest man in the world." The king directs the trapper to go to the temple of Ishtar to find the priestess Shamhat and bring her to Enkidu with the following plan:

The wild man will approach. Let her use her love-arts.
Nature will takes its course, and then
the animals who knew him in the wilderness
will be bewildered, and will leave him forever.

The story implies that Gilgamesh will foil Enkidu's mission by drawing Enkidu under his own spell, although first by Shamhat's. The story shows Gilgamesh taking measures to influence Enkidu. The next page of verse has Enkidu making love to Shamhat, staying erect for seven days; after this he finds that his approach to his creature friends is unwelcome. Making love for seven days encodes the idea of strong influence over Enkidu, a thing that repeats later when he meets Gilgamesh. The loss of his creature friends announces the onset of his humanization:

He turned back to Shamhat, and as he walked
he knew that his mind had somehow grown larger,
he knew things now that an animal can't know.

This refers to more than a literal sexual awakening because animals have innate sexual knowledge. It encodes the idea that Enkidu has begun to understand love as intimacy and personal connection. Shamhat uses this to work on Enkidu in the next verses:

Enkidu sat down at Shamhat's feet
He looked at her, and he understood
all the words she was speaking to him.
"Now, Enkidu, you know what it is
to be with a woman, to unite with her.
You are beautiful, you are like a god.
Why should you roam the wilderness
and live like an animal? Let me take you
to great walled Uruk, to the temple of Ishtar
to the palace of Gilgamesh the mighty king
who in his arrogance oppresses the people,
trampling upon them like a wild bull."

This forms a connecting link from Enkidu awakening to intimacy to the reason for his creation. The next half page has Enkidu feeling a longing for a “true friend,” but the context makes it clear that this does not refer to Shamhat. Instead Enkidu immediately asks her to take him with her to Uruk in order to see Gilgamesh and challenge him as to which of them is the greater. The side by side of wanting a true friend and having the drive to challenge prefigures what happens between Enkidu and Gilgamesh.

Shamhat now tells Enkidu of Uruk’s many delights, such as colorful clothing, singing and dancing in the streets, and open access to sexual joy. She tells Enkidu how handsome and virile Gilgamesh is—so full of energy that he does not even sleep. Then she urges, “Enkidu, put aside your aggression,” and tells him how well the gods Anu, Shamash, and Enlil regard the king. Shamhat plays the role of Gilgamesh’s agent by urging Enkidu to part with his aggression for Gilgamesh, hinting at the intimate friendship to come and working against the reason for Enkidu’s creation. She then tells him how Gilgamesh went to his mother, the goddess Ninsun, to learn the meaning of his dream about a huge boulder, too heavy to lift. Gilgamesh describes part of the dream:

A crowd of people gathered around me,
the people of Uruk pressed in to see it,
Like a little baby they kissed its feet.
This boulder, this star that had fallen to earth –
I took it in my arms. I embraced and caressed it
the way a man caresses his wife.

The implied comparison is that Enkidu is like a star come to Gilgamesh who will receive him with tender love. Shamhat now tells

Enkidu that Ninsun took the dream to refer to a great hero coming to Gilgamesh as a dear friend who would be his double and ever loyal to him. She continues to work influence on Enkidu that is contrary to the reason Anu had him created but faithful to Gilgamesh's intentions and needs. Book One ends with Enkidu again making love to Shamhat, working a final dose of influence on him.

Decoding Book Two (six pages)

Shamhat introduces Enkidu to the ways of man, bringing him to shepherds' huts so that he can see and learn human ways. He uses both sword and spear to guard the shepherds' flocks by night, while the shepherds sleep, encoding his socialization and identification with the rank and file. Shortly after this, Enkidu looks up from making love to Shamhat and notes a man passing by. They learn that he has prepared food for a wedding banquet in Uruk, and Enkidu, upon learning that Gilgamesh has the right of first night with all brides, becomes angry and exclaims,

“I will go to Uruk now,
To the palace of Gilgamesh the mighty king.
I will challenge him. I will shout to his face:
'I am the mightiest! I am the man
Who can make the world tremble. I am Supreme!'”

The story states that Gilgamesh has the right of first night by divine decree, encoding his view that he has the right to treat his people arbitrarily. Shamhat and Enkidu go to Uruk, Enkidu walking in front, indicating an imminent separation from Shamhat in favor of Gilgamesh. This is the last time that Shamhat appears in the story as well as the last time that the king's abuses and tyranny are noted. As

Enkidu enters Uruk, the people note his immense size, comparable to Gilgamesh's, and feel that the "wild man can rival the mightiest kings." The wedding indicated has now taken place, and the bride awaits Gilgamesh who, when he approaches the marriage house, finds Enkidu waiting. Gilgamesh goes into a rage and engages Enkidu. The fight is brief, taking up ten lines of verse, and concludes with Gilgamesh's anger dissipating and Enkidu honoring him as "unique among humans" and "destined to rule over men." With this they kiss and embrace and become "true friends." Gilgamesh now steps into Shamash's place, and Enkidu begins to move away from his purpose.

Decoding Book Three (fourteen pages)

This book opens with the lines,

Time passed quickly, Gilgamesh said.
"Now we must travel to the Cedar Forest,
where the fierce monster Humbaba lives.
We must kill him and drive out evil from the world."

