

Gilgamesh

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Gilgamesh is the king of the city of Uruk in Babylonia, a region located on the river Euphrates in what is today called Iraq. Part god and part human, Gilgamesh knows that he is mortal and will die someday, which infuriates him and causes him to terrorize his people. He believes himself to be the strongest, most powerful super-human to ever exist, but is enraged that he is not immortal and seeks a way to become so. One day, tired of being oppressed by their king, the people of Uruk call upon the gods to help them. The gods create a man, Enkidu, an equal to Gilgamesh, who possesses great strength and cunning. Enkidu comes to Uruk to meet Gilgamesh, and—after they fight—become great friends.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu travel to the distant Cedar Forest together, driven by Gilgamesh's desire to be immortalized through the building of a giant wall of cedar trees around the city of Uruk. At the gate of the forest, they battle the powerful demon Hambaba the Terrible, the guardian of the precious trees, and succeed in killing him. Before they chop off his head, however, Hambaba places a curse on Enkidu declaring that he will be the first to die. After Gilgamesh and Enkidu successfully transport the giant trees to the city and are basking in their glory of building the great wall, Enkidu falls ill, as the curse comes true. He suffers for twelve days until he finally succumbs to death.

Gilgamesh is haunted by the death of his friend, and is now determined, finally, to attain his own immortality. He decides to travel to the end of the world to find Utnapishtim and his wife, the only mortal humans to ever be granted eternal life.

The journey to Utnapishtim is extremely perilous and long, and Gilgamesh encounters many hazards along the way. He first arrives at Mount Mashu, the place that guards the rising and the setting of the sun, and which is defended by two large scorpion-men. These giant beasts try to dissuade Gilgamesh from continuing on such a hazardous journey, but they nonetheless allow him to pass when they realize he will not turn back. Gilgamesh next enters the Land of Night, where no light ever appears. He travels far within these dark lands until he finally

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reaches a bright garden filled with sparkling gems and precious stones. It is here that he enters a tavern by the sea and meets a woman named Siduri. Gilgamesh asks her how to find Utnapishtim; but, like the scorpion-men, she tells him his journey is dangerous and begs him to return home. When Gilgamesh again refuses, she decides to help him by telling him of Urshanabi, the ferryman, who works for Utnapishtim.

When Gilgamesh approaches Urshanabi and demands he be taken across the waters to Utnapishtim, he is met with refusal. The ferryman claims it is impossible to cross the Waters of Death, for any mortals who touch the waters will die. He says, however, that if Gilgamesh cuts down tall trees to use as poles with which to push the boat across, they would certainly arrive safely. Gilgamesh does this, and the travelers are able to cross the dangerous waters without incident.

Upon reaching the shore, Gilgamesh encounters an old man. He tells this stranger that he is seeking Utnapishtim so he can discover the secret of eternal life. The strange man counsels Gilgamesh that all life is transitory, and death irrevocably comes to all mortals. At this point, Gilgamesh realizes that the man to whom he is speaking is the one he seeks, and he is surprised at the old and ragged appearance of someone who is immortal. Gilgamesh then asks Utnapishtim how he received the gift of eternal life, and Utnapishtim tells him the story of the Flood.

Before the Flood, Utnapishtim begins, there was a city called Shuruppak on the great river Euphrates. The gods, angered by the noise and callousness of humans, held council and agreed to send a great flood to destroy all humanity. All would have been lost, including Utnapishtim, if it were not for Ea, the god of humanity. Ea revealed this plan to Utnapishtim, advising him to build a great boat and to bring all living things onto it. This would be the only way to survive the wrath of the gods.

Utnapishtim did what Ea had suggested, and loaded the boat with silver, gold, jewels, and a sampling of all the living things of the earth. He then launched the boat just as Ea ordered him into the

boat and told him to close the door behind him. The gods sent the Flood then, thereby destroying the earth and even frightening themselves. The great Flood lasted seven days and seven nights, which were full of loud thunder that caused the earth to split and swallow up the light. After the storm was over, Utnapishtim looked out of his boat and saw nothing but water and humans turned to stone. He wept long for the loss of humanity.

After seven more days, his boat came to rest on top of Mount Nimush, which was now just below the surface of the water. On the seventh day, Utnapishtim sent a dove into the air to see if it could land. The dove returned, having found no perch. He then released a swallow, which also came back as it had found no tree on which to land. He sent off a raven next, and when this bird did not return and the waters had receded, he herded all the animals off the boat onto land. The gods discovered Utnapishtim and his boat, and were angered that their plan to destroy all of humanity had failed.

The god Enlil, who had been the one to propose the destruction of all humans, blamed Ea for telling Utnapishtim of the plan and allowing him to survive. Ea convinced Enlil to be merciful, and Enlil decided to bless Utnapishtim and his wife by granting them eternal life and sending them to live in the Far-Away at the source of all rivers.

Utnapishtim finishes telling his tale to Gilgamesh, and goes on to offer him his own chance at immortality. If Gilgamesh can stay awake for six days and seven nights, Utnapishtim says, he too will become immortal. Gilgamesh is thrilled for this opportunity, for there is nothing he desires more in the world than to be granted eternal life. However, the instant he sits down on the shore, he falls asleep and continues to sleep for the full six days and seven nights. Each day he sleeps, Utnapishtim places a freshly-baked loaf of bread at his feet in order to prove to him how long he has slept.

When Gilgamesh awakes on the seventh day, he does not believe that he has slept the entire time. Utnapishtim shows him the

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bread, the loaves from the first few days moldy and stale. Gilgamesh is distraught, and begins to weep. Utnapishtim's wife takes pity on him, and convinces her husband to tell Gilgamesh of the secret plant that will make him young again. In order to retrieve this plant, which is at the bottom of a mighty river, Gilgamesh ties heavy stones to his legs and sinks to the bottom. He plucks the plant, unties his ropes, and comes to the surface with it. Gilgamesh is uncertain as to the power of this plant, and he decides to test it on someone else before trying it himself. He bids farewell to Utnapishtim and his wife, and he begins the long road back to Uruk with the magic plant in hand.

After having crossed the Waters of Death a second time, Gilgamesh and Urshanabi, the ferryman, fall asleep on the shore. While they sleep, a snake slithers up and takes the plant from the slumbering Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh is devastated at this event when he finally wakes. He weeps, mourning his failed attempt to find eternal life, and eventually returns to Uruk. He realizes, however, that the only reason Utnapishtim was granted eternal life was because of a decision made by the gods. A great Flood such as Utnapishtim described would likely never occur again, and Gilgamesh must accept his mortality.

To make up for his eventual death, Gilgamesh made many attempts to immortalize himself through the building of the walls of Uruk, etching stories onto stone tablets, and telling stories, of which this epic is one part.