PROJECT REPORT No.1

published for:
FAPA mailing 111
May 1965
APA-F
and
sundry friends

by:
Lee Hoffman
basement
54 East 7 Street
New York, NY 10003

project report no. 1

tablets 1 & 2

The Gilgamesh Epic

INTRODUCTION

The noted lay-scholar, Mr. A.W.Tucker, is credited with having introduced Gilgamesh, semi-divine hero of ancient Near Eastern epic, to fandom and vice-versa. As I understand, Mr. Tucker drew upon the University of Chicago Press publication of the translation by Alexander Heidel (with some of the more interesting passages rendered in Latin).

Recently Mr. H.J.Ellison, formerly of Ohio and now of California, made reference to the Gilgamesh legend in his televised story of the Demon With The Glass Hand. Mr. Ellison most probably drew upon the aforementioned works of Mr. Tucker for his information.

I am drawing on a number of sources for my material in connexion with this legend, but am using primarily the Heidel translation mentioned above for actual quotations. This work is based largely on a Babylonian cycle that was put on clay around the 7th Century B.C. This was neither the first nor the last telling of the tale. According to Heidel, the gods who predominate in this version suggest a date of composition around 2,000 B.C., and according to Cyrus H. Gordon in Before The Bible "...the materials out of which the Gilgamesh Epic was fashioned by the second millenium B.C. were circulating orally, and pictorially, (among the Sumerians) around 3,000 B.C."

The Sumerians, a non-Semitic people settled in southern Mesopotamia, are said to have had well-developed arts and crafts which suggest that they originated (or resided for some time) in a mountainous area before their arrival in this location.

As to my own involvement and qualifications, I am neither scholar nor authority--just one who is curious about the archaeology of the Near East, the sources and development of western folklore, mythology, and religion, and a few other things. I am using a part of the Gilgamesh Epic here as a framework to hang such various

thoughts and glosses on as occur to me. I want to make it clear that these are speculative diversions which spring from a vivid imagination and which may--or may not--relate to reality.

FIRST OF ALL

I want to point out that a tale which survives over any period of time, especially in oral tradition, cannot be a static thing. It derives and it contributes continually--it interacts with its environment. No story, no matter how imaginative, is constructed of "whole cloth". The ideas and attitudes of the teller of a story derive from his own experiences, information he has acquired second-hand and his cultural context. It is from these ideas and attitudes that he forms his story, if it is "original", or reshapes it if it is "retold". As the physical and cultural environments of the tellers change, it is reasonable that the stories will be re-formed to fit into the changing world. Even if a canon is established, as in the case of the Biblical tales, and the precise wording retained over an extended period of time, the story will tend to be reshaped in terms of interpretation--of man's understanding of it at any given period of time. The story is "translated" by the listener in terms of his own attitudes.

A simple example of the "translation" is the current use of the expression "The exception proves the rule". Presently the word "prove" carries connotations of a test successfully completed and the cliche is cited to substantiate arguments to the effect that "exceptions" confirm rather than invalidate "rules".

But, of course, the word "prove" has a basic meaning of "test" without the connotation of successful completion. Substitution of this word will clarify the intent of the cliche: "The exception tests the rule". In this wording the phrase has a completely different interpretation than that commonly employed.

A FURTHER DIVERSION

People nowadays don't usually find it too difficult to conceive of other people (ancients and primitives, at least) having different gods and different rituals than they. With effort they may even comprehend that other peoples may have different sets of values. But it seems to be extremely difficult for many people to cope with the concept of others having different patterns of thought and different "rules of logic".

Personally I suspect that this latter concept is something fairly modern. There is a general tendency to ascribe one's own methods of thought to all others and to imbue one's ancestors with one's own ideals.

It was probably easier for the ancients to concieve of their foreign neighbors having different gods than it is for the modern Christian who is trained to the idea that all men worship one god, albeit they sometimes call him by different names. After all, to the ancient, his neighbor's gods were not theory, but fact.

But it may well have been quite difficult for many devout post-Exilic Hebrew monotheists to cope with the idea that the Patriarchs had dealings with "other gods" such as were expressed in the tribal tales. Further, this idea was in contradiction to the teachings that God is one, alone, and eternal, etc. So the situation was re-interpreted in the retelling of the tales, as in Exodus vi-3, where God says, "...I appeared unto Abraham, unto Isaac and unto Jacob, by the name of God Almighty (El Shaddai), but by my name JEHOVAH was I not known to them..."

Up until the time around the end of the First Century B.C. or early in the First Century A.D. when the canon was established Hebraic literature evidently underwent continual reworking in this manner. In perhaps a lesser degree the reworking has continued since then, especially when translations were made. Christian copyists frequently attempted to achieve a better, more complete whole by incorporating various fragments available to them and are said to have occasionally incorporated glosses as well.

