Guide to Responding

Study Guide for The Epic of Gilgamesh

Main Point Summary/Background:

The Epic of Gilgamesh is more than a story of adventure; it is a meditation on what it means to be human. It reflects humans’ will to understand the meaning of life and to reconcile with mortality. The poem also contains exquisite observations on the life and conduct of the people who lived in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in the second and third millenniums B.C. It tells us about their understanding of kingship, heroism, love, friendship, nature, fate, life, and death.

Note that scholars still argue today over what are the correct original words used in many passages, and sometimes even which is the correct passage due to the fragmentary nature of the text. Scholars also differ as to the meaning and purpose of the epic. Thus, just remember that this text is still not completely understood today.

Related Readings:
This reading is related to the other readings in subunit 2.1, especially those in sub-subunit 2.1.2 “The Fall of Sumer and the Rise of the Babylonian Empire,” such as Jon Lendering’s “Babylonian Empire.” Remember that The Epic of Gilgamesh is considered the most famous of the Babylonian literary works after being translated from Sumerian into Akkadian—the official language of the Babylonians.

Instructions:
Below are excerpts from the reading that help to answer the study questions.
Highlighting or taking notes while you read paired with later outlining and paraphrasing is an excellent method to ensure comprehension and retention of difficult material.

1. Firstly, remember that Gilgamesh was an actual king, who ruled the Sumerian city Uruk around 2700 B.C. Subsequently, even if the epic is nothing but an exaggerated story of the exploits of Gilgamesh, it still tells us a lot about Sumerian civilization and Sumerians’ understanding of kingship.

   Gilgamesh is predestined to become the king of Uruk from birth: “You were given kingship, such was your destiny, everlasting life was not your destiny.” However, from the very beginning of the narration, we learn that he is not a “shepherd” king. He does not show compassion for his subjects. He does not value human life. Very often he goes on a rampage, killing and raping. In fact, such is his cruelty that the gods created Enkidu to tame Gilgamesh: “Let them contend together and leave Uruk in quiet.”

   However, during his journey, Gilgamesh matures as a human and as a king. He learns the value on human life and compassion. By tablet XI, Gilgamesh finally
comes to terms with his life and role in history. Gilgamesh turns his attention away from his personal desires to the welfare of Uruk. He wishes to rule over the city and its inhabitants with wisdom and care.

2. It is clear from the very beginning of the narrative that Gilgamesh does not fit our modern day concept of a hero; in fact, on many occasions, his acts are rather unheroic. Still, Gilgamesh is an ancient epic hero, and subsequently he shares characteristics with other ancient epic heroes, such as Achilles in the Iliad.

Like many other epic heroes, Gilgamesh is different from "normal" humans. He is neither entirely human nor entirely god. He is blessed by the gods and revered by humans. Stronger than anyone he has ever known, he is destined for fame and glory from birth. As his fellow epic heroes, Gilgamesh makes a journey, in which he faces and overcomes impossible or nearly impossible tests. In this journey, he does not obtain what he is looking for, but he gains something of higher value—spiritual knowledge.

3. The poem contains numerous observations on the political life and conduct of the people who lived in Uruk in the second and third millenniums B.C. For starters, we know that this great walled city was ruled by a king. As a king, Gilgamesh ruled with absolute power, from when he was a cruel, unsuccessful monarch to when he becomes a wise one.

The life of the inhabitants of Uruk is a hard one, subjected to the sometimes cruel whimsies of their rulers and their gods. Remember that the gods created Enkidu to appease the people of Uruk: “Let them contend together and leave Uruk in quiet.”

The city must have attracted people from nearby and faraway lands, which is supported by the mention in the epic of citywide celebrations. In ancient civilizations, public celebrations had religious and political/military significance. Performances, used as religious and political propaganda, are a sign of a complex and well-organized civilization.

4. There is a large number of Sumerian gods mentioned in The Epic of Gilgamesh: Anu, the father of the gods; Aruru, the goddess who made Enkidu; Ishtar, the goddess of love; and Shamash, the sun god; among many others. Even though Anu is the father of the gods and subsequently the most powerful of all of them, there is not a clear hierarchical organization of his fellow divinities. The gods of this epic tale are anthropomorphic deities who express human characteristics such as jealousy, hatred, and love.

According to the epic, the gods created humanity: “When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping.” The main role of the gods in the epic is to control their creation; they rule all that in nature that is beyond human control: weather, fertility, love, life, and death. Humans are
utterly at the mercy of gods and their whimsical decisions. In the epic, dreams tend to be the vehicle of communication between gods and humans.

5. Already in the prologue, we learn that Gilgamesh is two-thirds god and one-third man. Gilgamesh is a hero of superhuman strength. Many of his attributes resemble those of the gods; however, he is flawed by being mortal. This conflict between his divinity and humanity sparks his quest for immortality. In the very beginning of the story, Gilgamesh believes himself to be above humans, and the gods have to intercede against him on behalf of the people of Uruk. It is only at the very end of the story that Gilgamesh identifies himself as a human and finally accepts his own mortality.