Gilgamesh and Enkidu are now intimate friends, and it is clear that Enkidu will share Gilgamesh's ambitions. The quest to kill Humbaba has utterly no connection with the story thus far and arises solely from Gilgamesh's ambition.⁶³ He frames his ambition as an effort to drive evil from the world when the only evil the story has noted is his tyranny and abuse. This reveals his blindness to how his grandiose strivings are more important to him than his people.

⁶³ Contenau (1954) suggests that the lack of wood in Uruk and its surroundings motivated the interest in Humbaba. However, this does not alter the story as given.

Enkidu becomes teary eyed, and objects to the quest, citing difficulties he knows of firsthand. When Gilgamesh poo-poo's him, Enkidu cites yet more hazards of Humbaba and the fact that the god Enlil puts Humbaba in the Cedar Forest because it is sacred to him. Gilgamesh has already acted against the gods' will by drawing Enkidu to himself instead of Enkidu's mission, and now Enkidu reminds him that he is again acting against the gods' will. Gilgamesh reproaches Enkidu for his fearfulness in twenty-two lines of verse that end with (speaker is Gilgamesh):

But whether you come along or not,
I will cut down the tree. I will kill Humbaba.
I will make a lasting name for myself.
I will stamp my fame on men's minds forever.

Gilgamesh now presents his intentions to the people of Uruk—repeating the last two lines above—and to Uruk's young warriors, some of whom fought at his side. Enkidu again becomes teary eyed with anxiety over the quest to kill Humbaba and appeals to the elders of Uruk to persuade the king not to go. The elders take up Enkidu's plea and try to dissuade the king, encoding that the king is more concerned with his self-aggrandizement than with his people. Gilgamesh replies to this with laughter and then returns to cajoling Enkidu into joining him. After Enkidu agrees, they go hand in hand to the temple of Gilgamesh's mother (Ninsun) to ask her help, encoding that Enkidu is now so much a part of Gilgamesh that he shares kinship with him. Ninsun responds with sorrow to this request and turns to Shamash, asking, "Why have you burdened my son with a restless heart?" Here the lesser deity turns to a greater one to divest herself of blame for Gilgamesh's excessive self-interest. Ninsun asks Shamash several times to protect her son and one of these times she includes Enkidu, referring to the fusion of Gilgamesh

with Enkidu and the foiling of Enkidu's mission. Ninsun now says to Enkidu, "Dear child, you were not born from my womb, but now I adopt you as my son." This quote is followed by narrative on Gilgamesh and Enkidu, now as brothers, repeating the encoding.

The elders endorse the quest to kill Humbaba and ask Enkidu to walk ahead of Gilgamesh because he "knows the way to the Cedar Forest," and "he is tested in battle." The latter statement is not true because up to this point Enkidu has only lived wildly in the forest and has not engaged in any battles other than the brief one with Gilgamesh. The untrue statement encodes the idea that Enkidu can take the blame for Gilgamesh's ambitions, which, in fact, happens later.

Decoding Book Four (thirteen pages)

On their journey to the Cedar Forest, Gilgamesh prays to a mountain for a favorable dream, and Enkidu does a dream ritual. For the first time in the story, Gilgamesh falls asleep, but the narrative does not mention whether or not Enkidu slept, encoding that the deeper parts of Gilgamesh's nature are summoning him. At midnight Gilgamesh awakes and says to Enkidu,

"What happened? Did you touch me? Did a god pass by?
What makes my skin creep? Why am I cold?"

Gilgamesh awakes in an anxiety state and calls to Enkidu to tell him of a horrid dream in which they were walking in a gorge with a huge mountain looming before them that fell down upon them. When he asks Enkidu what it might mean, he ignores Gilgamesh's anxious state and interprets it positively, taking the mountain for Humbaba

and the fall to mean their victory over him. Gilgamesh responds with pleasure, and his anxiety passes. The imagery encodes unconscious, oppressive guilt anxiety in Gilgamesh.

This story element repeats four more times with only the dream content differing. In the first repetition, Gilgamesh reports “a dream more horrible than the first” in which a huge mountain throws him down and pins him by the feet, followed by a terrifying brightness that burns his eyes; at this point, a “shining and handsome” young man appears, pulls Gilgamesh out from under the mountain, and gives him water, calming the king. The terrifying brightness encodes the drive of unconscious insight into Gilgamesh’s self-absorption, attempting to reach his conscious personality. The handsome young man and his actions encode the more adaptive and less guilt-laden state that would result from a conscious assimilation. Enkidu assures Gilgamesh that the mountain refers to Humbaba’s inability to kill him and the young man refers to Lord Shamash, who will assure Gilgamesh’s safety and victory. The theme of unconscious recognition in Gilgamesh versus conscious denial, encouraged by Enkidu, surfaces at this point.

In the second repetition, Gilgamesh reports “a dream more horrible than both the others” in which

The heavens roared and the earth heaved,
then darkness, silence. Lightning flashed,
igniting the trees. By the time the flames
died out, the ground was covered with ash.

The heavens roaring and earth heaving encode the gods’ agreement that Uruk’s people, left behind, need help with Gilgamesh; darkness and silence refer to the king’s blindness to his abuse. The images of

lightning and flames refer to the king's destructiveness. Enkidu takes the fiery heavens to refer to Humbaba trying to kill the king and takes the failure to do so as proof that he and the king will succeed. Enkidu adds, again relieving the king, "We will kill Humbaba. Success is ours."

