

# Ishtar and the Bull of Heaven

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*The Epic of Gilgamesh*, one of the world's oldest surviving works of literature, was written between 2100 and 1200 BCE and records the adventures of Gilgamesh, king of the Bronze Age Sumerian city of Uruk. Gilgamesh starts the epic as an abusive king, too focused on himself to defer to the needs of the community; so, in response to the angry prayers of the townspeople, the gods send him a partner and equal—a newly civilized beast-man named Enkidu—to draw out his ability to care about others. The pair embark on a successful quest to defeat the demigod Humbaba, guardian of the Cedar Forest. But after Gilgamesh infuriates Ishtar, goddess of war and fertility, Ishtar demands Enkidu's death. In his grief Gilgamesh seeks to unbind himself from death, but this quest is unsuccessful as death and the need to adapt that comes from it are the essence of humanity and what separates mortals from the feckless gods.

The below excerpt comes from Tablet 6, halfway through the 11-tablet epic. Gilgamesh's beauty provokes the desire of the goddess Ishtar and she proposes to him. Gilgamesh scorns her, reminding her of the fates suffered by her many former conquests. Ishtar is enraged and rushes up to heaven. She persuades Anu, her father, to give her the fiery Bull of Heaven (the constellation Taurus) so that she can punish Gilgamesh with death. The Bull of Heaven causes havoc in Uruk, but Gilgamesh and Enkidu discover its weak spot and kill it. They insult Ishtar further and return to the palace in triumph to celebrate their victory.

The epic survives on various clay tablets, all of them damaged or fragmentary, so reproducing the epic and translating it into English involves a great deal of reconstruction, making use of the patterns of epic poetry and other, later version of the tale to fill in the blanks.

- Source: *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Tablet 6. Translation: Andrew George, 2003.

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He washed his matted hair, he cleaned his equipment,  
he shook his hair down over his back.  
Casting aside his dirty gear he clad himself in clean,  
wrapped cloaks round him, tied with a sash.  
Then did Gilgamesh put on his crown.

5

On the beauty of Gilgamesh Lady Ishtar looked with longing:  
'Come, Gilgamesh, be you my bridegroom!  
Grant me your fruits, O grant me!  
Be you my husband and I your wife!

'Let me harness you a chariot of lapis lazuli and gold,  
its wheels shall be gold and its horns shall be amber.  
Driving lions in a team and mules of great size,  
enter our house amid the sweet scent of cedar!

10

'As you enter our house  
doorway and footstool shall kiss your feet!  
Kings, courtiers and nobles shall kneel before you,  
produce of mountain and lowland they shall bring you as tribute!

15

'Your goats shall bear triplets, your ewes shall bear twins,  
 your donkey when laden shall outpace any mule!  
 Your horse shall gallop at the chariot in glory,  
 no ox shall match yours at the yoke!' 20

[Gilgamesh] opened his mouth to speak,  
 [saying] to the Lady Ishtar:  
 '[And if indeed I] take you in marriage,  
 ' . . . . body and clothing, 25  
 [whence would come] my food and my sustenance?  
 [Would you feed me] bread that is fit for a god,  
 [and pour me ale] that is fit for a king?'

*[There is a break here with some missing lines.]*

'[Who is there] would take you in marriage?  
 [You, a frost that congeals no] ice,  
 a louvre-door [that] stays [not] breeze nor draught,  
 a palace that massacres . . . warriors, 35  
 'an elephant which . . . its hoods,  
 bitumen that [stains the hands] of its bearer,  
 a waterskin that [cuts the hands] of its bearer,  
 limestone that [weakens] a wall of ashlar,

'a battering ram that destroys [the walls of] the enemy,  
 a shoe that bites the foot of its owner! 40  
 What bridegroom of yours did endure for ever?  
 What brave warrior of yours went up [to the heavens?]

'Come, let me tell [you the tale] of your lovers:  
 of . . . . . his arm. 45  
 Dumuzi, the lover of your youth,  
 year upon year, to lamenting you doomed him.

'You loved the speckled allallu-bird,  
 but struck him down and broke his wing:  
 now he stands in the woods crying "My wing!" 50  
 You loved the lion, perfect in strength,  
 but for him you dug seven pits and seven.

'You loved the horse, so famed in battle,  
 but you made his destiny whip, spur and lash.  
 You made his destiny a seven-league gallop, 55  
 you made his destiny to drink muddy water,  
 and doomed Silili his mother to perpetual weeping.

'You loved the shepherd, the grazier, the herdsman,  
 who gave you piles of loaves baked in embers,  
 and slaughtered kids for you day after day. 60

'You struck him and turned him into a wolf,  
now his very own shepherd boys chase him away,  
and his dogs take bites at his haunches.

'You loved Ishullanu, your father's gardener,  
who used to bring you dates in a basket,  
daily making your table gleam.

65

You eyed him up and went to meet him:

"O my Ishullanu, let us taste your vigour:  
Put out your 'hand' and stroke my quim!"  
But Ishullanu said to you:

70

"Me! What do you want of me?  
Did my mother not bake? Have I not eaten,  
that now I should eat the bread of slander and insults?  
Should I let only rushes cover me in winter?"

