Early and Late Versions
Earlier versions of the story, in the Sumerian language, can be compared with this Akkadian version. An even earlier Sumerian text, “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” refers to The Bull of Heaven. The work is listed in an important literary catalogue from Nippur.

An oddity is that, thus far, no Old Babylonian version of The Bull of Heaven has appeared. Versions in Akkadian and Hittite do appear in Middle Babylonian times. It has even been suggested that the story was added later than Old Babylonian times and is not well integrated into the narrative as a whole.

Where the adventure of Humbaba took the heroes outside Uruk and into the wilderness, the Bull of Heaven is brought into the city of Uruk, which suffers greatly from the presence of the bull.

Watch for small details involving the gods:

- Ninsun, the mother of Gilgamesh, is not involved in the story;
- Shamash, the sun, is given the heart of the Bull; and
- Ishtar, although she punishes Gilgamesh and her city with the Bull, takes care that the city will survive a long famine.

The poetry, especially of Ishtar’s proposal and Gilgamesh’s rejection of the offer, is a splendid example of Akkadian poetic style.

Episodes: What Happens in Tablet 6
The 6th Tablet is a largely self-contained story in four sections.

- The goddess Ishtar offers to marry Gilgamesh.
- Gilgamesh rejects the offer and insults the goddess.
- Ishtar brings a creature, the Bull of Heaven, down to earth, where Gilgamesh and Enkidu kill him.
- The two heroes celebrate their victory over the Bull of Heaven.

The next tablet of Gilgamesh shifts suddenly from the joy of victory and celebration to terror and tragedy when the high gods decide that one of the heroes must die.

Tablet 6, Lines 1-21 Ishtar Proposes to Gilgamesh
When the goddess Ishtar spies Gilgamesh bathing, then clothing himself with cloaks and a sash and putting on his crown, she is so taken with his beauty (dumqu) that she immediately proposes to him. The language she uses in her proposal and the gifts she offers him are worth considering. Just as quickly, Gilgamesh rejects her proposal. The difference in status is apparent throughout the exchange between the two.
First Ishtar offers to make him her *ha’iru*. This is not the ordinary word for husband. Rather it means “lover” and in a more restricted sense, a husband of a special wife, a *hirtu*. The *hirtu* is a woman or goddess who is equal to the man (or god). For ordinary humans the *hirtu* status provided legal protections that were not given to other wives. Since Ishtar is a goddess and Gilgamesh only a mortal, her offer is one that would raise his status. Note that she initiates the offer.

Akkadian poetry likes to cast parallel thoughts in different language. In very insistent language, Ishtar offers to make him her *ha’iru* and then (anticipating his acceptance, desiring his “fruits,” a euphemism for sex with him) uses the ordinary language of Akkadian marriage: she will be his wife (*ashshatu*), and he will be her *mutu*, her husband.

“Come here, Gilgamesh, be my lover!
Let me taste your body.
You’ll be my husband, and I’ll be your wife.”

Scholars have noticed that the third line is much like the formula used regularly to confirm a marriage—but with one very significant change. The formula is a *reversal* of the norm, which was spoken by the man who takes a woman as his wife. Because Ishtar is a goddess, she not only selects her mate and initiates contact with him, but she, not Gilgamesh, pronounces the marriage formula, emphasizing her role in the relationship.

To make the proposal even more appealing to him, Ishtar will provide him with gifts. This, too, is a reversal of the usual dowry, where the man provides the wife with gifts that are hers to keep.

The gifts themselves are interesting. She will give him a very special chariot decorated with precious lapis lazuli and gold. The chariot was, of course, more than mere transportation. Mesopotamian kings, like their counterparts in Egypt and other countries, were depicted in battle or hunting in their chariots. The one she offers Gilgamesh will even have wheels of gold and horns of amber. Instead of ordinary mules, the chariot will be drawn by terrifying “storm lions.”

Ishtar then turns to the “house” where they will live. Note that it is *her* house, another significant reversal, since in normal human marriage the bride is taken from her—that is, her father’s—house into the husband’s household, a condition anthropologists call *patrilocal*. As Mesopotamian society became increasingly *patriarchal* over the centuries, probably few remembered the situation early in Uruk, where *matrilocal* marriages were possible.