The third repetition has Gilgamesh telling Enkidu that he had "a dream more horrible than the three others" in which he saw a fierce eagle with a lion's head float down toward him, grimacing and shooting flames from its mouth. A young man with an unearthly glow appeared and seized the eagle, breaking its wings and wringing its neck. The eagle and flames encode the wrath of heaven with Gilgamesh. The young man who rescues him refers to his grandiosity (unearthly glow) opposing the will of heaven. Enkidu tells the king that the eagle is Humbaba again failing to harm him and that the young man is Shamash promising protection. His interpretation eases the king.

In the final repetition, Gilgamesh tells Enkidu that he had "a dream more horrible than all the others" in which he wrestled with a gigantic bull that pinned him down and crushed him. Just when he felt its breath on his face, a man pulled him up, put his arms around him, and gave him fresh water. This decodes as wordplay—the dream image telling Gilgamesh to deal with his bullying behavior. The man who rescues him encodes the increase in humanity that would result from such an act. Enkidu tells the king that the bull represents Shamash's protection and that the man who pulled him up was Lugulbanda, his personal god. He adds, "With his *help*, we will achieve a triumph greater than any man has achieved." This repetition does not conclude with the king showing relief at Enkidu's words. A menacing bull can hardly represent a protecting deity, and this time the empty basis for the king's relief in Enkidu's

interpretation is transparent. Enkidu is emerging as a promoter of the king's grandiosity, moving further away from his purpose.

Book Four concludes with Gilgamesh and Enkidu at the edge of the Cedar Forest, within earshot of Humbaba's roaring; the king is frightened, calling upon Shamash for protection, and Shamash responds with urges to attack.

Decoding Book Five (twelve pages)

From the forest edge, Gilgamesh and Enkidu see the Cedar Mountain—dwelling place of the gods and sacred to Ishtar—representing the idea that the gods are watching them. Enkidu is seized with fear and urges Gilgamesh to continue on alone. Gilgamesh reminds Enkidu that he cannot kill Humbaba alone, encoding that this act of destruction requires Enkidu to act against the reason for his creation. Enkidu now tells the king how terrifying Humbaba is and repeats his request that the king continue alone, setting up Enkidu's eventual role in the death of Humbaba. They continue into the Cedar Forest and, coming into view of Humbaba, both become terrified. Humbaba declares that he will kill only Gilgamesh, who is then overcome with dread. Enkidu now urges Gilgamesh on. When they arrive at Humbaba's den, Humbaba urges Gilgamesh to go away because there is no hope of overcoming him. He calls them madmen and berates Enkidu, stating that he won't kill him because he is too scrawny and won't even make a decent meal. The insults to Enkidu prefigure his role in killing Humbaba.

Gilgamesh again hesitates with fear, but Enkidu urges him on, and they charge at the monster. The god Shamash uses the four winds to pin down Humbaba and paralyze him, giving the king and Enkidu

their moment. This fulfills Enkidu's interpretation of Shamash's promise of protection—made in all but the third of five dreams—but their dire encodings are yet to happen. Gilgamesh sees that Humbaba is pinned and leaps upon him, holding a knife to his throat. Humbaba now begs Gilgamesh for mercy, promising him cedars for a temple to Shamash and a palace for himself. Enkidu now responds,

“Dear friend, don't listen
to anything that the monster says.
Kill him before you become confused.”

Enkidu is now acting wholly against his purpose, urging the king's grandiose and destructive tendencies. He speaks of the king becoming confused when his mission is to give the king balance, connecting with the following verses:

Humbaba said, “If any mortal
Enkidu, knows the rules of my forest,
It is you. You know that this is my place,
and that I am the forest's guarding. Enlil
put me here to terrify men
and I guard the forest as Enlil ordains.
If you kill me, you will call down the gods'
wrath, and their judgment will be severe.
I could have killed you at the forest's edge,
I could have hung you from a cedar and fed
your guts to the shrieking vultures and crows.
Now it is your turn to show me mercy.
Speak to him, beg him to spare my life.”

This is the last time the story calls Enkidu to honor his mission and to move out from under the spell of Gilgamesh. Enkidu urges Gilgamesh to kill Humbaba “before another moment goes by.” Enkidu makes a direct appeal to the king’s self-serving motives:

“Establish your fame, so that forever
Men will speak of brave Gilgamesh
Who killed Humbaba in the Cedar Forest.”

Humbaba now accepts that he is lost and curses both of them, wishing for Enkidu to die in great pain and for Gilgamesh to then become inconsolable—exactly what happens later. Gilgamesh responds to Humbaba’s words by dropping his axe, but Enkidu again urges him to kill Humbaba. Gilgamesh strikes three times at Humbaba’s neck, killing him. Enkidu now praises the king for his accomplishment, and together they cut down cedars. Enkidu says they will use them to build an immense door to a temple for Enlil, a temple that only gods, not men, will enter, implying a grand comparison of Gilgamesh to the gods. When he adds his hope that Enlil will delight in the temple, he expresses his own hope to be spared by the god who appointed Humbaba. They now return to Uruk, Gilgamesh carrying Humbaba’s head.