Even now one has only to listen to a few of the preachers of different Christain sects to learn to what extent the scriptures are subject to "interpretation" by the lights of our contemporary culture.

I feel one might be safe in assuming that other ancient literature has undergone similar retouching, just as the Arthurian legends were thickly coated with the culture and professed morality of the times when Malory set them to paper, the Romans of Shakes-peare are somewhat Elizabethan in attitude, and Hollywood's Spartacus is much like a 20th Century American in mind.

One can attack the myths and folktales that have survived over the years, looking to distinguish separate layers and remnents of prior tellings in earlier times that have not been completely obliterated by the refurbishing of later times. Frequently one is obliged to reconstruct a whole from just a few fragments. Always, when doing this, one must keep in mind that the reconstruction is just that--a speculative reconstruction. And there is always the probability that it has been affected in its form by one's own thought patterns and culture.

One more thing I want to point out before I get into the Epic is that by 2,000 B.C. the people of the Near East were by no means small tribes in isolated communities. There were highly developed cosmopolitan cities, extensive commerce and much intercommunication.

AT LAST: THE GILGAMESH EPIC

In the beginning of the tale, Gilgamesh is identified as "He who saw everything" and "He who knows all". He is the offspring of a diety and a mortal, as are a large number of ancient folk heros. (In some instances, Gil is said to be one-third god and two-thirds mortal, which presents an interesting problem for mathmeticians.)

Gil is ruler of the city of Uruk and is a man of might. He takes advantage of his position, is given to excesses--especially sexual--and eventually alienates the townspeople, who are particularly unhappy about his insistance on the Right of Kings toward brides. (This practice would seem to relate to the right of gods to firstfruits.) The people appeal to the gods to Do Something About This.

In answer to their pleas, Enlil (a predecessor of Baal) makes up a man like unto Gil. This fellow is called Enkidu and is somewhat of a Tarzan type, running wild with the animals. He is des cribed as covered with hair and knowing nothing of people. He comes from the "steppes" or "mountains", depending which translation of shadu you prefer. (Shadu, by the way, is related to the word Shaddai, mentioned earlier, which the King James renders as Almighty.)

HAIRY MEN (AND RED)

As you know, large wild men covered with hair are common in folklore. Ogres (i.e., flesh- or man-eaters) are often described as such. They may easily be the fictional offspring of hide-wearing barbarians, though in some specific cases they've turned out to be gorillas and other large anthropoids. (The reknown Wild Man Of Borneo, which was covered with red hair, proved to be the orangutan.)

In some cases they may be Yeti, and as Willy Ley has pointed out in Exotic Zoology, they have on occasion been the semi-decomposed bodies of wooly mammoths. (It might be well to keep in mind that the coat of the wooly mammoth has been described as dark reddish and in a decomposed state, its looping tusks might be taken for horns.)

Even in the present, heavy body hair is frequently correlated with strength and virility (and low intellect). Red hair is said to indicate a fiery temper and red-headed people are sometimes said to be the bearers of evil luck.

In the LaRousse Encyclopedia of Mythology there is a photograph of the impression of an Assyrian cylinder seal showing "Gilgamesh and Enkidu struggling with a bull and a lion." There are three sets of figures--two of curly-bearded humans wrestling with bulls and one of a bearded figure in profile with bull-like horns and ears. From

the waist down it is given the legs, hooves and tail of a bull. It is fighting a lion and appears to be plunging a knife into the cat's belly with its left hand.

In Edward Chiera's They Wrote On Clay there is an impression of a different seal, captioned, "The mighty Gilgamesh represented on a seal impression," which shows a very curly-headed fellow with a bull in hand, and a half-man, half-bull struggling with a lion. Other photos in this and other books show seal impressions of similar scenes, indicating that it was a common representation of a popular subject.

All of this implies that Enkidu was, indeed, "covered with hair", at least from the waist down. Also, "...the hair of (his) head is like (that of) a woman..." To quote Cyrus Gordon, "His long hair goes hand in hand with his strength." Gordon further points out the long hair of Samson, the Minoan insistance on long hair for men, and Homer's reference to the Achaeans as long-haired. Frazer, in his Folk-Lore in the Old Testament, goes extensively into the subject of long hair as the seat of one's strength/soul.

Another important hairy man, who was also an outdoorsman, was Esau, who is described in Genesis xxvi 25 as "red, all over like an hairy garment at his birth. Esau was also known as Edom, founder of a people by the same name, and Edom is translated in the King James as "red", although the explanation given is that he was named for the color of the pottage for which he sold his birthright. Adam is also translatable as "red". In this case the explanation is that he was formed of red clay.

