

Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Civilizing Mission: A Political Irony in the Gilgamesh Epic

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I

The Epic of Gilgamesh is one of the most famous epic stories from ancient times. Benjamin Foster is right that the Gilgamesh Epic “offers a splendor of language, imagery, themes, and ideas to the modern reader.”¹ This epic story has been translated into many different modern languages, and as well as into a cartoon movie, a children’s storybook, etc.² Many scholarly books, articles, and essays have been dedicated to investigate, examine, and interpret its meaning.³ This said, this paper is written to examine particularly the relationship between two main characters of the narrative, namely Gilgamesh and Enkidu. A brief survey of scholarship concerning these two characters will be explored in the first part of the paper in order to locate this project in a larger context of scholarship. I will further propose a reading strategy from a postcolonial literary theory. My intention is to see the possibility of using the “civilizing mission” concept to understand the power relation between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. The aim of this paper is to show that Gilgamesh, who has succeeded in ‘civilizing’ and subjecting Enkidu under his influence, turns out ironically to be powerless in the absence of this ‘civilized beast’, Enkidu. This irony of Gilgamesh reflects the irony of colonial empire that is fully dependent on their colony.

II

The publication of Thorkild Jacobsen’s article “How Did Gilgamesh Oppress Uruk” in 1930 has triggered a lot of subsequent discussions concerning the nature of the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Jacobsen basically argues throughout this article that the way Gilgamesh oppresses Uruk, especially in tablet I, is not through labor force, but rather sexual assault. The explanation of this oppression is analyzed through comparing Uruk’s oppression with the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. Jacobsen gives special attention to Gilgamesh’s dream of the coming of an axe, and his mother interpretation of the dream. Jacobsen comes to the conclusion that, “The meaning of the dream, however, is clear from its content. Gilgamesh sees an axe with which he cohabits as with a woman; as the axe is equivalent to Engidu, the dream cannot mean anything but that homosexual intercourse is going to take place between Gilgamesh and the newcomer.”⁴ Because Enkidu is created to be

¹ Benjamin Foster, “Gilgamesh: Sex, Love and the Ascent of Knowledge,” in *Love & Death in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Marvin H. Pope*, ed. Robert M. Good and John H. Marks (Guilford, CT: Four Quarters, 1987), 21.

² See Theodore Ziolkowski, *Gilgamesh among Us: Modern Encounters with the Ancient Epic* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012).

³ For an excellent survey of scholarship around the issue of meaning and literary genre of the Gilgamesh epic, see Andrew R. George, “The Epic of Gilgamesh: Thoughts on Genre and Meaning,” in *Gilgamesh and the World of Assyria: Proceedings of the Conference Held at the Mandelbaum House, the University of Sydney, 21-23 July 2004*, ed. Joseph Azize and Noel Weeks, Ancient Near Eastern Studies Supplement 21 (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 37–66.

⁴ Thorkild Jacobsen, “How Did Gilgamesh Oppress Uruk?,” *Acta Orientalia* 8 (1930): 70. Jerrold S. Cooper of Johns Hopkins University has observed a change in Jacobsen’s view of the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. The republished version of this very article in 1976 and Jacobsen’s another article in

a sexual contender to Gilgamesh, Jacobsen argues that the absence of Enkidu is sexually disastrous to the people in Uruk.⁵

After the publication of this article, scholars are divided in responding to Jacobsen's proposal. Scholars, who reject a homosexual theory, usually argue that the sexual overtone of this relationship is not strong enough to support this conclusion. Benjamin Foster, for example, argues that Gilgamesh and Enkidu are friends, but there is "no sexual basis at all."⁶ Jeffrey Tigay, similarly, does not think that "friends' grasping each other's hands and sleeping together has homosexual overtone."⁷ For him, men in Middle East even today still hold hand in public without any homosexual implication. Even though Jacobsen himself probably has changed his mind, many scholars today still hold to the idea that Gilgamesh and Enkidu are involved in a homoerotic relationship. Jerrold S. Cooper points out that the verb *râmu*⁸ (GE, I.291f) does not have to denote sexual love, but the verb *hababu* "when used for human activity always denotes sexual intercourse."⁹ Anne Draffkorn Kilmer similarly argues that the word play *hassinnu:assinnu* and *kisru:kezru* are strong indications that the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu has a sexual overtone.¹⁰ So, according to Rivkah Harris, the relationship between these two male characters "is not simply that of male and female but that of husband and wife."¹¹ In addition, Susan Ackerman argues that Gilgamesh's rejection of Istar indicates that his relationship with Enkidu, whom he loves like a wife (tablet I), should be understood as "an intimate and exclusive sexual relationship."¹² This list of scholars can go longer. The point that I am trying to show here is the discussion concerning the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu has been centered on sexuality and friendship.

