Chapter Ten

Enkidu in the Underworld

Coda: Tablet 12

In a curious way, even the strange Tablet 12 of *Gilgamesh* reinforces the problems of Enkidu’s inexplicable death. The twelfth tablet has always been a problem. It is much shorter than the other tablets (shorter even than Tablet 6). It is appended to a poem that appears to end when the final lines of Tablet 11 echo the opening of Tablet 1. Tablet 12 is, as we have seen, a close translation into Akkadian of the Sumerian poem, “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Underworld” (or “Bilgames and the Underworld”)\(^ {2173} \) — and even there it is odd, since it is only a translation of the last part of the Sumerian original.\(^ {2174} \) The details are not of interest here. Tablet 12 is mainly an account of the terrors of the Underworld, the fate of all humans. Probably its main thrust is to impress upon the reader the necessity of the living to care for the dead. Enkidu, who is swallowed up by the Underworld, appears to Gilgamesh, and gives him the grim details of the Underworld.\(^ {2175} \) For many scholars Tablet 12 is an inorganic appendix to a poem they consider complete in eleven tablets.\(^ {2176} \)

Many recent translations of *Gilgamesh* do not include Tablet 12—or relegate it to a section on the Sumerian “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Underworld,” as do Andrew George and Benjamin R. Foster. Stefan Maul mentions Tablet 12,\(^ {2177} \) but does not translate it or comment on it. Stephanie Dalley does translate it, but adds a qualification that has the support of many scholars today: that the epic was complete in eleven tablets, and the twelfth was added at a later date by another redactor.\(^ {2178} \) Simo Parpola’s edition of *Gilgamesh* does, however, retain the handcopy, transliteration, and glossary for those who would want to consider Tablet 12.

As an aesthetic response to *Gilgamesh* the argument for not considering Tablet 12 is convincing to many readers. The beautiful narrative structure of Tablets 1–11, with its framing device of Gilgamesh’s return to Uruk, suggests that the additional tablet is a clumsy attempt to correct something in the first eleven tablets.

The difficulty with the aesthetic argument is that what Andrew George calls the Standard Babylonian Text tells us in colophons that the text was not complete in 11 tablets and that it was complete in 12 tablets. (Four different colophons of Tablet 11 and three colophons of Tablet 12 have already been discovered, as George carefully notes.) Even as he dismisses Tablet 12 George attributes the tablet to the closest thing we have to an author of the Standard Babylonian Text, Sin-lēqi-unninni.

At some point when the text became standardized, then, Tablet 12 was considered part of the whole. It is always possible that an excavation will reveal a version that says the work is complete in 11 tablets. But for now we have only the evidence of a 12 tablet *Gilgamesh*.

What then happens to the argument for rejecting Tablet 12. The modern penchant for calling *Gilgamesh* an “epic” gives us a clue to what we want to see in the ancient text: a
well-made and internally consistent story that as an “epic” rests comfortably in what was (at least until recently) the most prestigious genre in the Western literary canon. Alas, the same ancients who considered it a text in 12 tablets also failed to call it an epic. Rather it was a “series” (ishkaru) known from the opening line of Tablet 1 and as a collection of Gilgamesh stories.

Many years ago John Gardner and I argued that we should take the text as it was—and try, as we would any difficult text that challenges our modern views of genre, to accommodate its apparent generic anomalies. Many have risen to the challenge. I will only suggest here what we argued back then, that Tablet 12 could be considered an “Epilogue” to the other stories in the collection. (We see epilogues today even in rather humble storytelling genres like TV sitcoms.) Tablet 12 tells us how Gilgamesh learned secrets of the underworld. It may be that Sîn-lēqi-unninni rejected another possible epilogue, “The Death of Bilgames” (if he knew it), in favor of an epilogue that showed Gilgamesh worthy of his last great achievement, when, translated into a god, he became a judge in the underworld.

Interestingly, scholars in the ancient world debated a similar case with the prestigious epic, Homer’s Odyssey. On aesthetic grounds Hellenistic scholars argued that the final book, the 24th Book, did not belong to Homer’s story. Book 24 introduces a quick change of perspective and tells of the death of the great hero, Achilles. Then it switches to Odysseus and his father Laertes. Odysseus tests Laertes, much as he had earlier tested Penelope. Ultimately Odysseus, Laertes and Telemachos make a stand against their enemies, and the goddess Athene brings the conflict to an end.