Decoding Book Six (eleven pages)

When Gilgamesh returns to Uruk, the goddess Istar finds him splendid and is smitten with him. She asks him to marry her and promises him abundance, wealth, success, and more. He responds by asking how he could repay her and what his fate will be when she loses interest in him. This connects with Gilgamesh being indebted to Ishtar; her priestess, Shamhat, prepared Enkidu to fall under the

king's spell by first awakening Enkidu and then compelling images of the king on him. Ishtar has helped Gilgamesh elude his balance by Enkidu in favor of his wishes and grandiose ambitions. Gilgamesh resents his indebtedness to Ishtar and expresses it with insulting verses that begin,

“Why would I want to be the lover
of a broken oven that fails in the cold,
a flimsy door that the wind blows through,
A palace that falls on its staunchest defenders”

The insults continue and build, the king reminding Ishtar, in a case by case way, how she tired of her prior lovers and destroyed them. Gilgamesh finishes, “If I too became your lover, you would treat me as cruelly as you treated them,” sending Ishtar into a rage. She goes directly to her father, Anu, and her mother, Antu, raging over how Gilgamesh has insulted her. Anu responds,

“But might you not have provoked this? Did you
try to seduce him? Or did he just start
Insulting you for no reason at all?”

These verses suggest that Anu knows that Ishtar is guilty of something, encoding the idea that Ishtar was an instrument, through Shamhat, of undoing her father's reason for having Enkidu created. Ishtar now asks Anu to let her use the Bull of Heaven to kill Gilgamesh and threatens, if refused, to release ghouls on Earth who will outnumber the living. Anu responds,

“But if I give you the Bull of Heaven,
Uruk will have famine for seven years.
Have you provided the people with grain

for seven years, and the cattle with fodder?”

Here at the midpoint of the epic, the story returns in encoded form to its opening theme of the king's irresponsibility to his people. Ishtar now replies that she has stored up enough grain for more than seven years, but she has not acted for the people so much as to secure her revenge on Gilgamesh. Anu agrees to give her the Bull of Heaven, encoding the idea that there is cause for anger with Gilgamesh.

Enkidu engages the bull, and Gilgamesh follows, killing it with a dagger thrust between its shoulder blades and horns. Ishtar responds from the great wall of Uruk, “Not only did Gilgamesh slander me – now he has killed his own punishment, the Bull of Heaven.” Ishtar's jealous rage about Gilgamesh getting his own way is an encoding of the king's self-absorption. Enkidu, upon hearing her, rips off one of the bull's thighs, throws it at her, and verbally abuses her. This encodes the right, in Enkidu's eyes, to be more important to the king than Ishtar. He sets the stage for his own death—not so much for abusing Ishtar as for urging Humbaba's death and acting against his mission. The killing of the bull itself encodes that Ishtar, as a guilty party in foiling Anu's reason for Enkidu's creation, has no right to revenge.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu go hand in hand to the palace amid cheers from the people, encoding the people's submission to the king's way. Gilgamesh calls to the singing girls of Uruk to identify the handsomest of men and bravest of heroes, cueing them to praise himself and Enkidu. He also mocks the fact that Ishtar has no one to avenge her. This is the climax of Gilgamesh's self-aggrandizement in the epic, revealed by Enkidu's dream of the same night that wakes him and leads him to ask the king, “Dear friend, why are the great gods assembled?”

Decoding Book Seven (ten pages)

Enkidu tells Gilgamesh that he dreamed they had offended the gods who then met in council, Anu citing the killing of Humbaba and the Bull of Heaven as major offenses. Anu adds that one of the two guilty must die, and it will be Enkidu. This begins the fulfillment of the encoded meanings of the five dreams that frightened Gilgamesh, and, therefore, Enkidu falls ill. When he tells the king that he knows this is his story's end, it encodes Enkidu's guilt for abandoning his mission and for supporting Gilgamesh's negative character traits. The king weeps for his friend's suffering and tries to comfort him by asking him how he knows the dream is not a favorable one. Enkidu does not reply but instead cites a second disturbing dream where he is attacked by an eagle-like creature with a lion's head that tramples his bones like a bull. He calls to Gilgamesh to be saved, but the king's fear keeps him from helping. The creature binds Enkidu's arms and takes him to the underworld. Here he sees piles of proud kings' crowns and images of other illustrious figures. The dream ends when Enkidu sees Ereshkigal, the queen of the underworld, who asks, "Who brought this new resident here?"

This is an anxiety dream expressing Enkidu's guilt for failing to act on his mission. The king's failure to save him encodes the mutual failure of both to engage in the primary goal of achieving balance. The crowns of proud kings and such in the underworld encode the destructiveness of the king's way that Enkidu failed to address. When Ereshkigal asks, "Who brought this new resident here?" the verses encode Enkidu's bewilderment over his own failure.

Gilgamesh tries to reassure Enkidu by telling him that the dream may be a good omen because the gods send dreams only to the healthy. He promises to pray to Shamash and other gods for Enkidu and to make a gold statue in Enkidu's image. This action encodes the king's guilt over drawing Enkidu away from his mission and merging him with his own grandiosity, represented by the gold statue. Enkidu replies, "There is no gold statue that can cure this illness" and states that Enlil has sealed his fate.