III

In this paper I am proposing the idea of "civilizing mission" as a lens to see the relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu in political terms. In postcolonial studies, the concept of "civilizing mission" has become crucial in understanding the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. Civilizing mission is basically a colonial project to bring the colonial civilization to the uncivilized world. Maria Lugones, an Argentinian literary scholar, explains that the distinction between men and women has become the sort of "mark of civilization." She explains:

With colonial modernity, beginning with the colonization of Americas and Caribbean, the modern hierarchical dichotomous distinction between men and women became known as characteristically human and a mark of civilization. Indigenous peoples of

1990, we no longer see a strong emphasis on sexuality in his analysis. According to Cooper, "Jacobsen seems to have completely abandoned his 1930 idea of homosexual relationship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu." For further discussion see Jerrold S. Cooper, "Buddies in Babylonia: Gilgamesh, Enkidu and Mesopotamian Homosexuality," in *Riches Hidden in Secret Places: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of Thorkild Jacobsen*, ed. I. Tzvi Abusch (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 73–85.

⁵ See Jacobsen, "How Did Gilgamesh Oppress Uruk?," 72.

⁶ Foster, "Gilgamesh: Sex, Love and the Ascent of Knowledge," 22.

⁷ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic* (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci, 2002), 184, n. 22.

⁸ All the quotations of *The Gilgamesh Epic* in this paper are taken from Benjamin R. Foster, trans., *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, A Norton Critical Edition (New York: Norton, 2001).

⁹ Cooper, "Buddies in Babylonia: Gilgamesh, Enkidu and Mesopotamian Homosexuality," 80.

¹⁰ Anne D. Kilmer, "A Note on an Overlooked Word-Play in the Akkadian Gilgamesh," in *Homosexuality in the Ancient World*, ed. Wayne R. Dynes and Stephen Donaldson, vol. 1, Studies in Homosexuality (New York: Garland, 1992), 264.

¹¹ Rivka Harris, "Images of Women in the Gilgamesh Epic," in *Gilgamesh: A Reader*, ed. John R. Maier (Wauconda, IL: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1997), 86.

¹² Susan Ackerman, *When Heroes Love: The Ambiguity of Eros in the Stories of Gilgamesh and David* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 45.

the Americas and enslaved Africans were understood as not human, as animals, as monstrously and aberrantly sexual, wild... The bourgeois white Europeans are civilized; they are fully human... But to the extent that the civilizing mission and conversion to Christianity has been always present in the ideological conception of conquest and colonization... the Priests and the church overtly presented their mission as transforming the colonized animals into human beings through conversion.¹³

As Logones has pointed out above, uncivilized groups of people are seen as animals or beasts. Therefore, the civilizing mission becomes necessary in order to change these people. The idea of civilizing mission is not only a past reality of European colonialism, but also a present phenomenon. Civilizing mission is still alive and well today. Carey A. Watt argues that “the Anglo-American invasion and occupation of Iraq has encouraged a renewed, twenty-first century consideration of civilizing mission. ... Self-proclaimed civilized peoples in the states such as Britain and America declared that they needed to be protected while the people of Iraq and neighboring states needed to be liberated from a dictatorial and dangerously uncivilized regime.”¹⁴ Behind the civilizing mission, there is always a colonial project. Or to put it differently, civilizing mission is “the justification and legitimization of colonial rule.”¹⁵ It is the part of the process of creating a colonial subject. This said, I am going to analyze the story of Gilgamesh and Enkidu through the lens of the political interaction between the colonizer and the colonized.

