

First & Last Name

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*Gilgamesh* an Ancient Story of Friendship

For thousands of years, people have explored the complexity of human relations between husbands and wives, parents and children, and friends. In *Gilgamesh*, translated by N. K. Sandars, the reader sees the unlikely friendship of two powerful men evolve. Although Gilgamesh appears to need no other human, the readers find as the story unfolds that he longs for the companionship of a friend. In fact, the reader discovers that Gilgamesh's friendship with Enkidu reveals Gilgamesh's humanity.

The author provides a vivid portrayal of Gilgamesh in the beginning of the poem by using descriptive language such as "he was wise" (12), had "a perfect body" (13), and was gifted with beauty and courage. Yet the townspeople view Gilgamesh as "terrifying like a great wild bull" (13). Through the eyes of the townspeople the audience sees Gilgamesh as an animal incapable of having a meaningful relationship with a human. Gilgamesh's oppressive behavior alienates him from his own subjects. Even though Gilgamesh is known to be wise and is gifted by the gods, he is inept at developing a relationship with the people he rules. Was this to be Gilgamesh's destiny, a life devoid of meaningful human relationships and friendships? The people of Uruk bemoan their gods with cries about Gilgamesh and his arrogant ways. The gods hear the people's cries and are merciful to the city of Uruk. The god's solution to create Gilgamesh's equal is to fashion the wild man Enkidu.

Gilgamesh and Enkidu have similar characteristics of arrogance and pride. It would seem that a relationship between these two personalities was one of bitter envy. If one thinks of their own friendships developing over time, a person may be drawn to another human being with the same character traits. The townspeople of Uruk do not see this as the case; they view Enkidu as the answer to their cries to the heavenly gods and believe he is hero who will put Gilgamesh in his place. Goaded on, the men in Uruk proclaim their jubilation in exclaiming, "Now Gilgamesh has met his match. This great one, this hero whose beauty is like a god, he is a match even for Gilgamesh" (16). However, it takes a brawl between Gilgamesh and Enkidu to recognize and appreciate each others' qualities. The reader comes to this realization when the author states, "So Enkidu and Gilgamesh embraced and their friendship was sealed" (17). So it is with modern day friendships, as academic rivals at school, or talented athletes that each realize the other's potential and begins to appreciate a common quality they share. Gilgamesh and Enkidu's friendship compares to the biblical friendship of David and Jonathon, as both are powerful men who hold each other's attributes in high esteem (1Sam. 18:1-4).

As this ancient friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu progresses, the audience sees the two men sharing their thoughts and dreams. The author appeals to the emotions of the reader when Enkidu interprets his friend's dream and tells Gilgamesh that "everlasting life is not your destiny" (17). The author goes on to state that "The eyes of Enkidu were full of tears and his heart was sick" (17). Is this not the meaning of true friendship, when friends cry and bear the sorrow of someone they love? The author sets the tone for the endearing friendship of these two warriors as they are about to do battle with Humbaba, the giant of the forest.

Friendship is the natural connection between humans that is found when two people share a common bond in interests, activities, or principles. The reader is made aware of this as

Gilgamesh and Enkidu proceed in their quest to wage war on the giant Humbaba. As time passes, mankind witnesses the bond of unfamiliar men coming together for the purpose of war. This shared purpose is the common factor that introduces these men to each other and friendships arise. It is unknown whether it is the concept of watching another's back or the common goal of victory that draws soldiers and warriors to these newfound friendships. Achilles and Patroclus as well as David and Jonathan share the type of military relationship that Gilgamesh and Enkidu develop.

The reader sees another aspect of true friendship as Gilgamesh and Enkidu begin their battle plans to destroy Humbaba. Their friendship matures as Gilgamesh encourages Enkidu and relieves him of his fears of fighting the giant (17). As a friend encourages his comrade, so Gilgamesh supports Enkidu by saying, "hold close to me now and you will feel no fear of death; keep beside me and your weakness will pass, the trembling will leave your hand" (20). The element of encouragement is a deciding factor in the warriors' victory over Humbaba. Gilgamesh and Enkidu continue their friendship by celebrating in the streets of Uruk with feasting and singing (26).

Man is born with a yearning for a friend, as the author illustrates when speaking of Enkidu, "he longed for a comrade, for one who would understand his heart" (15). The reader sees that Gilgamesh also longs for male companionship when his mother Ninsun, one of the wise gods, interprets his dreams stating, "I made it for you, a goad and spur, and you were drawn as though to a woman. This is the strong comrade, the one who brings help to his friend in his need" (15). The author uses the comparison of a lover as Ninsun continues her interpretation declaring, "you will love him as a woman and he will never forsake you" (15). At this moment the reader feels the need and desire of a soul satisfying relationship.

The author uses familial language to illustrate the brotherly love Gilgamesh and Enkidu have for each other. As Enkidu realizes his death is inevitable he cries out to Gilgamesh, “O my brother, so dear as you are to me, brother, yet they will take me from you” (26). It is common for men, as their relationship grows, to refer to each other as brother. The intricacy of a human relationship that ties human beings to one another is further revealed as the gods decide that amends must be made for the death of the Bull of Heaven and Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar Mountain. Enkidu’s life is the chosen sacrifice to amend the gods. As Enkidu’s death approaches, the audience is not a distant observer trying to ascertain whether Gilgamesh feels the same brotherly love, but an active participant when the reader hears that Gilgamesh “wept over Enkidu” (28). The reader is further drawn into a friend’s love after Enkidu dies and the author states, “So Gilgamesh laid a veil, as one veils the bride, over his friend” (30). The author’s comparison of marital love illustrates the deep love and friendship between Gilgamesh and Enkidu.

Gilgamesh’s humanity is revealed to the reader through experiences of war, victory, celebration, and death. The emotions of love, fear, pain, and sadness that the author reveals to the audience make the “great wild bull” more human (13). The friendship of Gilgamesh and Enkidu brings about a drastic change in the soul of Gilgamesh. The townspeople of Uruk now see Gilgamesh as human. At the close of the story the reader observes the city of Uruk as they mourn the loss of their beloved Gilgamesh. The author reveals Gilgamesh’s humanity as he refers to Gilgamesh as “the heart of Uruk” (40).

Works Cited

The Holy Bible New International Version. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1973