6. Sumerian society was of patriarchal nature; however, women had extensive rights and played important roles in society. Thus, even though the main characters of the epic are men—Gilgamesh and Enkidu—women play tangential but rather important roles.

In the divine sphere, goddesses such as Ishtar, may not have been as powerful as some of their male counterparts, as for example god Anu; however, they are represented as powerful women, who act with the confidence and decisiveness of their fellow male gods. Ishtar—the goddess of love—is able not only to manipulate men at her will, but also other gods. According to the text, she is the one who, angered by Gilgamesh’s rejection to her marriage proposal, convinces the gods to decide that Enkidu, Gilgamesh’s companion and best friend, must die.

In the human realm, numerous and very important women come to become part of the story. There is Shamhat, the temple prostitute who civilizes Enkidu and brings the friends together; Ninsun, Gilgamesh’s wise mother; Siduri, the philosophical barmaid, again, a wise female figure; and Utanapishtim’s wife, who intercedes on Gilgamesh’s behalf. The obvious role of women in The Epic of Gilgamesh is that of companions. A clear example is Ninsun, Gilgamesh’s mother, who acts as his confidant and advisor. Shamhat, the temple prostitute, represents women’s power to civilize men. By using her “sex appeal,” she seduces Enkidu and tames him. Thus, although women play supporting roles in The Epic of Gilgamesh, their power comes from the fact that they can significantly influence men.

7. Mesopotamia seasonally suffered severe drought and violent floods; nature was uncertain and chaotic. In the epic, the Bull of Heaven, which goddess Ishtar sent to punish Gilgamesh, symbolically represents drought. The flood symbolizes a force of destruction but also rebirth—similar to the story of the Noah’s great flood. Nature (wilderness) is also inhabited by monsters, such as Humbaba, the guardian monster of the cedar forest. Evidently, Sumerians feared nature, because they could not explain natural phenomena and subsequently could not control it or predict it.
8. In the epic, Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that the flood is sent by the gods, who unable to sleep for the uproar raised by mankind, agree to destroy humanity. Like the narrative of Noah in the Bible, the flood in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is a story of punishment and destruction by divine hands, which leads to renewal. Like Noah, Utnapishtim is saved because of his faith and obedience. Ea, the god of water, instructs Utnapishtim to build a boat and "take up into [it] the seed of all living creatures," and he does so. As Noah, Utnapishtim is a symbol of god’s mercy.

9. To understand how Enkidu represents Gilgamesh’s “equal” or “second self,” we first need to understand his nature. The poem tells us that Enkidu is created by the gods as a match for Gilgamesh to appease the people of Uruk and to harness Gilgamesh’s terrible energy. Enkidu would serve as a friend who would set him on the path of heroic deeds. When analyzing Gilgamesh’s dreams, his mother Ninsun tells him: "My son, the axe you saw is a friend...and I, Ninsun, I shall make him your equal. A mighty comrade will come to you, and be his friend's saviour..."

   In fact, Enkidu is equal to Gilgamesh in strength and bravery. He has a hybrid body strong enough to oppose him. "What an enormous man! [the townspeople] whispered. 'How much like Gilgamesh.'" Enkidu’s animal characteristics make him uncivilized and subsequently not subjected to social norms. Because he is not civilized and does not belong in society, he does not have to follow King Gilgamesh’s commands, and thus, on many occasions he is able to work as Gilgamesh’s conscience, or second-self. For example, Enkidu prevents Gilgamesh from entering the house of a bride and bridegroom.

10. Already in the prologue, we learn that Gilgamesh is two-thirds god and one-third man. Gilgamesh is a hero of superhuman strength. Many of his attributes resemble those of the gods; however, he is flawed by being mortal. This conflict between his divinity and humanity sparks his quest for immortality in which he searches for a way to become a god and leave behind his flawed human/mortal body.

   Even though Gilgamesh does not achieve his goal of everlasting life, the text provides answers as to what constitutes immortality for humans: civilization and fame. As the walls of the city of Uruk stood for centuries, reminding humans of this once powerful and cultured Sumerian civilization, the epic attested to the immortality of Gilgamesh’s name.

11. In this epic, death is represented as something that every human must face. Even Gilgamesh, who is two-thirds god and one-third man, is mortal and subsequently he must experience death. "All living creatures born of the flesh shall sit at last in the boat of the West, and when it sinks, when the boat of Magilum sinks, they are gone.”
When Enkidu and Gilgamesh undertake their journey into the forest to confront Humbaba, they encourage each other to face death courageously. Gilgamesh is able to overcome his fear of mortality by understanding the immortality of his name: "I will go to the country where the cedar is felled. I will set up my name in the place where the names of famous men are written." Thus, this spiritual journey teaches Gilgamesh the meaning of humanity and mortality. At the end, Gilgamesh understands that life without death would be meaningless.

12. *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a timeless tale of man’s search for immortality. This moving narrative leads its audience to explore what it means to be human and what is the nature of civilization.