Gordon details the significance of red in Before The Bible: "All over the ancient East...red (actually reddish brown) is the colour appropriate for men, and yellow, for women. The frequency of red ochre and yellow ochre in excavated towns suggests that men and women painted themselves with the appropriate colour of ochre. On the paintings of Egypt and Crete, red men and yellow women are quite familiar. The warriors on Etruscan paintings are red. Kret rouged himself to become ceremonially fit. And two of the most heroic men of the Old Testament, Esau and David, are described as naturally red...the colour Xanthos as applied to heros like Achilles probably means reddish brown (rather than 'fair' or 'blond') because it is also applied to horses where it seems to designate 'sorrel'..."

According to the LaRousse red was also popular during the Magdalenian period: "In many cases red ochre...was sprinkled over the corpse's grave...Because of its colour certain primitive peoples of to-day, in particular the Australian aborigines, liken red ochre to blood...and for this reason consider it a symbol of life and strength. It is reasonable to suppose that the ochre spread over the tombs and bodies of Paleolithic man was intended, like the deposits of food, to strengthen the dead one during his journey to

the after-world and his sojourn in his new abode...The Magdalenian skeleton of Hoteaux in the Ain, covered with red ochre, was found in a small trench...The skeleton of Klause in Bavaria...was completely surrounded by a mass of red powder...The corpse of Paviland in Wales was powdered with iron oxide which stained the earth and burial objects, and in some places formed a coating on the bones..." (LaRousse adds, "...the use of red ochre has not been observed in the Mousterian period.")

In The Alchemists by F. Sherwood Taylor, it says in regard to the Chinese, "Substances rich in Yang were those that imparted life and caused longevity. The most highly reputed of these was cinnabar (native red mercuric sulphide)...We may suppose that the red color of (cinnabar) was connected with the red blood of health..."

The LaRousse, referring to a description by Plutarch, tells us that the Egyptian villan-god, Set, "was rough and wild, his skin was white and his hair red--an abomination to the Egyptians, who compared it to the pelt of an ass." According to Glaister, in his Thespis, "Red is the color of Set."

Frazer, in The Golden Bough, says that the Egyptains were in the custom of annually sacrificing a red-haired stranger as the representative of the vegetation-spirit, Osiris; that the Romans sacrificed red puppies to avert the blighting influence of the Dog Star; that the priests of Harran 'clothed in red and smeared with blood, offered a red-haired, red-cheeked man to 'the red planet Mars' in a temple which was painted red and draped with red hangings."

In Revelations xvii-3-4, we find, "and I saw a woman sit upon a scarlet coloured beast, full of the names of blasphemy, having seven heads and ten horns. And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour..." She is a personification of Babylon, in this instance frequently interpreted as a symbol of Rome, and represents evil and corruption.

And, of course, there is the popular portrayal of the Devil as red with horns, tail and cloven hooves.

One more red and hairy man is the Yeti in Willy Ley's Exotic Zoology, described by the Sherpas who saw it as "of the same size as they are themselves--they average 5½ feet in height--and that its whole body, except the face, was covered with reddish-brown hair."

BACK TO THE GILGAMESH EPIC

Enkidu comes to the attention of the local folk when a hunter notes him drinking at the watering hole with the animals, filling in the hunters's pitfalls and breaking his traps. The hunter appeals for help and is given a suggestion for taming the wild man. He is to take a local prostitute (priestess?) to the watering hole

and introduce her to Enkidu. (Although it seems to vary in the obvious details, this brings to my mind the method used for capturing unicorns in the Middle Ages--and it should be noted that in the time and place of the Epic, a prostitute was not a "fallen woman" but rather she was consecrated to the gods. And in relating the harlot's ability to capture the wild man to the virgin's ability with a unicorn it should be remembered that various ancient goddesses were considered to retain/renew their virginity although they indulged extensively in sexual activity. An echo of this concept continues today in the image of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ, who is said to have borne a begotten child to a diety without the loss of her virginity/purity.

With the young lady in question (Shamhat by name) Enkidu spends six days and seven nights (in Latin) and is finally "sated with her charms". He then "set his face toward his game..." but it has been predicted that once he indulged with the lady the animals would "change their attitude toward him". So it is: "when the gazelles saw him, Enkidu, they ran away."

When Enkidu tried to follow after them, he found himself weakened. I think this has Significance, although you might argue that after six days and seven nights anyone would find himself weakened.

Considering the close association of human sexual activities and the fertility of the earth in primitive religions--mass sex rites performed seasonally in order to insure good crops by sympathetic magic, etc.--one might speculate that the taming of Enkidu symbolizes the conversion of man from a nomadic hunter to an urbanized agriculturalist. But more about this later.

