

First & Last Name

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### Inspired Misfortune

There is frequently a relationship that exists between works of literature, specifically the Bible. From Milton's *Paradise Lost* to Golding's *Lord of the Flies*, many works correspond to biblical stories. This is particularly true of *Gilgamesh*. The ambitious adventures of Enkidu, the ancient Mesopotamian god, Utnapishtim, and Gilgamesh reflect important events in the books of Judges and Genesis.

The course of Enkidu's life mirrors that of Samson in the book of *Judges*. Enkidu's entry into the kingdom of Uruk compares favorably to Samson's entry into Gaza. Both men are torn from a world they are familiar with by the women that they love. Each of the men is then thrust into unknown territory to fulfill the desires of others, which ultimately leads to his demise. In *Gilgamesh*, Enkidu is "innocent of mankind" (13). He eats grass in the hills with the gazelle and "lurk[s] with wild beasts," existing as one with nature, unfamiliar with the evil ways of the harlot that he is soon to encounter (14). He is oblivious the gods have selfishly created him to act as a counter-balance to the extremities of King Gilgamesh's behavior, in the hopes of satisfying the people of Uruk. Similarly, in the Bible, God creates Samson with colossal strength, so that he can perform tasks that would be virtually impossible for any other man. God intends Samson to use his strength to save the Israelite tribe of Dan from the Philistines. Not only do both men have a predetermined destiny, but their stories parallel when they each encounter a devious harlot: "When she speaks, Enkidu [is] pleased" and she leads him into Uruk where he becomes a man

“grown weak, for wisdom [is] in him” (15). Samson is similarly stripped of his strength by the persuasion of the prostitute Delilah, when he “sleep[s] with his head in her lap” and “his strength leaves him” (Judges 16.19).<sup>1</sup> In the end, Enkidu is sentenced to death by the gods for fulfilling his destiny and protecting his brother, King Gilgamesh in the slaying of the Bull of Heaven. The glorious god Shamesh pleaded, “It [is] by your command that they kill the Bull of Heaven... must Enkidu die although innocent?” (26). To no avail, Enkidu is sentenced to a guiltless death. When Delilah betrays Samson, “the Philistines captured him and gouged out his eyes. They then took him to Gaza, where he was bound with bronze chains and forced to grind grain in prison” (Judges 16.21). After speaking the harlot’s name in vain, Enkidu realizes that it is because of the harlot that he lives such a prosperous life and acquires “a companion, his own brother,” Gilgamesh. He rejoices praise for the harlot, “I promise you another destiny. The mouth that cursed you shall bless you! The priest will lead you into the presence of gods” (27). Although Samson never rejoices the name of the prostitute that is responsible for his loss of strength and blindness, when his hair grows back, he prays to God for the return of his strength. God answers his prayer and Samson is content in his death. The choice to give into temptation, and experience personal misfortune due to pure naivety, in the end, ultimately transforms Enkidu and Samson.

Similar to the personal misfortune that Enkidu and Samson encounter, Utnapishtim and Noah are faced with divinely inspired misfortune. The parallel that exists between *Gilgamesh* and the Bible is the removal of that which is deemed evil by the God(s). In the great floods, Utnapishtim and Noah are singlehandedly responsible for securing the survival of mankind. In *Gilgamesh*, the god Enlil is troubled by what has become of the people of Shuruppak and declares to the gods in the council, “The uproar of mankind is intolerable and sleep is no longer

**Comment:** A transition is needed between the Bible verse and the poem.

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<sup>1</sup> *The New Living Translation*

possible by reason of the babel,” and with this declaration, the gods consent to “exterminate mankind” (35). In the story of Noah, God becomes intolerable with “the extent of human wickedness on earth” and he saw that “everything they thought or imagined was consistently and totally evil” (Genesis 6.5). God regrets creating the human race to inhabit the earth and proclaims, “I will wipe this human race I have created from the face of the earth” (Genesis 6.7). Utnapishtim and Noah both find favors with their gods, permitting them to escape the guilty verdict that mankind receives, and death that is its sentence. Utnapishtim is pardoned by Ea who calls to him in his dreams, “tear down your house and build a boat, abandon possessions and save your soul alive” (35). Utnapishtim and Noah each follow the requests of the gods and survive the devastation of humanity.

Unlike the misfortunes that Utnapishtim and Noah face, Gilgamesh and Eve encounter serpents that steal and cheat mankind out of immortality. On his journey home from the “garden of the gods,” Gilgamesh continues his quest for eternal life (31). In his selfless attempt to deliver the plant “that restores lost youth to man” to the people of Uruk, Gilgamesh is lured to a “well of cool water” (39). Here Gilgamesh encounters the serpent that thwarts the sole opportunity for mankind to obtain eternal life. His entanglement with the serpent parallels Eve’s decision to partake the forbidden fruit. The Garden of Eden remarkably resembles the jeweled garden that Gilgamesh yearns to belong to. It is here that Eve is persuaded by the serpent that the forbidden fruit is not fatal. Stealing immortality with his words rather than his bite, the serpent speaks to Eve, “You won’t die! God knows that your eyes will be opened as soon as you eat it, and Eve is convinced” (Genesis 3.4-6). Eve consumes the fruit that the serpent speaks of and God banished them from the Garden of Eden and immortality is lost. Gilgamesh and Eve begin their pursuit for everlasting life in lush, divine gardens and are defeated by jaws of a serpent.

The relationship between *Gilgamesh* and the Bible is paralleled by the misfortune of men and the regulation of gods. The fate of Enkidu, Utnapishtim, and Gilgamesh clearly reflect occurrences in the books of Judges and Genesis. Samson, God, and Eve all share stories of equal venture and misfortune marred by a desire for overcoming what is lost, a balance within humanity. Although the Bible is known for its direct correlation to many literary works, this is especially evident in the epic of *Gilgamesh*.

Works Cited

*Gilgamesh*. *The Norton Anthology of World Literature*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Ed. Sarah Lawall. New York:

Norton, 2002. Page numbers of poem go here. Print.

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