

**Death and the Hero:
the Story of Gilgamesh (II)**

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In the last issue of *Labyrinth*, we met the hero Gilgamesh and his companion Enkidu, and heard about some of their adventures. We also saw how the heroic pair had offended the gods. Killing the terrible monster Humbaba might have been a beneficial act to humankind, and one guaranteed to make Gilgamesh and Enkidu's names live forever – but it also brought with it the hostility of the god Enlil, whose creature and servant Humbaba was. Even more dangerous was the heroes' treatment of the goddess Ishtar – Gilgamesh's rejection of her amorous advances and Enkidu's contempt, vividly captured in that moment when he strikes her in the face with the genitals of the monstrous Bull of Heaven. The gods will not allow Gilgamesh and Enkidu to continue on this arrogant course, and determine that one of the two must die.

The sentence of the gods falls on Enkidu, and a fatal sickness comes upon him. "I must sit down on the threshold of the dead," he laments, "and never again will I see my dear brother with my eyes." For twelve days Enkidu lies dying, with Gilgamesh weeping by his side. And when Enkidu finally succumbs, Gilgamesh is completely inconsolable:

He touched his heart but it did not beat, nor did he lift his eyes again. When Gilgamesh touched his heart it did not beat. So Gilgamesh laid a veil, as one veils the bride, over his friend. He began to rage like a lion, like a lioness robbed of her whelps. This way and that he paced round the bed, he tore out his hair and strewed it around. He dragged off his splendid robes and flung them down as though they were abominations. In the first light of dawn Gilgamesh cried out, "I made you rest on a royal bed, you reclined on a couch at my left hand, the princes of the earth kissed your feet. I will cause all the people of Uruk to weep over you and raise the dirge of the dead. The joyful people will stoop with sorrow; and when you have gone to the earth I will let my hair grow long for your sake, I will wander through the wilderness in the skin of a lion." The next day also, in the first light, Gilgamesh lamented; seven days and seven nights he wept for Enkidu, until the worm fastened on him. Only then he gave him up to the earth, for the Arunnaki, the judges of the dead, had seized him.

Gilgamesh's intense grief is reminiscent of Achilles's grief for Patroclus in the *Iliad*. There too, the hero loses his other half, his alter ego, his second self. It is as though the hero himself has experienced death, so close is the relationship with his companion. Indeed, it seems that the deaths of both Patroclus and Enkidu are simply substitutes for the death of the hero himself: Patroclus dies wearing Achilles's armour, and Enkidu dies for Gilgamesh's actions, not only his own. So it is not surprising that Homer expresses the anguish of Achilles in much the same terms as the Epic of Gilgamesh had described the lamentations of the Mesopotamian hero:

All night long the Achaeans wept and wailed for Patroclus. The son of Peleus was their leader in the melancholy dirge. He laid his man-killing hands on his comrade's breast and uttered piteous groans, like a bearded lion when a huntsman has stolen his cubs from a thicket and he comes back too late, discovers his loss and follows the man's trail through glade after glade, hoping in his misery to track him down. Thus Achilles groaned among his Myrmidons.

For both Achilles and Gilgamesh, the death of their sidekick is a catalyst. In Achilles's case, it prompts him to re-enter the battle with the Trojans, in a frenzied rage seeking to kill Hector, who had brought about the death of Patroclus. Achilles thus tries to deny and defy death by killing its agent. But Enkidu had died of an illness sent by the gods, so Gilgamesh is denied such an outlet. Instead, haunted now not only by the death of his friend but also by thoughts of his own death, he sets out on the ultimate quest: the search for immortality.

Bitterly Gilgamesh wept for his friend Enkidu; he wandered over the wilderness as a hunter, he roamed over the plains; in his bitterness he cried, "How can I rest, how can I be at peace? Despair is in my heart. What my brother is now, that shall I be when I am dead. Because I am afraid of death I will go as best I can to find Utnapishtim whom they call the Faraway, for he has entered the assembly of the gods." So Gilgamesh traveled over the wilderness, he wandered over the grasslands, a long journey, in search of Utnapishtim, whom the gods took after the flood; and they set him to live in the land of Dilmun, in the garden of the sun; and to him alone of men they gave everlasting life.