At the next dawn, Enkidu turns to Shamash because fate has turned against him. He curses the trapper who first found him and wishes that his life be destroyed since the trapper destroyed Enkidu's life. Enkidu curses Shamhat: "I curse you with the ultimate curse, may it seize you instantly as it leaves my mouth." To this he adds wishes that she never has a family or children—nor things to delight men, that she has wild dogs camp in her bedroom, that she has drunkard's vomit all over her, that she dresses in filthy underwear, that young men jeer her and more; she deserves all these consequences "for seducing me in the wilderness when I was strong and innocent and free." Enkidu's words encode his understanding that Shamhat was Gilgamesh's instrument to work him out of his mission and into the king's egocentric one, all building to Enkidu's ruin.

Shamash now asks Enkidu why he curses Shamhat. Shamhat gave him food fit for a god, splendid robes, and the intimate friendship of Gilgamesh, who will honor him in death and have the people of Uruk mourn him. Shamash adds, "and when you are gone he will roam the wilderness with matted hair, in a lion skin." Shamash's words ease Enkidu who now retracts his curses of Shamhat and wishes her essentially the opposites of his prior curses. Enkidu now shows himself capable of the positive change, which he was created to promote in Gilgamesh. The next four verses state,

Then Enkidu said to Gilgamesh,
“You who have walked beside me, steadfast
through so many dangers, remember me,
never forget what I have endured.”

This encodes Enkidu inviting Gilgamesh to be mindful of the change Enkidu was created to bring about in him. Enkidu expires after twelve days of being deathly sick but not before giving Gilgamesh the same invitation one last time:

“Have you abandoned me now dear friend?
You told me that you would come to help me
when I was afraid. But I cannot see you,
you have not come to fight off this danger.
Yet weren't we to remain forever
inseparable, you and I?”

The first two lines encode Enkidu's mission, the next two encode his failure to honor it, and the final two lines are his last invitation to Gilgamesh.

Decoding Book Eight (eight pages)

Gilgamesh is stricken with overwhelming grief and calls upon all of Uruk and nature to mourn the death of Enkidu. He calls to Enkidu, asking,

“O Enkidu, what is this sleep that has seized you,
that has darkened your face and stopped your breath?”

When Enkidu does not answer him, the king veils Enkidu's face, tears out clumps of his own hair, and rips his robes in grief. He calls upon his craftsmen to create a fine statue of Enkidu for princes and the people of Uruk to honor. The king offers precious gifts to the gods of the underworld for Enkidu's sake "so that Enkidu may not be sick at heart" in the afterlife. All of Book Eight is about Gilgamesh's overwhelming grief over the death of Enkidu and his struggle to come to terms with it. This encodes the beginning of the story's assault upon the king's grandiose self-absorption in favor of him living up to his responsibility to his people.

Decoding Book Nine (six pages)

As Shamash foretold, Gilgamesh roams the wilderness with matted hair, in a lion skin, expressing his identification with Enkidu's wild origin that serves to deny Enkidu's death. His grief soon turns to fear of his own mortality, and he seeks to outsmart death by seeking Utnapishtim, the only man who was ever made immortal. He travels eastward to ask Utnapishtim the secret of immortality, expressing an infantile reaction to the thought of his own eventual end.

He journeys to Twin Peaks and, at the entrance, encounters husband and wife scorpion people who guard the tunnel that the sun passes through overnight. They are people of terrifying appearance and fill Gilgamesh with dread. When the husband suggests that Gilgamesh must be a god, the wife identifies him as two-thirds god, suggesting a pun because of his wish to fully become an immortal god. The husband asks his name and inquires about his purpose because no mortal has ever made Gilgamesh's journey. The king replies that he is seeking his ancestor, Utnapishtim, to learn how to overcome death. To do this, Gilgamesh must cross the Twin Peaks, something

no one has done. The only route is through the completely dark tunnel of the sun. The scorpion woman urges her husband to show the king the way to Utnapishtim, and he tells the king that he has twelve hours to outrun the setting of the sun to reach safety at the edge of the world. At sunrise Gilgamesh begins his run, barely escaping the sun but emerging safely. He emerges in the garden of the gods “with gem trees of all colors, dazzling to see,” and he marvels at what he sees. The story is at pains to portray the king as one who will go to any length to secure his own interests. It expresses Gilgamesh’s grandiosity and self-absorption by placing him in the garden of the gods. The king’s flight through twelve hours of darkness may be taken as a pun on his failure to see his destructiveness and failure to his people.⁶⁴

Decoding Book Ten (fifteen pages)

Worn and weary, Gilgamesh next comes to the edge of the ocean and finds Shiduri, a tavern keeper. Taking him for a murderer, she locks her door and goes up to the roof of her house. The king threatens to break in if she won’t let him in. Shiduri tells him she locked the door because he looked so wild. The story returns in encoded form to the original complaint of the king: his abuse and tyranny; Shiduri asks who he is, and Gilgamesh identifies himself as the king of Uruk, the man who killed Humbaba and triumphed over the Bull of Heaven; he reaffirms himself as a powerful figure. When Shiduri asks why he looks so worn, the king narrates the loss of Enkidu and reveals his belief that if he mourns Enkidu enough, he

⁶⁴ Gilgamesh’s journey through the tunnel is often taken in the Jungian sense of descent into the unconscious. The problem with this interpretation, from the current perspective, is that he does not emerge healthier as a result. The story ends with the king back at Uruk but does not suggest that he has been transformed.

might return to life. This encodes an infantilism in the king because he behaves like a child who feels that enough pouting over a lost object can cajole its parents into restoring it.

