

# *Epic of Gilgamesh*

## *Assignment*

In discussion section we are going to be exploring key themes and topics in *Gilgamesh* that can tell us about some of the values, beliefs and ideas that were important to the Mesopotamian cultures from which the epic derives. We will consider these themes again when we examine Homer's *Iliad* in order to compare and contrast attitudes and beliefs.

**INSTRUCTIONS.** Following is a list of themes/topics, and questions to think about as you examine them. Examine *Gilgamesh* carefully, looking for where these themes occur, what is important about them, and what you can extract about the culture that produced them, that is, what we can say about their significance for understanding the particular culture. (You will notice that many of the themes overlap.)

**Important:** in order for our discussion to be effective, your group needs to have **specific passages** in mind, not simply a vague recollection that you read something somewhere that was relevant! Cite specific passages by page number(s) with your responses, so we can ALL read along.

### *1. The qualities of a hero.*

How important to Gilgamesh is reputation (i.e. how one appears to one's peers), honor, and fame (to one's peers as well as to posterity)? Is it enough for him to know he is the strongest and best, or is it necessary to demonstrate it, and if so, why? Do you think Gilgamesh is being represented as a hero, and if so, what are the characteristics of a hero in this culture?

### *2. The gods and religious beliefs.*

How are humans (including partly divine heroes like Gilgamesh) supposed to behave toward gods? How are gods supposed to behave toward humans? Do humans have free will or are they completely controlled by the gods?

What motivates the gods' actions toward humans? What motivates humans' actions toward the gods? What actions are we talking about? (hint: think about why gods choose to help or harm humans and the consequences; think about sacrifice and gift-giving).

### 3. *Women.*

Within the contexts of the stories, what role do women play or what functions do they have? Are their opinions judged to have value? Do they have any power? (Focus on humans, but you can think about the goddesses.)

### 4. *Compassion and pity.*

Do gods or humans feel compassion and/or pity for others (gods toward humans, humans toward each other)?

### 5. *Death and fate.*

How is death viewed? How important is a proper burial and why does it matter? How is Immortality achieved or accomplished? (Fame? Art?)

How do Gilgamesh, Enkidu, and/or other characters define the meaning of death? What, for example, do they imagine as happening to persons after they die? What is there about being alive that makes dying so fearsome or hateful?