SOME LOOKS AT TWO STORIES AT ONCE

It is interesting to observe some of the many things that Enkidu has in common with the better-known hero, Adam, of the Biblical creation tale. To begin with, both are not born of woman but are divinely created. In some versions, Enkidu is specifically formed from clay and given life. (There are quite a few folk traditions cited in Frazer's Folk-Lore in the Old Testament wherein men are created from clay--usually red.)

Both are set among the wild animals after they are created and live, as the animals, off the land which is implied or stated to be a condition of bliss. (It might seem that at the times of the inscribing of both stories men felt the weight of civilization and longed for a happier, simpler life which they imagined man led in some bygone age.)

Both Enkidu and Adam lose their natural simplicity and way of life through the machinations of woman. (Note that the beginnings

of agriculture and domestic life are attributed to women.) Adam succumbs to woman's insistance that he eat fruit and that he acquire knowledge--that "his eyes shall be opened, and (he) shall be as gods, knowing good and evil." As to the exact nature of good and evil, "The eyes of them both were opened and they knew that they were naked." Although sex isn't specifically mentioned in this account (Genesis, King James version) it certainly seems to be implied, especially since one immediate result of the transgression is God's curse toward Eve that "in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children." (Also one might note the Freudian aspects of the serpent that seduces Eve.) One might also deduce the implication that through the knowledge of sex one "shall be as the gods."

As to Enkidu, there's no question about the nature of the first lesson the woman teaches him.

SIGNIFICANCE

The use of the sexual act to symbolize the beginning of civilization is logical on several counts. According to Ashley Montagu in Man: His First Million Years, "There is every reason to believe that the family, in the form of a more or less permanent union between a male and a female and their children, is the oldest of human institutions." Likely, this family had its start in the discovery that one could insure the opportunity of satisfying sexual desires by maintaining a cooperative relationship with a member of the opposite sex. And cooperation for mutual benefit is the basic element of civilization.

Further, the sex act as symbolic of, and magically related to the fertility of the earth is representative of man's attempt to exert some control over his environment--another symptom of oncoming civilization.

MEN ACQUIRE MORALITY AND OTHER PROBLEMS

In the beginning Adam is naked and happy that way. Enkidu is "clad in a garb like Sumuqan." Sumuqan is simply described as a god of cattle and vegetation. So far I haven't found out how he dressed but evidently his costume wasn't suitable for civilized company for the woman "tore (her) garment in two; with one she clothed him, With the other garment she clothed herself".

After Adam and Eve sinned, "they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons." Later, Unto Adam also and to his wife did the Lord God make coats of skin and clothe them." Then "God sent him (Adam) forth from the garden of Eden to till the ground from whence he was taken."

Shamhat took Enkidu away from the wilderness where she found him

to Uruk, where she taught him the proper use of the bread and strong drink that were set before him.

It is along about here that Enkidu and Adam seem to have parted ways. Adam goes forth in sorrow to found the human race. Enkidu goes to an established city "And becomes like a human being." In the company of Shamhat he eats, drinks, and "makes merry..."

THIS BRINGS US ALMOST TO THE END OF THE SECOND TABLET...

...and definitely to the end of the first Project Report. A combination of too little time and too much else to do makes it impossible to continue this particular exploration right now. I do plan/hope to follow with more Project Reports, possibly continuing with the Gilgamesh Epic and likely indulging in some other speculations which happen to interest me.

--LeeH April 1965

A BIBLIOGRAPHY of the source material quoted in this Project Report.

Chiera, Edward: They Wrote on Clay (pb) Phoenix Books 1960 (c) 1938

Frazer, Sir James G.: The Golden Bough (abgd pb) Anchor Books 1961 (first published in 1890)

Frazer, Sir James: Folk-lore In The Old Testament (abgd) Tudor (c)1929

Glaister, Theodor H.: Thespis (pb) Anchor Books 1961 (c) 1950

Gordon, Cyrus H.: Before the Bible Harper & Row 1962

Heidel, Alexander: The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels University of Chicago Press 1949 (c) 1946

LaRousse Encyclopedia of Mythology: Prometheus Press Edition 1960

Ley, Willy: Exotic Zoology Viking Press 1959

Montagu, Ashley: Man: His First Million Years (pb) Mentor Books 1958

Taylor, F. Sherwood: The Alchemists (pb) Collier Books 1962 (c) 1949

Also Genesis, Exodus and Revelations from the King James Version of the Holy Bible, 1611, Gideons

---

Lee Hoffman
basement
54 East 7th Street
New York, N.Y., 10003