'When you heard what [he'd] said,  
you struck him and turned him into a dwarf.  
You sat him down in the midst of his labours,  
he cannot go up . . . , he cannot go down . . .  
Must you love me also and [deal with me] likewise?'

75

The goddess Ishtar [heard] these words,  
she [went up] to heaven in a furious rage.  
[Weeping] she went to Anu, her father,  
before Antu, her mother, her tears did flow:

80

'O father, again and again does Gilgamesh scorn me,  
telling a tale of foulest slander,  
slander about me and insults too.'

85

Anu opened his mouth to speak,  
saying to the Lady Ishtar:  
'Ah, but was it not you who provoked King Gilgamesh,  
so he told a tale of foulest slander,  
slander about you and insults too?'

90

Ishtar opened her mouth to speak,  
saying to her father, Anu:  
'Father, give me, please, the Bull of Heaven,  
so in his dwelling I may slay Gilgamesh!

95

'If you do not give me the Bull of Heaven,  
I shall smash [the gates of the Netherworld, right down] to its dwelling,  
to the world below I shall grant [manumission,]  
I shall bring up the dead to consume the living,  
I shall make the dead outnumber the living.'

100

Anu opened his mouth to speak,  
saying to the Lady Ishtar:  
‘If you want from me the Bull of Heaven,  
let the widow of Uruk gather seven years’ chaff,  
[and the farmer of Uruk] grow seven years’ hay.’ 105

[Ishtar opened her mouth] to speak,  
[saying to] her father, Anu:  
‘ . . . . . already I stored,  
. . . . . already I grew.

‘The widow [of Uruk has] gathered [seven] years’ chaff, 110  
the farmer [of Uruk has grown seven years’] hay.  
With the wrath of the Bull I shall [have vengeance.]’  
Anu heard this speech of Ishtar,  
the Bull of Heaven’s nose-rope he placed in her hands.

[Down came] Ishtar, leading it onward: 115  
when it reached the land of Uruk,  
it dried up the woods, the reed-beds and marshes,  
down it went to the river, lowered the level by seven full cubits.

As the Bull of Heaven snorted a pit opened up,  
one hundred men of Uruk fell down it. 120  
The second time it snorted a pit opened up,  
two hundred men of Uruk fell down it.

The third time it snorted a pit opened up,  
and Enkidu fell in as far as his waist.  
Enkidu sprang up and seized the Bull by the horns. 125  
In his face the Bull spat slaver,  
with the tuft of its tail . . . .

Enkidu opened his mouth [to speak,  
saying to Gilgamesh, [his friend:]  
‘My friend, we vaunted ourselves [in our] city: 130  
how shall we answer the thronging people?

‘My friend, I have tested the might of the Bull . . . ,  
so learning [its] strength, [and knowing its] purpose.  
Let me [test] again the might of the Bull,  
I [shall get myself] behind [the Bull of Heaven,] 135  
I will seize [it by the tuft of the tail.]

‘I will set [my foot on the back of] its [leg,  
in . . . . . [it.]  
Then [you] like a [butcher, brave and] skilful,  
between the yoke of the horns and the slaughter-spot thrust in your knife!’ 140

Enkidu rushed round to the rear of the Bull,  
he seized it by the [tuft] of the tail.  
[He set] his foot on [the back of] its [leg,  
[in] . . . . . it.

Then Gilgamesh like a butcher, brave and skilful, 145  
between the yoke of the horns and the slaughter-spot [he thrust in] his knife.

After they had slain the Bull of Heaven,  
they bore its heart aloft and set it before Shamash.  
Stepping back they fell prostrate in the presence of the Sun God,  
then both of them together sat down. 150

Ishtar went up on the wall of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,  
hopping and stamping, she wailed in woe:  
'Alas! Gilgamesh, who mocked me, has killed the Bull of Heaven.'

Enkidu heard these words of Ishtar,  
and tearing a haunch off the Bull he hurled it towards her. 155  
'Had I caught you too, I'd have treated you likewise,  
I'd have draped your arms in its guts!'

Ishtar assembled the courtesans, prostitutes and harlots,  
over the Bull of Heaven's haunch she began rites of mourning.  
Gilgamesh summoned all the smiths and the craftsmen, 160  
the size of the horns the craftsmen admired.

Thirty minas of lapis lazuli in a solid block,  
two minas each their rims,  
six kor of oil, the capacity of both.  
He gave them to his god Lugalbanda, to hold oil for anointment, 165  
he took them in to hang in his chamber.

They washed their hands in the river Euphrates,  
took each other by the hand and in they came.  
As they drove along the streets of Uruk,  
the people were gathered to gaze [on them.] 170

Gilgamesh spoke a word to the serving girls of [his palace:]  
'Who is the finest among men?  
Who the most glorious of fellows?'  
'Gilgamesh is the finest among men!  
[Gilgamesh the most] glorious of fellows!' 175