Hellenistic scholars, prompted perhaps by the growing interest in the Greek novel, with its shift to romantic involvement and the private lives of the characters, argued on aesthetic grounds that the Odyssey should end with Book 23. At that point in the epic, Odysseus has returned home, purified the household by killing off the suitors, and slept with his wife after his many years of wandering. I rather like that as an ending to the Odyssey, since it reinforces the parallels between the Greek epic and Gilgamesh 1-11. But I know of no modern scholar of Homer who accepts a 23 book Odyssey.

There are, clearly, heroic elements in Gilgamesh may remind us of Homer’s grand warriors (and the equally sly Odysseus especially). But on a scale that begins with the Iliad and ends with The Waste Land, I am more inclined to a Mesopotamian T. S. Eliot than a Homer behind the series of Gilgamesh stories that make up Gilgamesh.

A Hero Dying Young
As in Tablet 7, the death of a healthy, vigorous young man is seen as problematic. Enkidu descends to the world of the dead and in the process violates all the instructions Gilgamesh gives him. As a result he is swallowed up by the Underworld itself. Again and again the point is made: Enkidu did not die from normal causes, even “Fate” (Namtar). The poem refers to Asakku, a demon and the disease it causes, a non-specific mythological threat that may be taken as Disease itself. (The term is not used in medical texts.) Rather,
the Underworld seizes Enkidu. The greatest problem is that the young man did not die in battle.

Enkidu—rather the spirit of Enkidu, the part of any human that lives on in the Underworld—is able to return temporarily to earth, where he speaks to Gilgamesh. Since Gilgamesh has already grasped something of the secrets of the Underworld, he is finally able to obtain from the crafty god Enki what he could not get from the gods Enlil and Sîn, a secret way to communicate with his friend. One point seems clear: Gilgamesh is or has become “wise” in this poem in a way that would make sense to, say, a mashmashu exorcist. (Recall that he learned about Enki from Utnapishtim in Tablet 11. Here he communicates directly with the crafty god.)

Enkidu tells Gilgamesh of different “cases,” the different ways humans are treated. Gilgamesh asks about many different situations. And the final lines give a glimpse of unrelieved horror:

“The one whose body was left in the wilderness--have you seen him?”
--“I have.
His spirit does not rest in the Earth.”

“The one whose spirit has no one to care for him--have you seen him?”
--“I have.
He eats what was left over in the pot and scraps of bread
that were thrown into the street.” (12.151-54)

Although the Akkadian is a careful translation of the Sumerian, the abrupt ending does not exactly follow any of the three Sumerian versions that have been recovered so far. The version from Nippur adds four more cases and ends with a man who was burned to death (and whose spirit ascended to the heavens). A version from Mê-Turan adds three more lines that suggest Gilgamesh did not accept what he has learned and goes off seeking “life.” A third version, from Ur, adds a reference to what seems to be a massacre of the sons of Sumer and Akkad at the hands of Amorites. Like those who were massacred, Gilgamesh own father and mother were forced to drink muddy water from the place of the massacre. When Gilgamesh hears that, he takes action, including apparently making statues for them, and bringing the remains home to Uruk for proper burial and ritual mourning. Gilgamesh will provide his parents the clear water they need in the Underworld.

It seems to me significant that Tablet 12 (and even more obviously, the Sumerian version from Ur) emphasizes family in a way that Tablets 1-12 do not. It makes the absence of any reference to Gilgamesh descendents, especially the son who, according to The Sumerian King List, succeeded his father in Uruk, all the more surprising. The fates
of many in the Underworld are grim in the extreme, but the ones who have loved ones on earth who provide for them are relieved of the worst problem they face, the lack of potable water. The more children a person has, the better the spirit is likely to be cared for in the land of the dead. Nothing explicitly connects this with Gilgamesh and Enkidu, but the poem leaves open the possibility that its view of family is very different from what we see in the first eleven tablets.