Gilgamesh expresses his grief in a little more than a page that concludes, “And won’t I too lie down in the dirt like him, and never arise again?” These words are spoken in the midst of his quest for immortality and encode that the king is more concerned with how things affect him than the loss of one he loved very deeply. Shiduri responds by discouraging the king to seek immortality but encouraging him to seek the ordinary pleasures of life, which works against his grandiosity and brings him to again voice his grief over Enkidu. His words end,

“Show me the road to Utnapishtim
I will cross the vast ocean if I can, If not
I will roam the wilderness in my grief.”

Gilgamesh’s thoughts of grief are inseparable from his quest to evade his own death, again encoding that the loss of Enkidu is more about the king’s fear of death than about his love for Enkidu. Shiduri continues to remind the king that there is no way across the ocean, but Utnapishtim’s boatman, Urshanabi, who has the Stone Men needed for the crossing, may be able to help him. Gilgamesh attacks and destroys the Stone Men. He finds Urshanabi, identifies himself as the king of Uruk, and demands to be shown the way to Utnapishtim. Urshanabi tells him that he has prevented what he wants by destroying the Stone Men who could survive the Waters of Death in the ocean crossing, dramatically encoding the self-destructive nature of Gilgamesh’s ambition.

Urshanabi gives him hope by directing him to prepare three hundred poles, each one hundred feet long, to use for the crossing. When they come to the Waters of Death, the king uses and jettisons the poles one at a time—enabling him to avoid touching the water—and then uses Urshanabi’s robe as a sail to complete the journey. The imagery puns on the king’s fear of death by making him resort to the absurd gesture of using hundreds of long poles to avoid touching the Waters of Death. The punning continues a few verses later where Gilgamesh sees an old man, who is actually Utnapishtim, and asks him where he can find Utnapishtim, encoding the idea that the king is blind.

When Utnapishtim asks Gilgamesh why he looks so worn, he narrates on the loss of Enkidu and returns to his present concern with “And won’t I too like down in the dirt like him, and never arise again?” Still not knowing to whom he speaks, he says, “That is why I must find Utnapishtim.” He reviews his life’s wanderings, asking what he has achieved, seeking now an end to his sorrows. Utnapishtim responds with compassion for Gilgamesh, reminding him how generous the gods were with him, making him a king, but that he is now only a day nearer to his end for all his exertions. He reminds the king that “the gods of heaven stay aware and watch us, unsleeping, undying,” encoding that the king, though searching for immortality, can choose to learn a lesson about his role in this life. Utnapishtim repeats the lesson, reminding Gilgamesh of the brevity of life and adding, “The sleeper and the dead, how alike they are! Yet the sleeper awakes and opens his eyes, while no one returns from death.” Utnapishtim, as an immortal, is the opposite of dead Enkidu; however, he is also like Enkidu because Utnapishtim offers the king wisdom for life.

Decoding Book Eleven (twenty pages)

Gilgamesh tells Utnapishtim that he expected him to look like a god, and he intended to fight him, but now he says, “I can’t fight, something is holding me back.” This encodes the king’s hopeful identification with Utnapishtim, who is already immortal. Utnapishtim narrates how he found immortality by revealing that he was once king of Shuruppak on the Euphrates and when the gods⁶⁵ decided to send a flood, he was directed surreptitiously⁶⁶ by Ea to tear down his house and build a ship to function as Noah’s ark in Genesis. When Utnapishtim asks how to respond to the people inquiring why he is building such a large ship, Ea responds, “Tell them that Enlil hates you.” The story establishes lines of identity between Utnapishtim and Gilgamesh, both as kings of cities near the Euphrates and as kings hated by Enlil. Enlil hates Gilgamesh for killing the guardian Humbaba; Enlil’s hatred for Utnapishtim becomes clear at a later point that will be noted. The idea of Utnapishtim demolishing his home and making a ship encodes the idea of creating a new being in Utnapishtim.

When the ship and its contents are assembled, Shamash directs Utnapishtim to launch, and Utnapishtim notes that he first gave his palace, contents and all, to the man who sealed the hatch. This encodes the idea of releasing prior attachment to the old self as part of opening to the creation of a new self, a key message for Gilgamesh.

⁶⁵ The decision is made in secret, and the five gods, Anu, Enlil, Ninurti, Ennugi and Ea, are bound by oath. Later in the epic, the major responsibility goes to Enlil.

⁶⁶ Surreptitious means that Ea whispers the secret of the impending flood, along with instructions on building a boat and so on, to a reed fence around Utnapishtim’s house. Utnapishtim’s effective action based on a whisper contrasts with Gilgamesh’s lack of action even though “the people overwhelm heaven with their heartrending cries.”

Utnapishtim describes a terrible storm flooding the earth for six days and seven nights, destroying the entire human race but for him and those in his ship. On the seventh day, his ship runs aground on Mount Nimush. He then sends out a dove that returns to the ship for want of land and then a swallow that does the same; finally he sends out a raven that does not return and concludes that the waters are receding. This is imagery for decompensation—the collapse of maladaptive psychic systems that clear the way for the generation of new and more adaptive ones—an essential message for the king. Thus, the imagery also represents that Utnapishtim is a second effort to correct Gilgamesh. Utnapishtim makes ritual offerings that draw the gods with emphasis on Aruru, lover to Anu, and creator of the human race with Ea. She says, referring to Utnapishtim's offerings,

“Let all the gods come to the sacrifice,
except for Enlil, because he recklessly
sent the Great Flood and destroyed my children.”

