

## THE OLDEST STORY IN THE WORLD

In Iraq, in that place between the Tigris and Euphrates, where Hammurabi created his legal code, *Gilgamesh*--the oldest story in the world, a thousand years older than the Bible--was written. Its hero was a historical king who reigned in the Mesopotamian city of Uruk in about 2750 BCE. In the epic, Gilgamesh has a friend, a wild man named Enkidu. With him Gilgamesh battles monsters, and when Enkidu dies, he is inconsolable. He sets out on a desperate journey to find the one man who can tell him how to escape death. Part of the fascination of *Gilgamesh* is that, like any great work of literature, it has much to tell us about ourselves. In giving voice to grief and fear of death, in portraying love and loyalty, in representing the universal quest for wisdom, it has stayed relevant for centuries.

For two thousand years, all traces of *Gilgamesh* were lost. The baked clay tablets on which it was inscribed in cuneiform characters lay buried in the rubble of cities across the ancient Near East, waiting for people from another world to read them. It wasn't until 1853 that the first fragments were discovered among the ruins of Nineveh, and the text was not deciphered and translated for several decades afterward. The story of its discovery and decipherment is itself as fabulous as the tale itself. A young English traveler named Austen Henry Layard, who was passing through the area, heard that there were antiquities buried in the mounds of what is now the city of Mosul. He halted his journey and began excavations in 1844. These mounds turned out to contain the ruined palaces of Nineveh, the ancient capital of Assyria. "In amazement" Layard and his assistant "found room after room lined with carved...reliefs of demons and deities, scenes of battle, royal hunts and ceremonies; doorways flanked by enormous winged bulls and lions; and, inside some of the chambers, tens of thousands of clay tablets inscribed with the curious, and then undeciphered cuneiform script." Over twenty-five thousand of these tablets were shipped back to the British Museum in London.

When cuneiform was officially deciphered in 1857, scholars discovered that the tablets were written in Akkadian, an ancient Semitic language connected to Hebrew and Arabic. Fifteen years went by before anyone noticed the tablets on which Gilgamesh was inscribed. Then, in 1872, a young British Museum curator named George Smith realized that one of the fragments told the story of a Babylonian Noah who survived a great flood sent by the gods. "On looking down the third column," Smith wrote, "my eye caught the statement that the ship rested on the mountains of Nizir, followed by the account of the sending forth of the dove." Smith's announcement, made on December 3, 1872, to the newly formed Society of Biblical Archaeology, that he had discovered an account of the Flood on one of the Assyrian tablets caused a major stir, and soon more fragments of *Gilgamesh* were unearthed at Nineveh and in the ruins of other ancient cities. His translation of the fragments that had been discovered up to then was published in 1876. It was understandably incomplete and contained many mistaken guesses. Nevertheless, it was an important pioneering effort.

Today, more than a century and a quarter later, many more fragments have surfaced, the language is better understood, and scholars can trace the history of the text with some degree of confidence. The consensus is this: Legends about Gilgamesh probably began to arise shortly after the death of the historical king. The earliest texts that have survived, which date from about 2100 BCE, are five separate and independent poems in Sumerian, a non-Semitic language unrelated to any other that we know. It is as distant from Akkadian as Chinese is from English. It became the learned language of ancient Mesopotamia and was part of the what

ancient Scribes were expected to master during their training. Then there was the Old Babylonian version. It was written in Akkadian (of which Babylonian is a dialect) and dates from about 1700 BCE. Eleven fragments have survived, including three tablets that are almost complete. Some five hundred years after the Old Babylonian version was written, a scholar-priest named Sin-leqi-unninni revised and elaborated on it. His epic, which scholars call the Standard Version, is the basis for all modern translations. As of now, with seventy-three fragments discovered, slightly fewer than two thousand of the three thousand lines of the original text exist in readable, continuous form; the rest is damaged or missing, and there are many gaps in the sections that have survived.

What we do know about the story can be summarized as follows:

- The gods had created Enkidu -- a wild creature -- in the hope that he might challenge the arrogant and ruthless Gilgamesh and thus temper his excesses.
- After an initial confrontation, Gilgamesh and Enkidu become friends.
- On an expedition to the west, they confront an evil monster, Humbaba, in the Cedar Forest.
- Enkidu slays Humbaba and, in retribution, the gods take Enkidu's life.
- Enkidu's death so haunts Gilgamesh that he undertakes to seek eternal life, and so Gilgamesh the mighty hero is transformed into Gilgamesh the broken mortal.
- The pursuit of immortality leads Gilgamesh into further adventures. The most famous is his encounter with Utnapishtim, an ancient hero who had survived a tragic flood.
- Gilgamesh, following Utnapishtim's advice, finds a plant capable of rendering him immortal, only to have it stolen by a snake while he sleeps, exhausted from his quest. On this note, the epic ends.



*Tablet 11 of the Epic of Gilgamesh contains an extensive flood story that's similar in many ways to the biblical account in Genesis.*