The Twelfth Tablet reminds us that, while the birth and death of Enkidu are important in the *Gilgamesh* series, the birth (only hinted at) and death of Gilgamesh himself are not part of the series, though Sumerian accounts of both have been discovered. The absence of the son, Ur-lugal, whose name is known from a few references in Sumerian texts, is also striking.

The “wisdom” in *Tablet 12* is, I think, closer to the advice given by Siduri to Gilgamesh in the Old Babylonian version than in the Standard Version. Tablet 12 is a kind of coda in that regard. Enkidu has been swallowed up because, precisely, he has refused to follow the customs of the Underworld. When he descended, he acted like a normal human being on earth, while he had been warned to act in precisely the opposite way (the Underworld—“Earth” in this case, *erṣetu*—exactly reversing life on earth):

To the advice Enkidu was deaf.
He put on a clean garment.
They marked him for a stranger.
He anointed himself with good oil from the bowl.
At its smell they gathered around him.
Into the Earth he threw the throw-stick.
The spirits trembled.
Those hit by the throw-stick turned on him.
He carried a staff in his hand.
Put sandals on his feet.
He made noise in the Earth.
He kissed the wife he loved,
beat the wife he hated,
kissed the child he loved,
beat the child he hated.
The outcry of the Earth seized him (12.32-47)

Note the image of “life” as lived normally. It is this “life” that the epic (at least, possibly, in the Old Babylonian versions of the story) sees as the “cure.” Even the treatment of the dead reflects this concern. In his list of “cases,” Enkidu notices that the man who has seven children is better off than the one with six, the one with six better off than the one with five, and down the line until the detached, isolated figures—killed in the wilderness, loners—are mentioned. It is the broken individuals who suffer the most, the hopeless ones who have no one on the earth to help them in their misery. (And note that their misery is not a result of sins or crimes committed either on earth or in the Underworld.)
Wisdom in *Gilgamesh* Tablet 12

The god Ea is once again the god who provides Gilgamesh with wisdom that he will presumably need to possess when he becomes a god in the Underworld. There he will be one of the judges, like Dumuzi and Ningishzida. (Gilgamesh meets both Dumuzi and Ningishzida there in “The Death of Gilgamesh.”) Several scholars have emphasized stages in the enlightenment of Gilgamesh, notably Benjamin R. Foster and Tzvi Abusch. Foster does not consider Tablet 12 as part of *Gilgamesh*. Abusch distinguishes between an eleven-tablet *Gilgamesh* and a twelve-tablet *Gilgamesh* and offers an interpretation that has Gilgamesh preparing for his role as judge in the Underworld. For Abusch, Gilgamesh first must learn to be a normal man (based on the Old Babylonian wisdom offered by Siduri), then what it means to be king (through Utnapishtim’s story of the Flood), and finally what it means to be a god—in Tablet 12.

It is, of course, in Tables 11 and 12 that we see the importance of Enki/Ea.

In light of what is narrated earlier in *Gilgamesh*, the sequence in Tablet 12 that involves Ea is particularly striking. When Enkidu is trapped in the Underworld, and it is made clear that he had not died as a hero in battle, Gilgamesh, as “the son of Ninsun” approaches three of the high gods for help. The first two dismiss Gilgamesh’s plea. Gilgamesh goes first to Enlil’s temple in Nippur, the Ekur. Enlil gave him “not a single word in response.” Gilgamesh then approaches the Moon God Sin in his temple in Ur. Enlil gave him “not a single word” in response. Gilgamesh then approaches Ea in his temple in Eridu. He makes the identical appeal, and Ea answers him. The response is brief but important. Gilgamesh is to open a hole in the Earth so that the spirit of Enkidu could rise. When he does this, Enkidu’s spirit does indeed emerge “like a gust of wind.” They embrace and kiss; they discuss and agonize over Enkidu’s condition and the condition of others in the Underworld.

In Tablet 11, we have seen, a “hole” or channel to the bottom of Ea’s *apsû* allows Gilgamesh to find and bring up the Plant of Rejuvenation. Here a different term for “hole” is used, *takkapu*, a rare term that translates the Sumerian *ab-lal*.