The character of Gilgamesh is described in the epic as a civilized person especially when compared with Enkidu. The narrator of the epic describes him as being “wise in all things,” “full of understanding,”¹⁶ He is a strong man who has undergone many hardships.¹⁷ The praise of Gilgamesh continues:

Surpassing all kings, for his stature renowned
Heroic offspring of Uruk, a charging wild bull,
He leads the way in the vanguard
He marches at the rear, defender of his comrades.
Mighty foodwall, protector of his troops,
Furious flood-wave smashing walls of stone,
Wild calf of Lugalbanda, Gilgamesh is perfect in strength.
... Who could be his like for kingly virtue?
And who, like Gilgamesh, can proclaim “I am king!”
Gilgamesh was singled out from the day of his birth
Two-thirds of him was divine, one-third of him was human!
The Lady of Birth drew his body’s image,
The God of Wisdom brought his stature to perfection.

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¹³ Maria Lugones, “Methodological Notes Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” in *Decolonizing Epistemologies Latina/o Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Ada María Isasi-Díaz and Eduardo Mendieta (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 72–3.

¹⁴ Carey Anthony Watt, “Introduction: The Relevance and Complexity of Civilizing Missions C. 1800-2010,” in *Civilizing Missions in Colonial and Postcolonial South Asia from Improvement to Development*, ed. Carey Anthony Watt and Michael Mann, Anthem South Asian Studies (London: Anthem Press, 2011), 1–2.

¹⁵ Pramod K. Nayar, *Postcolonialism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, The Guides for the Perplexed Series (London: Continuum, 2010), 39.

¹⁶ The Gilgamesh Epic, I.5.

¹⁷ Ibid., I.29

¹⁸ Ibid., I.30-52.

What is this saying? Gilgamesh's perfection or goodness goes beyond a normal human being to the extent that his humanity is only one-third. Moreover, the way Shamhat introduces Gilgamesh to Enkidu is also reflecting this glorious depiction: "Oh, let me show you Gilgamesh, the joy-woe man. Look at him, gaze upon his face. He is radiant with virility, manly vigor is his. The whole of his body is seductively gorgeous."¹⁹

However, this is not the only information in the Epic about Gilgamesh. The positive description is only one side of the coin. On the other side, Gilgamesh is depicted as a frightful oppressor as well. Yes, he has so much power, but he also abuses it.

In the enclosure of Uruk he strode back and forth,
Lording it like a wild bull, his head thrust high.
The onslaught of his weapons had no equal.
His teammates stood forth by his game stick,
He was harrying the young men of Uruk beyond reason
Gilgamesh would leave no son to his father,
Day and night he would rampage fiercely

...
Gilgamesh would leave no girl to her [mother]
The warrior's daughter, the young men's spouse.²⁰

The nature of the oppression of Uruk has long been debated among scholars. Tigay says that it is "one of the most elusive problems of the epic."²¹ There are three common proposals to understand the nature of oppression of Uruk: sexual, corvée labor, and athletic contests.²² Just as have discussed above, since the publication of Jacobsen's article in 1930, scholars are divided as to whether the nature of the oppression is sexual or not. With regards to the corvée labor, Tigay rejects this proposal because he thinks that the relationship between the building of Uruk's walls and the oppression cannot be establish.²³ While agreeing with Tigay, Jacob Klein comments further that "The sweeping statement ... that 'Gilgamesh does not release the young maiden to her mother/suppose' etc., can only refer to a mass and continuous activity, such as domestic labor, which Gilgamesh imposed on the young women (just as on the young men)."²⁴ Moreover, there are some indicators in the text that the oppression is related to a sort of athletic game. Scholars are debating these issues. However, the point still stands in the text that Gilgamesh is an oppressor, and he has misused or abused his power. Gilgamesh's oppressive behavior pushes the people of Uruk to bring a complaint to Anu. As the result, Anu asks Aruru to create "a partner for Gilgamesh," namely Enkidu, who is "mighty in strength,"²⁵ so that "Uruk may have peace."

¹⁹ Ibid., I.234-237.

²⁰ Ibid., I.61-74.

²¹ Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, 181.

²² See the discussion of each of these proposals in Jacob Klein, "A New Look at the 'Oppression of Uruk' Episode," in *Riches Hidden in Secret Places: Ancient Near Eastern Studies in Memory of Thorkild Jacobsen*, ed. I. Tzvi Abusch (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 187-201; Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, chap. 9.

²³ Tigay, *The Evolution of the Gilgamesh Epic*, 182.

²⁴ Klein, "A New Look at the 'Oppression of Uruk' Episode," 189.

²⁵ The Gilgamesh Epic, I.6