Enlil arrives, angry that Utnapishtim and those on his ship survived the flood,⁶⁷ and says to the other gods, “Wasn't the Flood supposed to destroy them all?” Ninurta replies that Ea made the survival of Utnapishtim and the others possible, setting up the motive for Enlil to hate Utnapishtim for foiling his designs. Ea inquires of Enlil why he so recklessly sought to destroy the human race, pointing out the injustice of all dying for the faults of a few. Ea suggests a lesser measure, such as decimating the race with lions, wolves, famine, or a plague, encoding that human nature, though flawed, is rectifiable

⁶⁷ Ea directs Utnapishtim to take his family, kinsfolk, craftsmen, and artisans, as well as examples of creatures with him on the ship.

and ought not to be destroyed en masse. There is hope for Gilgamesh. Enlil now confers immortality on Utnapishtim and his wife. Enlil begins with hate for the entire human race and for Gilgamesh who foiled him but arrives, with Ea's help, at the wise decision to give man another chance. Enlil rewards Utnapishtim with immortality because it is by his help that he sees the wisdom of a more reasonable use of aggression, the very thing Gilgamesh needs to learn. This encodes that Utnapishtim's real merit is for saving the race, hinting that Gilgamesh will become a more responsible king. The imagery also encodes honoring the hope of redeeming human nature through rebirth.

At the end of his story, Utnapishtim says to Gilgamesh "who will assemble the gods for *your* sake?" Utnapishtim asks the king by what merit he can claim immortality, encoding the story's concern with his failure to balance his personality as Enlil learned to do. He offers the king an opportunity to pass a test by staying awake for seven days saying, "Prevail against sleep, and perhaps you will prevail against death." The number seven represents purging the psyche of maladaptive parts and, therefore, Utnapishtim's request decodes as requiring Gilgamesh to show that he can commit to outgrowing his maladaptive parts.

Gilgamesh sits down against a wall and falls asleep at once, prompting Utnapishtim's comment to his wife about how quickly the king failed the test. When his wife urges him to send the king back safely to his own land, Utnapishtim exclaims, "All men are liars. When he wakes up, watch how he tries to deceive us." Gilgamesh triggers this statement because he shows no cause to merit the immortality he seeks. Utnapishtim tells his wife to bake a loaf of bread for each day the king sleeps and to make a mark on the wall for each loaf. Seven days pass and the first six loaves are in different

degrees of staleness. With the seventh loaf still on the coals, Utnapishtim awakens Gilgamesh who declares, "I was almost falling asleep when I felt your touch." This is the lie Utnapishtim was anticipating. He tells the king to note the six stale loaves made while he slept. The loaves and the number seven both encode a drive toward new and higher life in the psyche. The imagery expresses Gilgamesh's failure to have such a drive and achieve merit with which to make a claim for immortality. The king now expresses helplessness over what to do and states that he sees only death everywhere he looks. His helplessness and imagery of death encode the call to accept the necessary state of unknowing that accompanies parting with familiar but maladaptive ways, which precede the onset of actual growth.

Utnapishtim tells the boatman Urshanabi that this is his last voyage across the great ocean, encoding that Utnapishtim is Gilgamesh's second call to awaken, and it is now up to the king to do so. He notes that the king is filthy and tired, that animal skins obscure his beauty, and directs Urshanabi to restore Gilgamesh's appearance and "dress him in fine robes fit for a king." The cleansing and dressing of the king encodes encouragement to Gilgamesh to live up to his responsibilities as king so that he may be entitled to signs of rank and esteem.

As Gilgamesh and the boatman push off Utnapishtim's wife notes the king's hardships and asks Utnapishtim to give the king something for his journey home. The king returns the boat to shore, and Utnapishtim offers him a secret of the gods. He tells the king of a small, spiny bush found in the Great Deep, with sharp spikes like a rose's thorns; he adds that if the king finds it and brings it to the surface, he will then have found the secret of youth. The magical plant encodes the king's potential to become a wiser and more just

ruler. The thorns are a reminder of the growth pains involved in doing so, and the placement of the plant in the Deep locates human potential in the deep unconscious.

The king digs deeply into the shore and, weighing himself down with two stones, descends into the Deep and finds the magical plant. In the process of grasping the plant, it tears his hands, and they bleed, encoding his unwillingness to deal with the dark contents of his unconscious. He then shows the plant to Urshanabi and tells him that he will test its powers by first giving it to old men to eat. Gilgamesh adds, "If that succeeds, I will eat some myself and become a carefree young man again." These are fateful words from the king, encoding that he has little commitment to become a better king, mindful of his people.

On the journey back to Uruk, Gilgamesh comes upon a pond of cool water and leaves the plant behind to bathe in it. A snake smells the plant and takes off with it, casting off its skin in the process. The imagery addresses the king's need to cast off old ways to grow new ones, becoming more connected to his people and less to himself. This event brings him to tears, and he laments to Urshanabi that all his hardships have been for nothing:

"was it for this that my hands have labored,
was it for this that I gave my heart's blood?
I have gained no benefit for myself
but have lost the marvelous plant to a reptile."

