Tips for Tablets 9 and 10
The Search for Life: Tablets 9 and 10

Early and Late Versions
Tablet 9 has a number of gaps, but about fifteen lines on an Old Babylonian tablet from Sippar helps to restore a conversation between Gilgamesh and the Sun God Shamash.

An Old Babylonian version of the advice Siduri (or Shiduri) gives Gilgamesh at the beginning of Tablet 10 differs in detail and “wisdom” from the version in Gilgamesh. Because there is much repetition in Gilgamesh’s retelling of the loss of Enkidu, much of Tablet 10 has been restored. An Old Babylonian text has a version of a dialogue between Gilgamesh and Urshanabi, the boatman who will help Gilgamesh cross the dangerous waters to his destination, his encounter with the wise Utnapishtim.

It would appear, then, that the death of Enkidu was known earlier than Gilgamesh. The sad journey Gilgamesh takes to find “life” was known in some form, with the characters Siduri and Urshanabi playing important roles, in the Old Babylonian period. The very difficult early work, “The Early Dynastic Hymn to Gilgamesh,” appears to have a journey at the end that parallels Gilgamesh’s search in Gilgamesh, but there is no companion for Gilgamesh in that piece.

With all the gaps in Tablets 7-10 the narrative shows considerable coherence as both Enkidu and Gilgamesh are thrown into a tragic turn that completely changes the tone of the story. It is not clear how early the sage Utnapishtim, who Gilgamesh thinks has the answer to his great question about “life,” was brought into the story.

Episodes: What Happens in Tablets 9 and 10

Tablet 9

Tablet 9, Lines 1-18: Sorrow Enters the Heart
In a soliloquy, Gilgamesh weeps for Enkidu and indicates his fear of death. He states his purpose: a journey through the wilderness to find Utnapishtim (who, with his wife, were the only humans to escape death). On a mountain pass he sees lions and is fearful. He prays to Sin, the Moon God, for protection. At night he receives a dream, which gives him strength. He takes his axe and knife and kills the lions.

A gap in the text is usually filled in with an Old Babylonian document thought to have come from Sippar, the home of Shamash. It provides something of a sad farewell to the Sun God, whose path through the darkness he will take but whose protection is no longer evident. Gilgamesh speaks to Shamash, telling the Sun God of his plan. Shamash discourages the journey: Gilgamesh will never find the life he seeks.

The discouraged Gilgamesh asks if, at his death, he will lie sleeping through the ages. Will there be light for him? He asks when the dead may see the light of the sun.
**Tablet 9, Lines 38-135: At the Mountains of Mashu**
After the gap in the text, Gilgamesh has arrived at the twin mountains of Mashu, which guard the rising sun every day. The place is guarded by a scorpion-man and his wife, both terrifying creatures. They recognize that Gilgamesh is part human and part divine, in fact “two-thirds god, one-third human.”

The scorpion-man also discourages the journey. No one has traveled the path Gilgamesh seeks. The scorpion-man does, though, provide him with information about the journey (much of which is lost) and opens the gate of the mountains.

Gilgamesh takes the path of the Sun God.

**Tablet 9, Lines 136-195: The Dark Journey**
Gilgamesh travels in darkness. Eventually he begins to see light, and enters a beautiful garden made up of precious stones.

The tablet ends with a woman watching the approach of Gilgamesh.

**Tablet 10**

**Tablet 10, Lines 1-18: Gilgamesh furens**
The woman who observes Gilgamesh is Siduri, keeper of a tavern at the farthest reaches of land, where the land meets the sea. The poet narrates her observations and her inner thoughts. She sees his wild appearance and intuits his deep sorrow. Thinking him a killer, she bars the door and goes up on the roof.

**Tablet 10, Lines 19-91: Gilgamesh and Siduri**
Gilgamesh threatens to smash the door, but Siduri asks him to tell his story. Once again, in exactly the same words, Gilgamesh explains the reasons for his sorrow and his intention to find Utnapishtim. As with the others, Siduri discourages him, since there has been no passage across the sea since olden times; only Shamash makes the perilous journey. And the Waters of Death are before him.

She does, though, give him the advice his needs to continue the journey. He will need the help of Urshanabi, the boatman, and the mysterious Stone Things he uses to make the crossing.

**Tablet 10, Lines 92-162: Gilgamesh and the Boatman**
Gilgamesh immediately attacks, with his axe and knife, the very Stone Things he will need to make the crossing. He smashes them and throws them into the river. Once again, this time to Urshanabi Gilgamesh explains his sad state and his intention to see Utnapishtim.

Since he had destroyed the Stone Things, he must go into the forest and cut three hundred enormous punting poles to be used for the crossing.
**Tablet 10, Lines 163-183: The Dangerous Passage**
Once he cuts the punting-poles, Gilgamesh and Urshanabi make the journey across the Waters of Death. When they use up all the punting-poles, they strip down and use their clothing as a sail to complete the journey.

**Tablet 10, Lines 184-203: Utnapishtim Observes Gilgamesh**
The famous wise man, survivor of the Flood, watches as the boat approaches. He notices that the Stone Things are broken and the one aboard the boat is not the master. The remaining lines in the text are too broken to be reconstructed.

**Tablet 10, Lines 204-322: The Wisdom of Utnapishtim**
The lengthy tablet, with more than 300 lines, concludes with a dialogue between Gilgamesh and Utnapishtim. As at every stage in this long journey, the person he meets wants to know the reason for Gilgamesh’s sorrow. Once again Gilgamesh repeats the sad tale of losing Enkidu. At the completion of the tale, Gilgamesh hopes that sleep will finally come to him and sorrow will give way festive joy.

The long-awaited reply of the wise man contains, unfortunately, many missing lines, and some that are readable are difficult to interpret. The last twenty some lines of the tablet, though, are clear. After his arduous search Gilgamesh receives anything but the advice he sought. Unlike Utnapishtim himself, the great exception to the rule, human life is “snapped off like reeds in a canebrake.” There is no escaping death. We build our houses, make arrangements for the future, continue feuds, but in the end there is nothing. The captive and the dead are alike. Never did a dead man greet a man living in the land.

The final lines of Tablet 10 have Utnapishtim giving a final blow to the hopes of Gilgamesh. The gods have fixed the fates of humans, establishing Death and Life; but they have not revealed the day of Death.

**Key Words in Tablets 9 and 10**

**Tablet 9**

**Utnapishtim** (Uta-napishti), son of Ubar-Tutu, is one of several names for the figure like the biblical Noah, survivor of the Flood.

**Sin** (Suen), Sumerian Nanna, the Akkadian name of The Moon God.

**Mashu**’s twin **mountains**, peaks between which the Sun God rises at dawn.

**Scorpion-man** and his **wife**, terrifying **guardians** of the mountain gate.

**Flesh of the gods**, the part of Gilgamesh that makes him “two-thirds god.”
Path of The **Sun God**, through the underworld at night.

**Garden of Precious Stones**, where each natural object is a jewel.

**Tablet 10**

**Siduri**, an avatar of Ishtar.

**Waters of Death**, ocean

**Urshanabi**, the boatman

**Stone Things**, apparently needed to make regular trips across the waters

**Punting-poles**, like those used in shallow waters, needed for the journey

**The fool (?) or lil-demon**, possibly identified as the father of Gilgamesh

**Anunnaki** and **Mammitum**, maker of **destiny**

For critical and philological notes on these texts, see George, BGE, II, 862-77.