Of course the house is special, too. The scent of cedar is mentioned first. The Sumerians in the south of Mesopotamia would especially value the wood, since such trees are not to be found there. The reference to cedar may refer back to Gilgamesh’s triumph over Humbaba. As we have seen earlier, our *Gilgamesh* clearly locates Humbaba in the far north of Uruk, and he is specifically the guardian of the cedar forest. The Humbaba episode ended with the heroes cutting down the trees and sending them south down the river.
Ishtar’s house is special in other ways. There Gilgamesh will be welcomed by the doorway and the throne themselves. In earlier poems the lovers meet at the gate or doorway of the goddess’s house, that is, her temple.

Among the gifts Ishtar offers are splendid goods like the chariot drawn by storm demons and a house, and authority over other kingdoms. What might seem today like humble offerings—goats, a donkey, horses and an ox—reflect the pre-industrial world, when the ability of humans to domesticate animals transformed society. The temples of ancient Uruk controlled not only agricultural lands but also large herds of animals. Fertility of the land was key to the survival of settled communities. With its control over a large part of agriculture and animal husbandry—and the surpluses that were stored in the temple—the “house” of Ishtar was the center of economic activity in the land. It operated as much like a national bank as a place of ritual and worship.

Note another small detail: the ox Ishtar offers is the only reference to the ordinary domesticated bull (alpu) in *Gilgamesh*. Elsewhere the references are to wild bulls, wild cows and the special Bull of Heaven.

**Tablet 6, Lines 22-79: Gilgamesh rejects Ishtar**

Gilgamesh does the unthinkable. Ishtar has offered a life beyond the dreams of ordinary humans. Union with Ishtar would raise Gilgamesh to a godlike status, although he would still be the junior partner. Her proposal takes up fewer than twenty lines (lines 6-23). Gilgamesh will take twice as many lines to reject her (lines 24-79). Her offer is an elegant piece of Akkadian poetry. His rejection of her is such a brilliant putdown that most readers remember it as a highpoint in *Gilgamesh*. It raises the issue of the artistic decision to place this piece at the center of *Gilgamesh*. Is it the final wisdom of the poem? Or a position that Gilgamesh will have to modify.

At the heart of his complaint Gilgamesh fears (or at least claims) that Ishtar will transform him completely. Ironically, his rejection of her will change him utterly.

At first (lines 24-44) Gilgamesh seems worried either that he could not offer her what as a husband he should—or that she will not really take care of him. (The lines, alas, are very broken at this point.) When the passage becomes clear, Gilgamesh uses a series of brilliant images to characterize the Ishtar who will fail to fulfill her promises. She is a fire that goes out in the cold, a flimsy door that will not keep out the wind, a palace that crushes its defenders, a well (or an elephant?) whose lid collapses, tar that smears the person carrying it, and a waterskin that soaks the one who lifts it. She is also the limestone block that crumbles in a stone wall, a battering ram that shatters in the presence of the enemy, and a shoe that bites the owner’s foot!

As if this were not insult enough, Gilgamesh goes on to list Ishtar’s lovers (lines 46-79). The poetic technique is interesting here. The list begins with the famous lover of Ishtar’s youth, Tammuz (or in Sumerian Dumuzi). He is the subject of myths and love poetry in Sumerian and Akkadian. He is even mentioned by name in the Bible (Ezekiel 8:14, possibly referred to in Isaiah 17:10). Since he is usually addressed as “lord,” areas outside
Mesopotamia knew him as ‘adōnī, as in the Greek Adonis, lover of Aphrodite (or Venus). Gilgamesh claims that Ishtar set up for him an annual wailing. We have Sumerian and Akkadian versions of the myth that may explain this annual ceremony, which is usually classed with myths and rituals of the “dying god.” In both Sumerian and Akkadian versions of the story, Inanna/Ishtar descends into the underworld, where she is captured and killed. In order for her to be resurrected, the goddess must find a substitute (pūhu) to take her place. In the Sumerian story, her lover Dumuzi/Tammuz refuses to show the proper respect to the goddess, and he is selected as the substitute. After a lengthy chase, the demons of the underworld find him, torture him, and kill him. Even Inanna laments his death. And his sister, Geshtinanna, in a rare offer of self-sacrifice, agrees to share his fate in the underworld. Dumuzi will spend half the year in the world of the dead and half the year with the gods. His sister will complete the cycle. The two lines in *Gilgamesh* would certainly have reminded any audience of the larger story that had already been around for more than a thousand years.