Gilgamesh is confronted with how his grandiose self-seeking and indifference to his people fail to lead to fulfillment. After the death of Enkidu and his failure to find immortality with Utnapishtim, this is the third assault on his way of life, and the narrative implies that

he is beginning to question how he leads it. The epic ends with Gilgamesh repeating the words in the prologue in which he notes the magnificence of Uruk. At the epic's end Gilgamesh has come full circle with an element of hope, for he now questions his egocentric way and leaves open the prospect that he may come to accept the necessary challenge for growth that will make him a better king to his people.

An Encoded Structure

The decodings given divide into an encoded precursor structure for the story from which the many other encodings derive. The emotionally charged idea that drives the story is that king Gilgamesh of Uruk, although a grand figure who is two-thirds divine and a reliable protector, is also a king who abuses and tyrannizes his people to the point of their calling upon the gods for help. The story, as a whole, encodes the wish for the people, where the epic flourished, to have a more just and responsible king. The gods respond with the creation of Enkidu to balance the king. He is created wild to encode the hope that the king can evolve upward as Enkidu does early in the story. Shamhat, priestess to Ishtar, becomes the king's implied instrument to foil Enkidu's purpose and work Enkidu into the king's designs. Shamhat awakens Enkidu to human culture and love, preparing him to move from love with her to love with Gilgamesh. Shamhat's actions create indebtedness from the king to Ishtar.

Enkidu is initially angry at the king, but after a brief combat, Enkidu becomes his beloved friend and acolyte to his ambitions. The structurally encoded meaning is that Gilgamesh is too effective in acting out his grandiose self-seeking, a point quickly repeated with the king's intent to kill Humbaba, who poses no threat to Uruk.

Enkidu expresses anxiety about killing Humbaba, encoding that he still has some attachment to his purpose, but Gilgamesh wins him over. With the help of Shamash, Gilgamesh kills Humbaba, but he does so only with Enkidu's final urging, bringing the story to the peak of the king's egocentric success. This event, together with Gilgamesh's five anxiety dreams, encodes that lessons to the king are to follow.

When they return to Uruk, Ishtar calls off her debt to the king by asking him to marry her. He not only defaults by spurning her but insults her, encoding an arrogant grandiosity that is hurtful to his people. At the midpoint of the epic, Ishtar asks her father Anu for the Bull of Heaven to kill the king in revenge, but Anu first inquires if she has prepared to care for the people of Uruk in the seven years of famine to follow, encoding a repetition of the motive for the story. Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill the bull and then mock Ishtar. Later Enkidu has an anxiety dream of the gods assembled, encoding that assaults on the king's negative traits are about to begin.

In this dream, Anu states that either Gilgamesh or Enkidu must die for killing Humbaba, and it will be Enkidu, encoding the first blow to the king's ways that hurt his people. Gilgamesh is overwhelmed with grief from the death of his beloved Enkidu, and it soon transforms into fear of his own mortality, encoding the narcissistic presumption that stands between him and his people. The king decides to seek out his ancestor, Utnapishtim, the world's only male mortal, to learn the secret of immortality. This decision results in arduous journeys that the story uses, often with punning imagery, to encode how far Gilgamesh's grandiosity will take him to achieve his self-serving ends. The king finally finds Utnapishtim, who enters the story as a second effort to awaken the king. Enkidu was created wild, helped kill Humbaba, and is now dead, whereas Utnapishtim is a

former king of a city near Uruk, saved a remnant of the race, and is immortal. Events drive Enlil to hate Utnapishtim as he already hates Gilgamesh, encoding the hope that the nearness of Utnapishtim, a man of merit, to the king will awaken him. Enkidu represents an effort to awaken him from below and, since that fails, Utnapishtim represents an effort from above.

Gilgamesh fails to find a key to immortality despite his considerable exertions to find Utnapishtim, the second blow to his way of life. The story encodes that no amount of self-seeking that is unbalanced by his responsibility to his people will result in the king's increase. The third blow involves the small, spiny bush of the Great Deep that can confer youth, for Gilgamesh loses it to a snake, encoding that his presumption of getting his own way without regard for his people is unacceptable. The story ends as the king returns to Uruk and reveals what he has gained from his ways, encoding a hope in the people that he will become more responsible to them.

Discussion

The present decoding arrives at a deep encoded structure from which all other encodings derive, a highly subtle structure for a story, in the present view. This view fits the opening hypothesis that the story is an encoding of a people's wish for a more just and responsible king because the further the surface meaning from the encoded one, the less likely the encoded meaning is to be perceived and provoke an angry response. That is, the more anxious the people are about the encoded anger becoming apparent to the king, the greater the need is to disguise it in story images that encode it away from easy, conscious perception. This is likely why Gilgamesh, after being

presented in the story's opening verses as "powerful and tall beyond all others" has only one episode where people cower before him.

The Gilgamesh epic was elaborated over many centuries in a world that was more concerned with conquest and power struggles than human rights and needs. These many centuries are another source of the subtlety of the encoded structure, for within them, the social damage motivating the epic festered, and the people had ample time to make their angry expressions even more subtle.

The parent culture for the epic is a precursor for Judaism, one of whose themes is social justice. Since it appears that the Genesis story of the Flood has its roots in the Sumerian myths, it is consistent to regard the Gilgamesh epic as an encoded call to social justice that manifests more fully in the later Judaic culture. Finally, the idea that Gilgamesh addresses a basic social responsibility—in the most general sense, from those who govern to the governed—gives the epic another enduring interpretation.

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