Early and Late Versions
Most of Tablet 3, which runs to some 240 lines, has been restored from the main text. The Old Babylonian Yale tablet supplies about twenty lines at the end of the tablet.

The heroic story of the journey to the Forest of Cedars and the battle with Humbaba was clearly a popular tale both in literature and in the visual arts, where Gilgamesh and Enkidu are often portrayed at the moment of attacking the giant. The story told here in Tablets 2-5 should be compared and contrasted with the two Sumerian versions, “Gilgamesh and Huwawa” A and B. The part of the story that makes up Tablet 3, however, has little parallel in the Sumerian poems.

Episodes: What Happens in Tablet 3
Tablet 3 picks up the story begun at the end of Tablet 2, a story that will occupy Gilgamesh through Tablet 5: the quest for a name. Gilgamesh wants to take on a truly heroic task, the confrontation with Humbaba in the Forest of Cedars.

Tablet 3 is set entirely in Uruk.

Tablet 3, Lines 1-12: The Elders Advise Gilgamesh and Enkidu
The elders of the city, who had warned against the adventure, give brief advice to the two men. Gilgamesh should trust Enkidu to lead him, since Enkidu knows the wilderness and has seen battle. Enkidu, for his part, should bring the king back safely to Uruk.

Tablet 3, Lines 13-34: In the Palace Sublime
Gilgamesh takes Enkidu into the palace of his mother, the goddess Ninsun. He informs her of his decision to go on a journey and face a battle, and boasts of his successful return.

Tablet 3, Lines 35-115: A Mother’s Plea
The better part of Tablet 3 is a magnificent ritual and address given by the wise goddess Ninsun. In her sadness, she purifies herself and ascends the stairs of her Sublime Palace. Upon the roof she offers incense to the Sun God. The plea is more than a request for Shamash to guide and protect the heroes. Ninsun sees what complicates her son’s quest: that it was Shamash who had afflicted Gilgamesh with his restless spirit. In one of the few passages in Gilgamesh that speaks of “evil,” which generally does not have the sense of a cosmic battle between forces of good and evil in Mesopotamian thought, it is Ninsun who identifies the true purpose of sending Gilgamesh into battle with Humbaba. Killing Humbaba will annihilate the “evil” Shamash “hates” (mimma lemnu šá tazerru ēhallaq). This raises the stakes, for Gilgamesh is anxious to make a name for himself in a battle the consequences of which he does not understand (or at least does not articulate in his haste to go up against Humbaba).
In this long address, Ninsun asks for the protection of Shamash and also of his wife, Aya. She even identifies what Shamash can do (and will do) to help the men defeat Humbaba. Shamash will summon the winds to lock Humbaba in a position where the men can approach and capture him.

As is the case with many ancient stories—often stories known in oral, not written, form, since so few persons were literate—the audience knows from this early part of the story much of what will happen at the climax.

Gilgamesh’s mother does not appear in the Sumerian “Gilgamesh and Huwawa” texts. In those versions it is Enkidu, not the mother, who persuades Gilgamesh to ask the protection and guidance of the Sun God. And the Sun God does not implant the idea or the motive of the quest in Gilgamesh. It does not appear that the Sun God in those versions of the story desires to rid the world of an evil he hates.

Here Ninsun also predicts, in the form of a request she makes of Shamash, that Gilgamesh will ultimately live among the gods as a god himself. Shall he not share the heavens with the sun? grow wise with Ea and rule the “black-headed” people (i.e., the Sumerians) with Irnina, another name for Ishtar? Significantly, she envisions him living in the underworld with the god Ningishzida. In Mesopotamian tradition Ningishzida was a god in the underworld who acted, as Gilgamesh would, as a judge in that dreaded place.

Tablet 3, Lines 116-34: Ninsun Adopts Enkidu
Ninsun has one more important role to perform in Gilgamesh. When she smothers the censer and comes down from the roof of her palace, she brings Enkidu into her household as her son. The adoption is complicated for modern readers since Ninsun also makes Enkidu into a shirku of Gilgamesh and the women who Ishtar. The shirku was bound to the temple (often donated to temples by parents), performed many, often important tasks, but apparently was not involved in the religious functions of the temple.

Part of the text is missing after this, but it appears that Ninsun asks for a successful journey for Enkidu to the Forest of Cedars.

Tablet 3, Lines 147-231
It appears that Gilgamesh make ritual preparations for their journey. Gilgamesh gives orders to the officers who will rule Uruk in his absence. They in turn offer advice to the two men, as the elders had done previously. (It is possible that Gilgamesh in this very fragmented section recognizes that his task is to remove the “evil” Shamash “hates” by killing Humbaba.)

Key Names/Figures in the 3rd Tablet

Wives (?) of Gilgamesh = a rare reference to wives (hirati) of the hero.

Sublime Palace = the palace (Egalmah) of Ninsun in Uruk.
Evil = Shamash the Sun God opposes the “evil” (lemnu) embodied in Humbaba.

Aya the Bride = a goddess of light, Sumerian Sherida, consort of Shamash, worshipped with Shamash in Sippar and Larsa.

Annunaki = a group of gods, Sumerian Anuna, sometimes a general term for “gods,” sometimes gods of earth and the underworld (in contrast to Igigi).

Winds = used as a weapon against Humbaba, as in other mythic contests.

Irmina = another name of Ishtar, found in the Forest of Cedars.

Black-headed people = a way the Sumerians described themselves.

Ningishzida = a god of the underworld, a judge like Tammuz.

Land-of-No-Return = a way of describing the underworld home of the dead.

Votaries, priestesses, hierodules = difficult (like shamhatu and harimtu) to translate into modern terms, women in the service of Ishtar.

Marduk = considered by the Babylonians as King of the Gods, mentioned only once in Gilgamesh.

Officers = dignitaries of Uruk, in contrast to the elders.

Assembly = very early texts in Uruk refer to various assemblies of citizens who had a voice in managing the city-state; Mesopotamian gods similarly meet in assemblies.

For critical and philological notes on these texts, see George, BGE, II, 809-16.