Gilgamesh and The Underworld

The most thorough study of the Underworld to date is Dina Katz’s, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources.* Gilgamesh is frequently mentioned in that study, including Tablet 6 of the Standard Akkadian *Gilgamesh*. Several of her conclusions bear directly on the image of the Underworld in relation to kingship. For one thing, *Gilgamesh* contains what appear to be different Mesopotamian traditions. In one case (Tablet 10.301) Utnapishtim, as we have seen, expresses a rare skepticism toward survival after death. In another, Sumerian and Semitic views are different in many respects. The importance of the Sun God, Utu/Shamash, as judge of the dead is a late, possibly Semitic concept that appears after Ur III. For Katz, a key text is the Sumerian “Death of Gilgamesh,” which, if it is an Ur III text is the earliest statement of the principle that death is the fate of all humanity.
We have a tendency to think of kingship as a relatively simple and persistent concept. What complicates the issue is that when kingship emerges, it appears to be significantly different from the *enship* that characterized human rule in Uruk, with its intimate partnership with the goddess Inanna. The Ur III deified kings, beginning with Urnamma and Shulgi, complicate the picture, for they are both kings and *ens*. Shulgi, especially, derived both titles from his association with Uruk: *enship* from selection by Inanna, and kingship from a dynastic principle (as brother of Gilgamesh, he enjoyed kingship through their divine mother, Ninsun). The “Death of Urnamma” and “The Death of Gilgamesh” provide much of the evidence for Sumerian views of the Underworld. The Ur III pattern disappears in Old Babylonian times, certainly by Hammurabi’s mid-career. I would argue that Uruk preserved ideas that may well have disappeared in other parts of Mesopotamia, but found their way into *Gilgamesh*.

**The Death of Gilgamesh**

The notoriously difficult problem of dating Sumerian literary texts complicates the issue of Gilgamesh’s death. The death of Enkidu, narrated immediately after the glorious victory over The Bull of Heaven, is the crisis that impels Gilgamesh to search for answers to the great questions of life and death.

Dina Katz suggests that the poem, “The Death of Gilgamesh,” which like most other Sumerian works is known from Old Babylonian copies—that is, from the early 2nd millennium when Babylon, especially under King Hammurabi, was in its ascendancy—may well have been composed earlier, in the Ur III period. Katz looks very carefully at all references to the world of the dead in Sumerian sources. The Semites who came to dominate Mesopotamia north and south appear to have had a different idea of life after death than that held by the Sumerians. (The role of the Sun God as a judge in the Underworld is an example.) A key text for Katz is “The Death of Urnamma,” the founder of the Ur III dynasty. Much of Sumerian ideology can be gleaned when “The Death of Urnamma” is compared with “The Death of Gilgamesh.”

“The Death of Gilgamesh” contains what may be the earliest statement of the key principle that death is the fate of all humanity. If we add “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” which is even earlier than “The Death of Gilgamesh,” we may be able to see how the Gilgamesh narratives came to displace the death of Gilgamesh onto the death of the hero’s friend.

It is worth emphasizing that “The Death of Gilgamesh,” like “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” makes no significant reference to Enkidu. (Enkidu is mentioned in a list as Gilgamesh’s “comrade in battle,” lines 100 and 200, but has no role to play in the narrative). Like many Sumerian poems the narrative of “The Death of Gilgamesh” is carried by a series of speeches. Gilgamesh receives dreams of the high gods in council. Enlil plans to reward Gilgamesh with eternal life for the hero’s great achievements. The crafty Enki balks at the plan. Enki recalls that after the Flood the gods had agreed that no human would live forever. Even though Gilgamesh is the son of a divine mother, he will not gain the life of the gods. Enki decrees his fate: he will be governor of the dead and a
judge, like Ningishzida and Dumuzi. Gilgamesh recounts his dreams to his own council. Since, as we have seen earlier, Gilgamesh has the hero conspicuously recounting his dreams to Enkidu, the absence of any significant reference to Enkidu in such an obvious parallel situation suggests that the motif of the friend is a later development to the story.

Katz sees a significant evolution of the Underworld idea in this “The Death of Urnamma.” Ur III kings, especially Urnamma and his son Shulgi, claimed to be brothers of Gilgamesh. Where the Ur III king had been raised to the level of the already legendary hero Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh is raised to the level of the judges Ningishzida and Dumuzi.

