Early and Late Versions
Tables 4 and 5 complete the story of Humbaba begun in Tablet 2. Tablet 4 narrates the difficult journey to the Forest of Cedars; Tablet 5 describes the conflict with Humbaba. The two tablets correspond in many ways to the Sumerian “Gilgamesh and Huwawa,” but the many gaps in the tablets are usually filled in by Akkadian versions of the story from Old Babylonian and Middle Babylonian sources.

One major difference between the Sumerian versions of the story and Akkadian versions is the keen interest in the interpretation of dreams. In all versions the heroes appeal to the Sun God for help in the endeavor, but the dreams that are so prominent in Tablet 4 are not in the Sumerian accounts. (In one version Enkidu has a dream, but no details are given; in another, Gilgamesh has a terrifying dream, but Enkidu’s interpretation is missing. In either case the motif is not as prominent as it is in Akkadian versions.) The very number of Akkadian texts that preserve the dreams indicates the increasing popularity of the motif.

The actual encounter of the heroes with Humbaba preserves many motifs in the Sumerian versions.

Episodes: What Happens in Tablets 4 and 5

Tablet 4
Tablet 4 tells of the frightening journey through the wilderness. The heroes cover a march of a month and a half in only three days, and every three days they set up camp. At each stop along the way they perform a ritual to receive a dream from Shamash. On at least five occasions they face the sun, dig a well, and put fresh water in some vessel, presumably as an offering to Shamash, then climb to the top of a mountain and make an offering of flour to the mountain, asking it for a dream. Then Enkidu builds a shelter with a door to keep out the weather. He draws a circle for Gilgamesh to lie down, and Enkidu lies down in the doorway. In each case Gilgamesh goes to sleep in the fetal position, and in the middle of the night receives a dream. The dreams are really nightmares, but Enkidu interprets them in a positive light.

Dream 1: A mountain falls, suggesting that Humbaba will collapse on the heroes. Enkidu interprets is as the mountain itself falling—a victory for the heroes.

Dream 2: A handsome man saves the hero. A mountain throws him down, but the mountain is not Humbaba.

Dream 3: The heavens cry out; earth trembles; darkness, lightening and fire. A battle is fought, in which an old man appears. Enkidu interprets the dream as Gilgamesh
successfully fighting Humbaba; the old man is Gilgamesh’s father, the famous Lugalbanda.

**Dream 4:** A Thunderbird appears in the sky. A man in a strange form defeats the Thunderbird. Enkidu interprets the man as Shamash.

**Dream 5:** A wild bull appears to attack. Someone gives Gilgamesh a drink from a waterskin. Enkidu sees the wild bull as Shamash, who will help the men. The water is given to him by father Lugalbanda.

For all the positive interpretations of the prophetic dreams, as the heroes approach to mountain with its forest of cedars, Enkidu once again falters. Gilgamesh encourages Enkidu to forget Death and seek Life. At the entrance to the mountain the heroes fall silent and halt their progress.

**Tablet 5**

Tablet 5 completes the story of Humbaba with, as expected from Tablet 3, the death of the giant. There are some gaps in the text, but in the slightly more than 300 poetic lines only a few lines are given over to the battle between the heroes and the giant. Some lines at the beginning of the tablet to a description of the awesome mountain covered with precious cedars. Among other things, the mountain is a dwelling of the gods, and one deity in particular has a throne there: Irnina, another name for Ishtar. It is a sacred grove with Humbaba set as its guardian by the King of the Gods, Enlil, himself. Much of the preparation for battle is usually filled in from other Akkadian versions of the story, and those are rather different from the Sumerian version. In all versions, one objective is achieved: cutting down cedars. In the Sumerian poem, Gilgamesh succeeds by tricking Humbaba. The emphasis in Tablet 5 is on the help Shamash provides the heroes, with the thirteen winds that stun the monster. Since earlier we have read about another object, ridding the world of “evil” hated by Shamash, another aspect of the story is given particular prominence. When the heroes have Humbaba in their grasp, he asks for mercy. Enkidu now is adamant. Gilgamesh should not listen to Humbaba’s pleas. In the Sumerian story, Enkidu is the one who kills the giant. Here, as in other Akkadian texts, it is Gilgamesh who stabs Humbaba with his knife. (Visual images of the scene were popular, and show a giant forced to his knees, the heroes on either side of him, and Gilgamesh making the fatal blow.)

Since the gods in council, especially Enlil, will ultimately decide which of the heroes is guilty of this outrage, the emphasis on Humbaba’s (deceptive?) plea for mercy and the debate by the heroes, which ends up in Gilgamesh taking the decisive action, transforms a simple battle scene into an ethical dilemma for the heroes.

Once Humbaba is slain, the men cut timber. Enkidu makes an elaborate door from the lumber. They make a raft, place the cedars on it, and travel downriver to Enlil’s home in Nippur. Gilgamesh carries the head of Humbaba to Enlil.
Key Words in the 4th and 5th Tablets

Tablet 4

Mount Lebanon = a reference to a mountain range far to the north and west of Uruk; it splits apart in the combat between the heroes and Humbaba.

House of the Dream God = a shelter built for the protected person to receive dreams, that is, messages from the gods.

Lugalbanda = Old Babylonian versions of the dreams mention the protection given Gilgamesh by his father, Lugalbanda.

Thunderbird = a lion-headed monster-bird named Anzu, prominent in myths for attempting to wrest powers from the gods.

Tablet 5

Knife and axe = the weapons used by the heroes against Humbaba.

13 winds = the winds sent by the Sun God: South Wind, North Wind, East Wind, West Wind, Moaning Wind, Blasting Wind, Typhoon, Hurricane, Tempest, Devil-Wind, Frost-Wind, Storm Wind, and Whirlwind.

Enlil in Nippur, Shamash in [Larsa] (not Sippar?) = in the 3rd millennium BCE the Sumerian city of Nippur was as powerful as any city-state and the home of the King of the Gods; the text is broken where Shamash’s city is mentioned; Larsa was a relatively unimportant city, but Sippar became increasingly important from the late 3rd and 2nd millennia BCE, a sacred city in the north built up largely by a Semitic population from the west.

Door to be made by Enkidu = the door will figure again prominently in Tablet 7.

For critical and philological notes on these texts, see George, BGE, II, 817-28.