Utnapishtim, “the Faraway”, then, is the goal of Gilgamesh’s journeys. He is the Mesopotamian version of Noah, the only human (along with his nameless wife) to survive the great flood. As a reward, the gods gave him immortality, the only human (along with his wife) to be given this boon. Gilgamesh thinks, not illogically, that if he can reach Utnapishtim, he can learn from him the secret of everlasting life. Death will thereupon be defeated, at least for Gilgamesh personally, if not for all humankind.

Although Gilgamesh is consciously seeking Utnapishtim, at the end of his journey, as the agent of immortality, it is actually the journey itself that represents Gilgamesh’s closest approach to immortality. As one might expect of such a challenging journey, it’s full of the strange and the uncanny, the dangerous and the dreadful. He encounters the lions of the mountain passes, and slaughters them all, like Samson or Hercules. But they are a minor threat compared to what comes next. He must journey beneath the Mountains of Mashu, the peaks that guard the rising and the setting sun, and that are themselves guarded by the terrifying Scorpion Men, half human, half dragon. Twelve leagues in darkness Gilgamesh must travel beneath the mountains, able to see nothing before him and nothing behind him. The journey beneath the earth is symbolic of death itself and the underworld – for Gilgamesh to negotiate it successfully is for him to gain a temporary victory in his battle against death.

Thus it is the journey itself that marks Gilgamesh’s greatest success in his struggle with death. The descent beneath the earth is one of the most powerful symbols of death, vividly employed by Tolkien in the Mines of Moria and the Paths of the Dead. But Gilgamesh must pass through other regions representative of death before he can reach Utnapishtim, most notably the “waters of death” over which he must cross in order to come to Dilmun, where Utnapishtim lives his endless life of ease.

Gilgamesh finally reaches Utnapishtim, after all the toils and dangers of his journey, only to be disappointed in his desire. Utnapishtim points out that he alone (along with his wife) has immortality because of the extraordinary circumstance of his life. He proves to Gilgamesh that he cannot attain eternal life by testing him, challenging him to stay awake for seven days and seven nights: Gilgamesh promptly falls asleep and sleeps for a week. Immortality, it seems, is not for everyone, and in a rather sententious manner (after all, it’s easy for him to talk), Utnapishtim lectures Gilgamesh on his inability to accept mortality:

“There is no permanence. Do we build a house to stand for ever, do we seal a contract to hold for all time? Do brothers divide an inheritance to keep for ever, does the flood-time of rivers endure? It is only the nymph of the dragon-fly who sheds her larva and sees the sun in his glory. From the days of old there is no permanence. The sleeping and the dead, how alike they are, they are like a painted death. What is there between the master and the servant when both have fulfilled their doom?”

Ironically, though, it becomes clear that Utnapishtim too has made a sacrifice when he took on immortality; unlike Gilgamesh, he cannot be heroic. “I look at you now, Utnapishtim,” Gilgamesh says, “and your appearance is no different from mine; there is nothing strange in your features. I thought I should find you like a hero prepared for battle, but you lie here taking your ease on your back.” Heroism lies in the struggle with death, not in the attainment of immortality. Gilgamesh is at his most truly heroic in his journey – had he attained his goal, he would have lost his heroism. And that heroism does bestow immortality of a kind, as Gilgamesh had once recognized, and now finally comes to recognize again. He has come full circle in his quest, but now he has true understanding, an understanding that had eluded him until he experienced the grief and the struggle. The epic itself proves Gilgamesh’s eternal existence. It closes with his death, but his name lives on.

Gilgamesh, the son of Ninsun, lies in the tomb. In those days the lord Gilgamesh departed, the son of Ninsun, the king, peerless, without an equal among men, who did not neglect Enlil his master. O Gilgamesh, lord of Kullab, great is thy praise.