With that brief reference to Dumuzi, Gilgamesh goes on to produce a long list of Ishtar’s lovers. The technique is one of increasing specification and expansion. The poetry is full of wordplay, only some of which is obvious today. After Dumuzi, traditionally described as a shepherd, the first of several animals is mentioned, a “shepherd bird,” the *allallu* or roller bird, a bird that protects her brood by acting wounded. Gilgamesh sees the bird having its wing broken by Ishtar and reduced to crying out *kappi*, a bird cry that sounds something like Akkadian “My wing!”

The sequence of lovers after Dumuzi includes a bird, a lion, a horse, a shepherd, and a farmer. All have had their fates changed by Ishtar. The list seems to have a direction from wild to domesticated, from early roles for humans (herding and farming), a kind of evolutionary scheme such as was seen in Tablet 1 of *Gilgamesh*. Ironically, the shepherd is turned into a wolf and his own dogs go after him and bite him. The farmer—actually the one who tends an orchard of date palms—is turned into some kind of creature, possibly an animal, one who is stuck in position and cannot move up or down. The image suggests something that cannot climb up or down a date palm. In order to produce a good crop of dates, humans learned how to fertilize the female tree rather than leaving it to chance.

The list also goes from the anonymous animals (standing for a species) to specific humans, first anonymous then named, and from brief references to fuller descriptions. (Note that the mother of the horse, Silili, who weeps for the horse who is now “broken” and reduced to drinking muddy water, is herself a goddess, such as cattle and grain that were known by their divine names.) According to Gilgamesh, the shepherd is struck and turned into a wolf even thought he regularly brought both bread and meat to Ishtar.

The longest of these short stories involves the date palm cultivator, a certain Ishullanu, who was Ishtar’s father’s gardener. His case is closest to Gilgamesh’s own. Ishtart looked upon him and asked to “taste” his virility. She even asks him to touch her vulva. Like Gilgamesh, Ishullanu grumbles that he has what he needs (given to him by his mother).
The *Gilgamesh* poet chose, as we will see, to ignore the earlier version of the Bull of Heaven episode that showed a rivalry between Gilgamesh’s mother Ninsun and Inanna/Ishtar. Perhaps it is being reintroduced here in a very subtle way. Ishullanu provides a striking pun between the food his mother gives him and the “bread of insults and curses” that Ishtar is like to give him. Ishtar will indeed react to Gilgamesh in much the same way as she reacted to Ishullanu: in her anger she will “strike” him as she has all her previous lovers. For Gilgamesh that will mean conflict with the dreaded Bull of Heaven.

**Tablet 6, Lines 80-146: The Bull of Heaven Descends**

The heroic victory of Gilgamesh and Enkidu over the Bull of Heaven follows the earlier Sumerian versions of the story, though, as usual, with a number of interesting differences. Before mentioning the specifics of the bull fight itself, it is worth noting a detail that is mentioned in the earlier versions but is given an interesting twist here. The Bull is, of course, depicted as a powerful bull, although it clearly has special status and power, a kind of super-bull. (The Sumerian *gud-an-na*, literally “bull-from-Above,” translates into a special literary term, *alû*, in Akkadian.) The effect on Uruk is profound. It is described as Famine (whereas Humbaba, as we have seen, is likened to the Flood).

In this version of the story, Ishtar’s father will only provide her with the Bull of Heaven if the city will survive a terrible famine. Famine is, along with Plague and Flood, a perennial danger to settled communities. (War is a fourth danger, one usually listed in late, Iron Age, writings.) Life in the floodplain of southern Iraq knew such anxieties well. The ability to produce huge surpluses of barley in the salty alluvial soil made the grain storehouse the center of “civilized” life in Uruk.

