

My instinctive response to the story of Gilgamesh has always been to two of its principal themes: friendship and loss. For me, everything in the epic leads to and out of these experiences. The connection between them engaged me once to look back at my own life, at history, at reality divested of formal religions revelation, philosophical reflection, and academic knowledge. I was put by its story-power into a kind of pre-conscious, pre-learned, pre-judgmental state. Two men, first fighting, then befriending, one facing death, the other the pain of loss, the survivor's embarking on an impossible journey to find eternal life, only to lose what he was given to a serpent, was a relentlessly poignant, tragic story stripped bare of illusion and spiritual hope, yet in its hero's defiance of death it revealed a nobility of soul inherent in our human condition.

The depth of loss, the resounding voice of grief, became a comfort to me and has remained so: an unexpected ancient companion to my own fragmented story. But this isn't all that the tale is about. There's the relationship of gods to humanity, the sacredness of the walled citadel to be maintained by the king, the politics of the elders, the social structuring, the position of women, the kindredness of animal and man and all of nature to humanity, nature's animateness and plenitude, justice and injustice, the cross-vitalization between city and steppe, the boundaries between the lawful and the forbidden, the effect of all these on the two friends, and of course history.

One can adapt, as several authors have done, certain parts to the exclusion of other parts, emphasizing the grandly heroic as opposed to human vulnerability, for instance. Also, because of the flood story so close in detail to the later biblical account but so different in spirit, one might regard this as a religious narrative centered on the quest for eternal life and on the quasi-prophetic figure of Utnapishtim, who was chosen with his wife to build the ark and with the selected animals to survive the divinely ordered devastation. In the ancient Near East I believe such a reading is cautiously justifiable, given that region's abundant succession of cultures and assimilative power of myths and religious configurations. While I suggested a compassionate One, humanly hoped for beyond all the irresponsible, uncompassionate gods, my retelling was in no way theological in intent or spirit, but emphatically human in its depictions of aspirations and sufferings and in its naked, essential understanding of reality.

For me, friendship and loss formed the delicate yet enduring chain that linked together the various pearls presented episodically throughout the story. Hence my constant echoes of the one and repeated foreshadowings of the other.

As regards the role of personal experience in the retelling of such a story, I believe that Gilgamesh came to me out of a void I perceived early in my life. The power of myth was felt in its unexpected ambush of reality itself as I knew it. Its narrative form called for immediacy of response and simplicity of style. And though the passion to respond became coupled with the need to understand its meaning, the latter remained hidden within the former, the telling of which was paramount.

Herbert Mason, December 2002