**Life Cycles**

The argument developed here is that the complete life, and especially the death, of Enkidu involves a displacement of a life-and-death story of Gilgamesh, a story that could have been put together from Sumerian poems like “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” “The Birth of Gilgamesh,” the heroic poems regarding the defeat of Aka, Humbaba, and The Bull of Heaven, and “The Death of Gilgamesh.” One advantage of this reordering of material (in several stages of many hundreds of years) is that Enkidu comes to represent primal humanity, who comes of age in the wild and progresses through stages of culture to approach something like an American Dream-only to have his life cut short as happens with great heroes. Gilgamesh, in contrast, is an adult when we first see him. His heroic acts are complicated, as in the case of Humbaba, where the Sun God is responsible not only for protecting Gilgamesh but also for having placed in Gilgamesh the desire to rid the world of an evil force. Gilgamesh is given a special status by the gods from birth and from the high status of his parents, Lugalbanda and Ninsun. Unlike Enkidu, Gilgamesh is 2/3rd god. He is king by virtue of a dynastic principle of succession.

On the other hand, Gilgamesh preserves an even more ancient Sumerian role, as *en*, that may have been kept alive (in some form) only in Uruk. This is his special relationship with the goddess Inanna. She selects those lovers. Gilgamesh has the wit and arrogance to deny her proposal, but in the end, gains enough “wisdom” to return to Uruk and to his dual role in the city-state that was identified by the Great Goddess and her temple, at the “heart” of the city.

What is also gained by the increasingly important role Enkidu plays in the Gilgamesh story is empathy. The audience of Gilgamesh is invited to identify with Enkidu at first. His is a story of struggle and eventually of pain, terror, and illness leading to a death that seems incomprehensible. As in many stories ancient and modern, an inner life of an Enkidu is revealed in conflict and suffering.

There is relatively little of an inner life of Gilgamesh until the center of the story, when he challenges Ishtar. It is not his impending death that allows an inner life to reveal itself to the audience. It is, rather, the love he has for his special friend that leads to the suffering and increasingly mad Gilgamesh. Gradually, as he meets the Scorpion Man and his Mate, Siduri, and Utnapishtim—as the audience introjects more of the suffering Gilgamesh—he
learns from his experience, as Enlil and Ishtar have had to learn from theirs—and gains enlightenment.

Tablet 12 returns the audience to Enkidu. Death has not relieved his suffering, except for giving him the chance to reveal himself and the situation of the Underworld to Gilgamesh. In one sense Tablet 12 provides a counterbalance to certain emphases in Tablets 1-11. We have noted that many readers of *Gilgamesh* prefer the Old Babylonian wisdom of Siduri to Siduri of the Standard *Gilgamesh*. While I do not share this enthusiasm for the Old Babylonian view of life, I can see how it fits into Tablet 12. Enkidu is advised (by the already enlightened Gilgamesh) that he should act in the Underworld in a manner that reverses ordinary life on earth. Enkidu refuses the advice and is trapped in the Underworld. The sequence allows for a reinforcement of “ordinary” life. Such a life consists of wearing clean garments and shoes, cleaning one’s body with perfumed oil, carrying weapons, making noise, kissing the wife and son a man loves and beating the wife and son he hates. Most people in the Underworld, as Enkidu describes the place, would love to return to such a happy state. In the Underworld there is little to eat or drink, and the world below is very dark—though it is not the world of punishment such as the Judeo-Christian and Muslim world envisioned.

There is, however, a ray of hope for the dead. In a tradition that goes back millennia, where people poured libations through a hole to relieve their dead ancestors, the great consolation for mortals is to have a loved one remain on earth. The fates of the dead Enkidu identifies are often dreadful, but he includes the fates of the father who has one, two, or six offspring. In each case, the father below has increasingly good treatment if he has many children. The father’s condition improves almost to the level Enkidu had experienced on earth.

