Study Questions for *The Epic of Gilgamesh*

Please write out your answers to the questions that follow and/or take notes on the relevant areas in the text, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It is best to get into the habit of doing this while reading. You should complete this exercise after you have read and highlighted, or noted, areas of the text that you think are important. The purpose of this exercise is to help you follow the story’s intent and to think critically about its teachings. Below are a list of questions that, once answered, will ensure that you have a good outline of the story’s purpose and an in-depth understanding of its historical importance.

**Context:**

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a Sumerian epic poem that dates back to the 3rd millennium B.C. It is one of the earliest known pieces of written literature in the world. Even though this text was unknown to the modern world until 1853, when it was discovered by Hormuzd Rassam, the poem was extremely popular in ancient times and knowledge of it extended throughout Asia and Europe. Its influence can be traced through many texts throughout history, including the Homeric epics—*The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*—and the Bible. The main similarities between *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Homeric epics are in the personalities and characters of heroes and gods, and how their interactions are depicted. The most remarkable parallels between *The Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Bible are in the Old Testament, particularly the narratives of the flood and the Garden of Eden.

The epic seems to be rooted in history, though many of its incidents are legendary. Gilgamesh was an historical king of Uruk in Babylonia, on the River Euphrates in modern Iraq, who lived about 2700 B.C. According to the official Sumerian list of kings, he reigned for 126 years. The stories and myths of his life form what we know as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. A 1st millennium B.C. catalogue of Cuneiform literature named a scribe, Sin-Leqi-Unnini, as the author of the poem; however, modern scholars generally agree that Sin-Leqi Unnini, who most likely lived in Uruk in the Middle Babylonian period (1600-1000 B.C.), was simply an editor trying to record a definitive version of this oral story. Accordingly, the text is generally regarded as anonymous.

**Note on Language:**

In the form you are reading it, the poem is actually a composite of a number of stories from clay tablets found at a variety of sites in Mesopotamia. The most complete version existing today is preserved on 12 clay tablets from the library collection of 7th-century BC Assyrian king Ashurbanipal, but where the
text is disconnected, scholars have used alternate additional fragments to fill in the gaps. Thus, there are alternate versions of the text in existence.

Sometimes this epic poem can be a very difficult reading to understand; there are allegories, metaphors, symbols, and epithets, and the language is often obscure. Please make sure to read the guide to “Mesopotamian Languages and Writing” and the “Glossary” in the back of the book, which will also help you to keep track of the numerous characters.

Questions:

1. In the prologue, Gilgamesh is portrayed as a king-tyrant, but later he becomes a king-hero. According to this, how was a king supposed to behave in Sumerian culture?

2. Based on the presentation of Gilgamesh, how would you define the concept of heroism in Sumerian culture?

3. How would you describe the political organization of the city of Uruk?

4. How are the gods described in the poem? What is their function? How do they intervene in human affairs?

5. In the story, it is emphasized that Gilgamesh is a demigod. Why include this emphasis of his partial divinity? How does it affect his character?

6. What roles do women play in the story? What do their representations suggest about the significance of women in this ancient culture?

7. How is nature depicted? Is the setting of the epic a safe and peaceful place, or dangerous and chaotic?

8. Why does the flood happen? Why is Utnapishtim saved?

9. As Gilgamesh’s “equal” or “second self,” how does Enkidu represent the other side of Gilgamesh?

10. Why does Gilgamesh want to find immortality?

11. How is death regarded in the epic? How do humans come to terms with death?

12. What is the purpose of this story?