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Gilgamesh and Christian Scripture: What are the Connections?

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* has long been considered the first epic in all of human history – at least the earliest of all epics. This Mesopotamian story, being written centuries before the Bible, depicts a demigod named Gilgamesh who goes on a heroic journey with his greatest companion, Enkidu. The characters within the *Epic of Gilgamesh* share striking similarities with infamous characters from the Bible, especially those in the Old Testament. In multiple Old Testament passages, the Hebrew writers utilized ideas and character traits from the Gilgamesh Epic that conveyed a significant theological message to their audience. Though polemical by nature, these reflected ideas and characters serve to instruct the audience of ancient Israelites who were living in the world of ancient near eastern literature. The content of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is unique and foundational to several biblical passages, and the Hebrew writers of the Old Testament used key elements from the epic to demonstrate the spiritual significance of specific characters, events, and morals.

A key event the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the fight between Enkidu and Gilgamesh, which is reflected in the account of Jacob and the Angel of YHWH. Esther Hamori, associate professor of Hebrew Bible at Union Theological Seminary, describes the concrete connections between the epic and the biblical account of Jacob's wrestling match in the *Journal of Biblical Literature*. In her article, she says, "Many intriguing parallels stand out between the fight scenes. . . in both stories the match functions as a rite of passage. . . Each hero is deliberately sought out by his

opponent. . .” (Hamori, 628). These parallels offer an interesting view of the Hebrew scriptures, one that is not typically held by the majority of Christians and Jews. Could the author who records Jacob’s wrestling be utilizing the structure of the fight scene from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to convey a theological idea? It is certainly clear, as more comparative studies are made, that both narratives are interrelated in various ways that could answer the previous question more completely. The purpose of Jacob wrestling with the Angel is to obtain the blessing of God for his posterity. The purpose of Gilgamesh wrestling with Enkidu was for Gilgamesh to be blessed by Enkidu for the sake of showing mercy to Uruk, the city in which Gilgamesh was formerly a harsh and unbearable ruler. Each wrestling match sends the message of the main characters requiring endorsement from the other. Jacob wished to be blessed by the Angel for the sake of being God’s chosen, while Gilgamesh wished to fight with Enkidu to prove the worthiness of his kingship. By the end of both matches, the one being fought against eventually becomes the fighter’s closest ally. For Jacob, it was the Angel of YHWH, the leader of the Armies of Heaven. For Gilgamesh, it was Enkidu, his companion in heroic conquests. Both of these narratives, when studied comparatively, reveal the context of the Hebrew writer’s theological messaging in the culture of the ancient near east.

A unique character in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is Utnapishtim, a “mortal who possesses the secret of life” (Magill, 938) that is paralleled with the character of Noah in the Hebrew account of the flood. In the account of Noah and the flood, a man of many years is instructed by God to build a large boat for the sake of preserving the animal and human life of the earth from the flood of God’s judgement. We find that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* presents a similar character. Donald Mills, Professor Emeritus of the classics at Syracuse University, mentions this connection in his book *The Hero and the Sea*. He says, “With the reality of Enkidu’s death established in his

consciousness, Gilgamesh sets off on the long and lonely journey to Utnapishtim, the Babylonian equivalent of Noah, hoping to learn from him the secret of immortality. Instead, he hears of the story of the great flood and Utnapishtim's role in it" (Donald, 23). All throughout the narrative, Utnapishtim shares various characteristics with Noah. The longevity of Noah's life, as a man who lived for centuries, could possibly be connected to Utnapishtim's "secret of immortality," since the account of Noah records that mankind lost its longevity after the flood. The fact that Utnapishtim in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is recognized as the central figure of wisdom and righteousness is another tell-tale sign that Noah is connected to Utnapishtim, since Noah was considered to be the only righteous one to remain on the earth at the time of the flood. The correlation between Utnapishtim and Noah provides more concrete evidence that the writers of the Bible were familiar with the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, using key ideas from the narrative to describe the account from the Israelite perspective.

A main idea that the *Epic of Gilgamesh* emphasizes is the brevity of mankind and the lively nature of the sun, which is evident within the writings of Qoheleth – King Solomon – in the book of Ecclesiastes. The overarching theme of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is Gilgamesh's acceptance of the inevitability of death, that there is no true path to immortality that would prevent him from suffering the same fate as his friend, Enkidu. Gilgamesh's acceptance of death and realization of having little effect on their destiny is expounded upon by Gerald Janzen, a theologian who connects Gilgamesh's statements to the words of Qoheleth. In an article published in *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, he quotes Gilgamesh and says, "the dramatic exploration of human mortality vis-à-vis the immortality of the gods arrives at the conclusion, 'only the gods live forever with the sun; as for human beings their days are numbered; whatever they achieve is but wind'" (Janzen, 466). Janzen then goes on to compare this quoted statement

with what King Solomon stated in Ecclesiastes 11:7-8, which describes the brightness of life that is expressed by the sun that soon sets and goes away, symbolizing death and despair (KJV). The setting of the sun is expressed all throughout the book of Ecclesiastes to describe the inevitability of death, but the origin of this idea is unknown. Where could Solomon have received the idea that the placement of the sun in the sky could symbolize life or death? Janzen explains Solomon's words considering what Gilgamesh said, which came to an agreement: those under the sun were doomed to die, and their works are nothing but vanity. The idea of being under the sun, as King Solomon emphasizes throughout the book of Ecclesiastes, when it is connected to its possible context in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, reveals the understanding of life and death in the mind of the ancient near eastern reader. King Solomon's possible use of Gilgamesh's metaphor of the sun presents another piece of evidence that could prove the interconnectedness of both pieces of literature.

The question that each of these connections present is the same: who influenced who? Did Gilgamesh influence the Scriptures, or did the Scriptures influence Gilgamesh? If the purpose of the Scriptures were to be historical documents that explain everything in perfection, the Christian could answer the question without any issue. But the Scriptures are not intended to be historical perfections. They are intended to be literary mosaics that create the overarching motif of God's plan for mankind. Each piece in the mosaic is meant to describe a theological concept that is presented in the context of the culture from which it is originated. This does not mean that they are historically inaccurate, but it indicates that the writers and editors of the Scriptures would frame the narratives of Scripture while considering the writings of their culture. In the same way an expositor will structure their sermons like narratives with concepts from many writers in their culture, the Hebrew writers would do the same. It is a foreign concept to

those with an inaccurate view of Biblical inspiration, and it is rooted in thinking that the writers of the Scriptures are like robots without any influence on what they were writing. Believe it or not, but the Scriptures were written by people just like anybody else, except they were carried along by the hand of God that moved them to write. The Bible was written for us, not to us. Let's let the Scriptures be what they are: ancient near eastern documents written by men that were nurtured by God.

Works Cited:

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