Certainly Tablet 12 reinforces the patrimonial, patriarchal family. Enkidu, of course, has no children. His only hope in the Underworld is his beloved Gilgamesh. *The Sumerian King List* knows of a Gilgamesh son, a grandson, and other descendents, none of whom gained any notice or importance in the traditions even of Uruk. If Enki insists in “The Death of Gilgamesh” that even the hero, being human, must die, a motif that appears in “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” his special relationship to the Great Goddess is what will provide him a special, divine status in the Underworld. Recall that in “The Descent of Inanna” and “The Descent of Ishtar” (in less detail), the sacrifice of the lover, Dumuzi/Tammuz, also leads to his transformation as god and judge in the Underworld. Like Dumuzi, Gilgamesh will be deified through the Great Goddess, and will remain, as a god, of lesser status than Inanna/Ishtar. But it is still an exalted role. Thus, for example, the Ur III king Shulgi links his fate to his “brother” Gilgamesh.

In Tablet 12, the deified Gilgamesh is only hinted at, largely through the “secrets” given to him by the wise Ea.

One of the reasons Tablet 12 is often rejected by modern readers is that it is unique in the “series” of Gilgamesh tales that make up the Standard *Gilgamesh* in that it is a very close translation into Akkadian of a known Sumerian poem. John Gardner and I thought there
may be a point a reader of *Gilgamesh* in translation may often miss. Especially for the learned professionals in 2nd and 1st millennia BCE Mesopotamia—such as Sin-leqi-unninnī, ancestor of *gala* and *āshipu* alike—Sumerian must have had the same prestige that, say, Greek had for Latin poets and scholars (and still has for many scholars in the modern world). Bilingual texts, especially the important incantations, have interlinear Sumerian and Akkadian versions, and it seems pretty clear that the Sumerian is the text, the “modern” Akkadian text a help for those who had not learned the long-dead Sumerian. One might find a parallel today in the Qur’an, where the classical Arabic is not quite the same as Modern Standard Arabic, and where no translation of the Qur’an into any language is considered equal to the original. As texts like *Gilgamesh* came to have canonical forms toward the end of the 2nd millennium BCE, the professionals who copied texts and translated them must have seen the preservation of a Sumerian text in the Akkadian of Tablet 12 something far more than a minor effort to keep alive a tradition. As both Greek and Latin pass from the Modern West it is well to remember the power such languages had for centuries after their classical forms had disappeared from speech.

**Once Again: Are the Heroes Healed?**

As I read *Gilgamesh*, even if the problematic Tablet 12 is to be ignored, the opening lines of Tablet 1 suggests that Gilgamesh suffered from a recognizable condition, akin to the Western understanding of melancholia, and that his experiences, written into precious tablets, relieved that condition upon his return to Uruk. We do not know from *Gilgamesh* how Gilgamesh died, if he, like Enkidu, was given special benefits during his lifetime but was fated to die young. The Sumerian “The Death of Gilgamesh” suggests just that. It was a bitter lesson for the hero to learn. (Gilgamesh learns of his fate through dreams.) He was, however, able to overcome the terror that it initially caused him.

The situation facing Gilgamesh in “The Death of Gilgamesh” is displaced in *Gilgamesh* upon Enkidu. The wisdom provided to Enkidu by The Sun God in Tablet 7 does not obliterate the fear of death, but it does allow him to see the extraordinary benefits his life with Gilgamesh has given him. The language in his acceptance of that wisdom is the same as the language of healing in the opening lines of *Gilgamesh*, where Gilgamesh himself has had to learn equally bitter, possibly “tragic” truths.

