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TZVI ABUSCH Brandeis

## The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Homeric Epics

**M**y purpose in this study is to relate a few of the results that I have previously reached regarding the Epic of Gilgamesh (GE) to the Homeric corpus. This is not an unreasonable undertaking, for it has been suggested more than once that the Iliad and the Odyssey were influenced by the Epic of Gilgamesh. Parallels and connections between the Epic of Gilgamesh, on the one hand, and the Iliad and the Odyssey, on the other, have been noticed and established by a number of scholars. Limiting myself to classicists, I note particularly the work of Burkert,<sup>1</sup> the recent book by West,<sup>2</sup> and the earlier observations and sustained arguments by such others as Beye,<sup>3</sup> Crane,<sup>4</sup> Gresseth,<sup>5</sup> Page,<sup>6</sup> Webster,<sup>7</sup> and Wilson.<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, in this study, I shall take the connection for granted and try to link together larger devel-

opments and structures in the hope of producing a provocative argument rather than definitive results.

I shall carry out the comparison of the Akkadian and Greek materials in two parts. 1) First, I shall look at the Homeric materials to see if these works reflect some of the same issues and stages that I have postulated elsewhere for the Epic of Gilgamesh and if they thus provide some support for the ideological constructions that I have posited. 2) Then, I shall suggest that some of the literary developments that I have noted in the Epic of Gilgamesh may have been operative also in the construction of the Odyssey. Finally, I shall leave the reader with an unresolved question, in line with the rabbinic dictum that "You are not obliged to finish the task, but neither are you free to neglect it." (Pirkei Avot 2:21)

### I.

First, then, to the ideological stages.<sup>9</sup> But before examining these, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that there are also

significant differences in mood and tone between the Akkadian and Greek epics, and these affect the manner in which we experi-

<sup>1</sup> See especially W. Burkert, *The Orientalizing Revolution: Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture in the Early Archaic Age* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 1992).

<sup>2</sup> M. L. West, *The East Face of Helicon: West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth* (Oxford, 1997).

<sup>3</sup> C. R. Beye, "The Epic of Gilgamesh, the Bible, and Homer: Some Narrative Parallels," in *Mnemai: Classical Studies in Memory of Karl K. Hulley*, ed. H. D. Evjen (Scholars Press, 1984), 7-19.

<sup>4</sup> G. Crane, *Calypso: Backgrounds and Conventions of the Odyssey*, Beiträge zur klassischen Philologie 191 (Frankfurt am Main, 1988).

<sup>5</sup> G. K. Gresseth, "The Gilgamesh Epic and Homer," *The*

*Classical Journal* 70/4 (1975), 1-18.

<sup>6</sup> D. Page, *Folktales in Homer's Odyssey* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1973), 51-69, esp. 59-60.

<sup>7</sup> T. B. L. Webster, *From Mycenae to Homer* (London, 1964).

<sup>8</sup> J. R. Wilson, "The Gilgamesh Epic and the Iliad," *Echos du Monde Classique/Classical Views* 30, n. s. 5, no. 1 (1986), 25-41.

<sup>9</sup> I have written about these stages in my essay, "The Development and Meaning of the Epic of Gilgamesh: An Interpretive Essay," which will appear elsewhere; a popular version has appeared as "Gilgamesh: Hero, King, God and Striving Man," in *Archaeology Odyssey*, vol. 3, no. 4 (July/August 2000), 32-42, 58-59.

ence the different ideological constructions. Thus, Homer is more pessimistic and his heroes do not resolve their conflicts with the decisiveness and finality of Gilgamesh: rather than going home, Achilles dies; Odysseus, for his part, must look forward to further journeys after his homecoming.

As a literary form, the epic draws upon and grows out of songs of lament and songs of praise. But the grand epics like Gilgamesh or the Iliad, whether oral or written, introduce a note of tragedy; they view heroism not from the perspective of the battle, as if it were now taking place, but from a time after the war, and they explore the inevitable conflict that the new circumstances call forth. Thus, the epic is often a meditation upon and an exploration of the inevitable conflict between, on the one hand, the forces represented by the absolute commitment by the powerful and heroic male to energy and battle and, on the other, the forces that represent newly emerging social structures and value systems.