The fear of Famine is introduced here by Ishtar’s father, who identifies the bull with seven years of harvesting only chaff. He asks Ishtar is she has stored by grain for the people and grown grass for the animals. Ishtar’s response is that she has already provided for her people and for the animals. The scribe who wrote the key text used in modern reconstructions of Tablet 6 inscribed a line across the tablet before Ishtar’s father’s question, a line before Ishtar’s response, and a third line after her response. The careful separation of the exchange between father and daughter provides additional emphasis to the point made here: the Bull is a threat to the city, and the city is identified as the house of Ishtar. The poet goes out of his way to point out the contrast between Humbaba, at the heart of the wilderness, and the Bull of Heaven who descends like Ishtar’s own house, from heaven to earth, into the city.

True to the father’s fears, as soon as the Bull descends, it dries up woodland, marshlands, and reed. It drinks up the river itself. At its snort it opens up a huge pit and 100, then 200 men of Uruk fall into it. Enkidu himself falls into the pit up to his waist. When he springs out of the pit the battle of the heroes with the Bull begins in earnest.

But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Before the Bull descends the reader is given an explanation of Ishtar’s getting the Bull in the first place. Upset at being rejected, Ishtar
goes to her father, Anu, in the heavens. She weeps before Anu and Ishtar’s mother, Antu. At first Anu is unresponsive, and blames her for provoking King Gilgamesh. She responds with a threat. If Anu does not give her the Bull of Heaven, she will destroy the underworld and release its inhabitants. The dead will return to the earth, and they will devour the living. The dead will then outnumber the living. This is a variant of a threat Ishtar makes in the Akkadian poem, “The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld” mentioned above. That her father takes the threat seriously shows the extent of Ishtar’s power over life. (Her sister, Ereshkigal, as we shall see, rules the underworld.)

Given the assurance that Uruk will be safe—that enough chaff and grass, probably hay—has been stored there, Anu releases the Bull to Ishtar. She leads it down by a nose-robe, and it immediately proceeds to devastate the land.

The actual killing of the Bull is described in fewer than twenty lines. (Recall that the actual battle against Humbaba was also described in relatively few lines.) Details of conflict accord with both the earlier Sumerian story and the visual representations in cylinder seal impressions. When Enkidu has extricated himself from the pit, he advises Gilgamesh on the way to fight the Bull. Since he had in his previous state observed the power of the Bull—as he had observed the power of Humbaba—Enkidu knows how to fight the creature. He circles behind the bull, grabs it by the tail, sets his foot on a back leg and holds it. Gilgamesh, like a butcher, brings his knife down in the neck between the horns.

Their triumph over the Bull of Heaven will further infuriate Ishtar, of course. She flies up onto the wall of Uruk and issues a mournful wail against Gilgamesh. What happens next is a further outrage to the godhead of Ishtar. Enkidu tears a piece of the bull and flings it at the goddess. (There is still some question about the imittu Enkidu throws at her. The word usually refers to the right side or shoulder, but it can refer to a cut of meat, and it is a part that can be used in rituals.) Enkidu then hurls an insult and challenge at Ishtar. If he had been able to catch the goddess as he had the Bull, he would have treated her the same way.

If Gilgamesh’s rejection is a poetic, intelligent putdown of a goddess, Enkidu’s is a much rougher sort. The unprecedented vision of humans acting to humiliate a divine being is certainly shocking. The two actions are very different and might be considered indicative of the differences between the more earth-bound Enkidu and the higher order of his royal counterpart. (In the Sumerian version, it is Gilgamesh himself who flings a piece of the Bull’s shoulder at the goddess.)

Wedged in between the defeat of the Bull and the insult to Ishtar is a brief, four-line detail that was not anticipated in the Sumerian versions of the story. Gilgamesh and Enkidu cut out the Bull’s heart and set it before the sun god Shamash. They then step back and prostrate themselves before the god. They sit down together. The episode seems to present a ritual act. It gives another indication of the extent to which Shamash has been given an increasingly large part in Gilgamesh. The addition to the story raises the question that the participation of Shamash in the defeat of Humbaba did. Is the Bull of Heaven, like Humbaba, to be seen as “something evil?” There are not further clues in this
short episode, nothing that identifies the Bull as evil or that suggests Shamash has been a supporter of the heroes in this adventure, only the presence of Shamash himself—and only that because the heroes perform a pious act out of respect to the Sun.