*Gilgamesh* is not “about” sickness and its cure, in the sense that it is a scientific study of a pathological state, or in the sense that much of Mesopotamian “literature” is incantatory. Yet the double episode of the double character, Gilgamesh/Enkidu, their “illness” and the “wisdom” that heals them reflect the way in which Mesopotamian literature draws in what we have medicine and psychotherapy to deal with today. Certainly scientific medicine is the great gain of the West. Herodotus was appalled at the dreadful condition of medicine in Babylon when he (supposedly) visited there. What we can gain from Mesopotamia, though, is a working-out of an holistic approach to human experience, especially as it reconciles male and female, body and mind. Mesopotamian literature is very frank. It seldom ignores a problem, physical or mental. But it had not yet learned to separate the parts of man in the destructive ways the West has learned to do—and is trying to unlearn.
Several Mesopotamian incantation texts were mentioned in the context of Enkidu’s death in Tablet 7. Tzvi Abusch has studied another text, this one from the collection *Maqlû*. It names a number of gods renowned for their healing powers: Ea, Asalluhi, Gula, Nintinugga, and Ningirma. The first two are well known from the “Divine Dialogues” of Ea and his son Asalluhi (assimilated to the Babylonian god Marduk); the last three are goddesses, of whom Gula was the most prominent. In addition to the gods, the seven *apkallus* of Ea’s Eridu are identified. The object of the incantation is to “soothe the body” of a person suffering from a complex that involves *nissatu*, the most conspicuous of the symptoms of Enkidu and Gilgamesh.

The incantation is known as “Pure Oil, Clear Oil, Bright Oil.” It is an oil that “purifies” the body of the gods (*shamnu mullil zumri sha ʾili*) and “soothes the sinews” of humankind (*shamnu mupashshih sherʾānī sha amēlūti*). The key term is the one used of Enkidu when Shamash calms him and of Gilgamesh in the First Prologue, when he returns to Uruk from his journey: *pashāhu*. The oil and the “Incantation of Ea” are employed to expel the demonic *asakku*, *ahhazu* and *shuruppû* from the body and their more recognizable physical symptoms: *qūlu* (stupor), *kūru* (apathy) and *nissatu*. All three terms point to symptoms of depression. Ea, *shar apsī*, King of the Apsû, his son, the healing goddesses, and the seven *apkallu’s* effect the “soothing” of the afflicted person.

Abusch is particularly interested in the way a kind of incantation that addresses an item—in this case, oil—to enhance and activate the material is, in this incantation, transformed into an address that “emphasizes the independent force of speech” itself. The address is placed in “a mythological context and is treated as if it were capable of effecting change by itself.”

The incantation reminds us of the power ancient literature was thought to have in healing psychosomatic conditions.
Chapter Ten: Enkidu in the Underworld

2179 Stephen Bertman [personal communication].


2181 George introduces and translates Tablet 12 with the three Sumerian recensions, 175-94.

2182 For the son of Gilgamesh, Ur-lugal (Ur-lugal-la, or Ur-nungal), see The Electronic Corpus of Sumerian Literature on “The Sumerian King List.” For the son in “The Death of Gilgamesh,” see Niek Veldhuis, “The Solution of the Dream: A New Interpretation of Bilgames’ Death,” 133-48. The formula used in what may be the prototype of “The Sumerian King List” does not include relationships of parent to offspring, and the relationship is added only in three unusual cases, one of which is Aka, noted as the son of Enmerbaragesi of Kish, Piotr Steinkeller, “An Ur III Manuscript of the Sumerian King List,” Literatur, Politik und Recht in Mesopotamien, ed. Walther Sallaberger, 270, 276.


2184 Benjamin R. Foster, “Gilgamesh: Sex, Love and the Ascent of Knowledge,” 21-42; in Maier, Gilgamesh: A Reader, 63-79.


2187 CAD 18.75.

2188 Dina Katz, The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources.


2190 Katz, 236, 242, 247.

2191 Steinkeller, “An Ur III Manuscript of the Sumerian King List,” points out that the USKL ends with Ur-Namma and Shulgi. Shulgi’s name is written with the divine determinative, which allows Steinkeller to give a probable date for the version at Shulgi 20-48, when Shulgi had been deified, 269. Steinkeller proposes that the very notion of kingship cycling through Sumerian city-states, a notion absent in USKL, developed after the shocking collapse of the Ur III dynasty. In the earlier text kingship appears to be linear concept, originally justifying the immensely long reign of Kish (“as king”) that yielded to Sargon of Akkad.


2193 Katz, 247.


2196 Tzvi Abusch, “Blessing and Praise in Ancient Mesopotamian Incantations,” Literatur, Politik und Recht in Mesopotamien, ed. Sallaberger, 4-6. The text is Maqlû VII 31-49.

For examples, see Bertman and Parker, The Healing Power of Ancient Literature.