Gilgamesh is an epic hero, and in his epic we find a constant conflict between the heroic values that the warrior Gilgamesh represented and those other values that define Mesopotamian culture, values that appear in the form of Gilgamesh's various identities. For, in addition to being a hero, Gilgamesh is also a man, a king, and a god, and he must come to terms with these several identities. The basic conflict is that between the extraordinary and the normal. In the Old Babylonian version of the Epic, the conflict is that of hero vs. man; in the eleven-tablet version, it is that of hero vs. king; and in the twelve-tablet version, it is that of hero vs. god. In each version, the heroic identity breaks down as an approach to life because of the occurrence of an event, and a new solution must be found in order to resolve the conflict that (re)emerges thereupon. In the Old Babylonian version, Gilgamesh

finds a meaningful context within the bosom of the family, begetting children who represent him in the future. In the eleven-tablet version, he becomes a responsible ruler who rules his community with wisdom and creates human cultural achievements that outlast his own reign and are passed down to future generations. In the twelve-tablet version, he readies himself to become a normal god who judges dead human beings for eternity.

The struggles between the desires of the warrior and those of the normal man (Old Babylonian version) seem to find their parallel in the Iliad. That work is less about the Trojan War and more about Achilles. Achilles stands apart from his social and literary environment, and the work describes his emotional journey. It is thought that his story forms a discrete and late strand in the evolution of the Iliad. It has been noticed that Near Eastern themes and influences are particularly evident in the Achilles story and that a significant number of parallels exist between Achilles and Gilgamesh. Accordingly, it has been suggested that the Epic of Gilgamesh had a part in the formation of the Achilles story.

For us, it is significant that Achilles experiences some of the deepest human emotions. In his story, we see a struggle in the person of the hero between his commitment to the absolute values of the hero and the need to compromise; that is, a struggle between the vengeful warrior and the empathic human being. Although Achilles' commitment to absolutes defines the course of public events, his human side – his acceptance of his self as one who experiences normal sympathies – defines the private evolution of his character. He stands apart, but, in the end, his love of Patroclus, his reconciliation with Priam, and his thoughts about his father represent the ascendancy of his human side, of his identification with the human family.

In any case, I would suggest that the first stage of development of the Epic of Gilgamesh, that stage which centers upon the conflict between standing apart and being a member of a human family and leading a normal life, parallels the story and journey of Achilles, and thus finds its reflection (and our construction perhaps finds some support) in the Iliad.

For the second stage of the development of the Epic of Gilgamesh, I suggest that we turn to the story of Odysseus. Again, parallels have been found between the two accounts, and the influence of the Epic of Gilgamesh has often been noticed. For our purposes, it is therefore significant that the wanderings of Odysseus tell the story of the warrior-king who after a war wanders for ten years and experiences many adventures prior to returning to a peaceful milieu wherein he resumes the social responsibilities of a king. True, the Odyssey seems sometimes to be primarily about Odysseus's homecoming and the resumption of his role as master of his household and husband of his wife. But clearly, the theme of kingship and the regaining of the kingship by Odysseus have been incorporated into this tale. For he is the ideal leader; he must therefore learn self-control and struggle against temptations and his own impulses in order to hold the course and return to his kingdom and kingship. Thus, our second

stage of development, the version which focuses upon the struggle between the values of the warrior and those of the king (a version in which also Gilgamesh must learn self-control), finds its parallel in the wanderings of Odysseus.

Thus, the first two stages of development of the Epic of Gilgamesh seem to find their parallel (and our construction some support) in the Homeric materials. But when we examine the Homeric materials in light of the third stage of development of the Epic of Gilgamesh, we are led to wonder whether in this instance the Greek materials might not reflect a different process of development. In the third stage, Gilgamesh attains immortality by first resisting but then assuming the cultic role as judge of the netherworld by means of Enkidu's descent and ascent in Tablet XII. But whereas in the Epic of Gilgamesh, the cultic vision seems to define the third and last stage of development of the epic itself, it has been asserted that the Greek hero attains actual immortality through cult<sup>10</sup> and not through epic. I refer to Nagy's argument that Greek cult and epic treat the hero in two separate ways. The hero is both human and divine. Epic asserts the hero's humanity; through fame and praise, he achieves a human form of immortality. But it is in cult and not in epic that he becomes a divinity and thereby attains actual immortality.<sup>11</sup>

## II.

Perhaps the Greek materials do not provide a parallel to the cultically oriented third stage that I have posited for the Epic of Gilgamesh. But in thinking about the prob-

lem and especially about the relationship of GE Tablet XII to the Greek material, I note that Book 11 of the Odyssey, Odysseus' visit to the netherworld, appears to parallel

<sup>10</sup> Needless to say, Gilgamesh attains immortality also through the actual cult.