**Tablet 6, Lines 147-183: The Heroes Celebrate Victory**

While Ishtar calls together the women in her service and sets up a wailing over the Bull’s *imittu*, Gilgamesh acts in a very different way. Among Ishtar’s women are the *shamhatu* and *harimtu*—the terms used of the woman who was sent into the wilderness to seduce Enkidu—and a third category, the *kezertu*, literally the woman with curled hair. While all three categories are often thought to be prostitutes, even “sacred prostitutes,” acting for and perhaps embodying the *kuzbu* of Ishtar, in this instance they perform a different kind of service. We will see them again later when, as here, they act as professional mourners. (One can still find women employed as professional mourners in the Middle East today.)

As Ishtar deals ritually with defeat and death, Gilgamesh calls his craftsmen together to examine the horns of the Bull. They are astonished at the size of the horns and, presumably, prepare the horns to be decorated and filled with precious oil.

Gilgamesh then dedicates the horns to “his god,” Lugalbanda, and hangs the horns in Lugalbanda’s “bedroom.” Designating the father of Gilgamesh (1.33) as “his god” suggests that the human consort of Ninsun had been raised to godhead. (In the earlier Sumerian parallel, there is considerable emphasis given to the offering of the horns, not to Lugalbanda, but to the great goddess herself. With that gift the Sumerian story ends.)

Then the celebration really begins. Gilgamesh and Enkidu wash their hands in the Euphrates River, take each other by the hand, and drive along the main thoroughfare of Uruk. As the people gather to look at the heroes, Gilgamesh asks of certain serving-women (perhaps of his own household) who the greatest of “the boys” might be, the most powerful among the “men.” In both of the parallel lines the question (and the women’s response) refer to sheer masculine exuberance. (The words do not refer to “man” as human being.) Three broken lines follow, but they must merely emphasize the crowd’s recognition of the supreme moment of victory.

The main clay tablet used to reconstruct Tablet 6 has a line drawn to separate this great victory and the citizen’s reaction to it—and to the exceptionally rapid ending to Tablet 6. Only five lines remain to complete the story. The ancient scribe who produced the A text drew another line at the end of what he took to be the sixth column of the tablet. The column itself has only ten lines on it, then a colophon that indicates the first line of the next tablet.

As the episode leads to a “joyful celebration” (*hidūtu*) in his palace, the story turns immediately to its opposite. The “joyful celebration” recalls the description of Gilgamesh as the “joy/woe man. At the center of *Gilgamesh* is heroic triumph and almost perfect joy. In the next line the heroes are lying down in their beds.
Immediately, as Enkidu is lying down, he receives a dream. He rises to tell his friend the dream. Because we have the colophon, we know what the dream portends: disaster.

The colophon says simply, “Friend, why are the Great Gods in Council.” We will see how quickly the heroes’ triumph and joy will turn to ashes as Tablet 7 begins.

For a cultural and historical analysis of Tablet 6, see Part Two, Chapter 6, below.

**Key Words in the 6th Tablet**

- **Tammuz** = **Dumuzi**, the most famous of **Ishtar’s lovers**, celebrated in myth and rituals.

- **Ishullanu** = a **gardener**, who cultivates **date palms**, last in Gilgamesh’s list of Ishtar’s lovers.

- **Anu** = **An, The Above**, Sky God, the highest of the gods, “father” of Ishtar.

- **The Bull of Heaven** = (Akkadian *alû*, Sumerian GUD.AN.NA) a mythical beast, among the constellations, Taurus.

- **The Euphrates River** = with the **Tigris** River, the keys to agriculture in the Sumerian south; in antiquity close to Uruk.

- **Lugalbanda** = (human) **father** of Gilgamesh, deified ruler of Uruk, who appears in Gilgamesh’s dreams in Tablet 4.

- **Fruit** = used as a symbol of sexual activity.

For critical and philological notes on these texts, see George, BGE, II, 829-43.