<sup>11</sup> See G. Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans: Concepts of*

*the Hero in Archaic Greek Poetry* (Baltimore/London, 1979), x-xi (Foreword by J. M. Redfield) and 114-17.

Tablet XII of the Epic of Gilgamesh, at least on a thematic and structural level. This observation suggests a specific connection between the Akkadian and Greek epics and points to the possibility that some literary developments that took place in the Epic of Gilgamesh may also have taken place in the Odyssey. And at this juncture, it is especially gratifying to observe a concrete literary connection, for however interesting the comparison of ideological stages may be, they sometimes suffer (as here perhaps) from too much abstraction and generalization.

This, then, brings me to my second topic, the suggestion that some literary developments may be common to both the Epic of Gilgamesh and the Odyssey. For this purpose, I shall make use of some well-known observations made by classicists about the Odyssey together with my own conclusions about the history of the Epic of Gilgamesh, conclusions originally reached without recourse to the Odyssey.

First, the historical conclusions about the Epic of Gilgamesh.

1. In the original Epic, Gilgamesh's wanderings ended with Siduri. She informed Gilgamesh that he could not attain immortality by remaining with her and advised him to live a human life of celebration and family relationship. She then sent him with the boatman directly back to Uruk. The Epic did not originally include a section dealing with Utnapishtim.<sup>12</sup>

2. Subsequently, the Utnapishtim episode was developed in Tablet XI, and Siduri's role was diminished. Her famous speech

was suppressed, and she became only one more stop on the way to Utnapishtim.<sup>13</sup>

3. Into this new version, the Ishtar episode of Tablet VI was inserted.<sup>14</sup>

4. Finally, during the last stage of the development of the Epic, Tablet XII was added after the visit to Utnapishtim and in response to Tablet VI.<sup>15</sup>

Turning to the Odyssey, we may recall the oft-made observations that:

1) The netherworld scene in Book 11 disrupts the Circe episode, causing Odysseus to leave and then to return to Circe.

2) The Circe episode itself is a doublet of sorts to that of Calypso.

It has been argued repeatedly that Book 11 of the Odyssey is an insertion into the text. Note, for example, the elegant argument offered by Page.<sup>16</sup> This conclusion seems reasonable; moreover, it parallels and finds support in the generally accepted opinion that also Tablet XII, which centers on a visit to and report about the netherworld, constitutes a late addition to the Epic of Gilgamesh. On a structural level, therefore, we should compare Book 11 and Tiresias to GE Tablet XII and Enkidu, rather than to (or in addition to) GE Tablet XI and Utnapishtim. Accordingly, there can be little doubt that Odysseus's encounter with Circe and his trip to the netherworld in Book 11 parallel Tablets VI and XII of the Epic of Gilgamesh. And should further support be necessary for the link that I posit between Tablets VI and XII, then the juxtaposition of the Circe episode and Book 11

<sup>12</sup> See my "Gilgamesh's Request and Siduri's Denial. Part I: The Meaning of the Dialogue and Its Implications for the History of the Epic," in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo*, ed. M. E. Cohen et al., (Bethesda, Maryland, 1993), 1-14, esp. 9-13.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>14</sup> See my "Ishtar's Proposal and Gilgamesh's Refusal: An Interpretation of *The Gilgamesh Epic*, Tablet 6, Lines

1-79," *History of Religions* 26 (1986), 143-87, esp. 179ff.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 183-187.

<sup>16</sup> D. Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford, 1955), 21-51. For a unitarian position, see, e.g., A. Heubeck and A. Hoekstra, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey* (Oxford, 1989), vol. 2, 75-77; cf., e.g., C. Sourvinou-Inwood, 'Reading' *Greek Death: To the End of the Classical Period* (Oxford, 1995), 70-76, for a recent discussion which takes a middle position.

provides it. In any case, if my relative chronology regarding Tablets VI and XII is correct, we may suggest that an analogous development took place in the *Odyssey*, namely, the late addition of the Circe scene to Odysseus' narration and the subsequent insertion of Book 11 into that scene. This is supported by the fact that while Circe has been compared to Siduri, she has also been compared to and seems actually to be more like Ishtar. Hence, the functional parallel Calypso//Siduri belongs to an earlier version and is supplemented by a later Circe//Ishtar parallelism.<sup>17</sup>

More generally, we may ask our classicists to test the *Odyssey* in light of the following historical scheme suggested by the Epic of Gilgamesh.

1. Originally, the early version of the Epic of Gilgamesh reaches its climax in Gilgamesh's visit to Siduri, followed immediately by his journey home. Parallel to this stage, an early version of the *Odyssey* presented the wanderings of Odysseus as having ended with his visit to Calypso, followed by his journey home to Ithaca.
2. Subsequently, the Utnapishtim episode is added in the Epic of Gilgamesh between Gilgamesh's departure from Siduri and his arrival in Uruk; following this, the actual re-telling of the flood story is inserted into that episode. Parallel to this, the Phæacian episode is added between Odysseus's departure from Calypso and his arrival in Ithaca, and an account of some of the earlier wanderings is subsequently inserted.<sup>18</sup>
3. Finally, the encounter with Ishtar is inserted in GE Tablet VI, to which is then added the account of Enkidu's descent to and ascent from the netherworld in GE Tab-

let XII. Parallel to this, the Circe account is added to the series of tales recited by Odysseus and, subsequently, the descent to the netherworld of Book 11 is inserted into that account.

This historical reconstruction seems to me to be useful in several regards. It may provide an additional set of tools for the analyst of the *Odyssey*. In any case, it should resolve a set of apparent contradictions that I have noticed in the secondary literature regarding the relationship between the Epic of Gilgamesh and the *Odyssey*. It is obvious that Ishtar and Siduri have very different natures and functions. All the same, Circe is compared by some to Ishtar, by others to Siduri, and sometimes to both. Utnapishtim and Enkidu and their environs are surely different from each other, as are Alcinous and Tiresias. And yet, Utnapishtim has been compared by some to Alcinous and the Phæacians and by others to Tiresias and the netherworld setting, as has Enkidu. It may therefore be suggested that the drawing of contradictory parallels between the two works may sometimes be simply a result of the fact that as the *Odyssey* developed, later patterns were imposed on or introduced alongside earlier ones, and new characters took their place alongside older ones. In this sense, also the *Odyssey* is a palimpsest or, rather, a mosaic.

I am not certain whether the developments that seem to be common to both the Epic of Gilgamesh and the *Odyssey* reflect actual contact or are in the nature of parallel developments, whether the parallels between the Epic of Gilgamesh and (the *Iliad* and) the *Odyssey* are an indication of simi-

<sup>17</sup> Note that the role of Siduri is downplayed in later Akkadian versions and therefore her impact on an early stage of development of the Greek tradition is more plausible than her impact on later materials. Moreover, the later Circe would more likely have been modeled on Ishtar, who similarly became important only at a later stage of the development of the Epic of Gilgamesh. This

supports the argument that Calypso belongs to an earlier layer of the *Odyssey* than does Circe.

<sup>18</sup> Note the occurrence in both the Phæacian and Utnapishtim episodes, of the literary device of re-telling past events (Odysseus's earlier wanderings: the flood account).

lar developments, thereby providing material for arguments by analogy, or whether they indicate actual contact and influence of one work on the other. Parallel independent development seems unlikely because the similarities are much too specific, and thus we should probably assume actual contact. If so, then presumably the Epic of Gilgamesh influenced the *Odyssey* rather than the reverse. But if that is the case, then we may have to consider the possibility that contact took place at the several stages of literary development that we have suggested.

But multiple contacts seem very unlikely. The difficulty of assuming multiple contacts may not be unrelated to the fact that different levels of the Epic of Gilgamesh seem to show up alongside each other in the individual Homeric works. Thus, as noted earlier, the story of Achilles seems to parallel the first stage of development of the Epic of Gilgamesh, the conflict between the warrior and the man, and the story of Odysseus seems to parallel the second stage. Yet, the Achilles story is said to contain parallels to the latest version of the Epic as well, and

the *Odyssey* surely contains parallels to its earliest version. So given that several contacts seems problematic, as does the apparent mixing of early and late in the Greek materials, perhaps the Homeric works and the Epic of Gilgamesh initially developed independently, though they may have drawn upon a common narrative tradition. But, at a later stage, the Homeric tradition came into contact with the developed Gilgamesh account, a contact that allowed for the assimilation of the developed pattern or structure of the twelve-tablet version.

I usually hesitate to make suggestions in fields in which I am not a specialist, but comparison often requires just that, and I have welcomed the opportunity to compare Akkadian and Greek materials, both because the comparison of materials from the Classical and the Mesopotamian worlds is methodologically valid and because the results of such comparison may be significant for our understanding of the history of Western culture. So I am happy to end by apologizing to my classical colleagues and leaving the resolution of this problem to them.