

THE GILGAMESH VARIATIONS*Tablet 11: He Found Life*

Adapted by Barry Rowell

In the darkness, a chorus is faintly heard in the distance. Lights rise to reveal GILGAMESH, his head still in his hands.

CHORUS

Only one
Only you
One as bold as
You
Would so dare
One so bold
As you are so
So boldly dare.

You
Expect—
Expect—
Expect.

Knowledge.
Such such
Knowledge
You expect
You expect
To know.

Repeat, as needed

After a beat, UTNAPISHTIM laughs heartily and slaps him on the back.

UTNAPISHTIM

What? What makes you think you're special? You may be two-thirds god but that other third's gonna bite you in the ass some day. What's different about you?

GILGAMESH starts angrily, grabs UTNAPISHTIM and pulls him close, holds him by the back of the neck, their faces almost touching. GILGAMESH sniffs UTNAPISHTIM as an animal might, his eyes racing over the old man's entire body, searching for weakness. Pause.

GILGAMESH

You— [sniff] You are...

UTNAPISHTIM

Yes?

GILGAMESH

I feel you. In my hands. Your neck, your throat...

UTNAPISHTIM

Yes.

GILGAMESH

What will happen if I squeeze?

UTNAPISHTIM

[Gently.] You're getting it.
[Pause.] Yes, I am like you. Good.
What else?

GILGAMESH

[confused] I don't... I don't know.

UTNAPISHTIM

Why did you really come here?

CHORUS ends. Pause. GILGAMESH releases UTNAPISHTIM who steps slowly backward. GILGAMESH falls back onto his haunches, his fists pressed against the ground between his feet.

GILGAMESH

For Enkidu. For his... His death fills me. He- It. Must. Stop. I must stop it. I feel my flesh rot. I stink of death!

UTNAPISHTIM

Yeah, you have no idea: sheesh! Listen, boy-I know you. I was a fool like you. See, when I was young-maybe only a little older than you, even-when I was a young man, I had to get wise and quick. The gods had come up with a plan for a deluge, to really cleanse the earth-

GILGAMESH

Why?

UTNAPISHTIM

Who knows? We'd transgressed somehow. They thought they could do better by starting all over. Maybe they were just plain bored. What does it matter? So anyway, the gods decided to kill every last mortal and that no one should even know about the coming storm. But Ishtar disagreed: she didn't want to see us all wiped out.

UTNAPISHTIM is suddenly a young man again.

And, lo: I heard a voice; a voice to me through a reed wall.

ISHTAR

[whispering] Wall!

UTNAPISHTIM

It said unto me,

ISHTAR

Wall! Hear me, O Wall! *[Pause; softer]* A flood is coming-soon, very soon. Tear down this house; build an ark. For humanity. You alone.

UTNAPISHTIM

Alone? No, I can't. I can't do it alone. Everyone will see me; everyone will know—I can't keep a secret. No, I can't do it all alone.

(Pause.)

Oh. All right, then.

ISHTAR

Build an ark. Measure, build, cover and load. An ark. Secretly.

Take only what you must; leave the rest. Scorn goods, abandon riches.

You—only you, your family—will find life.

(pointed) Or else no one will.

The four actors each take up a wooden rod or pole and stand several feet apart; GILGAMESH is in the center. UTNAPISHTIM produces a ball of colored twine or heavy string, winds the end of it around the pole and then passes the ball along to one of the other actors, who wraps it around her/his pole so that it is connected to UTNAPISHTIM's pole by the string. The ball is then passed along to the next actor who does the same thing with her/his pole and passes it the next person. The activity continues, round and round, until the strings have created the outline of the ark—a cube with perhaps a few dividing lines to indicate the decks—between their poles.

UTNAPISHTIM

The ark had a footprint of one acre.

ACTOR THREE

43,560 square feet—

ACTOR FOUR

1% less than 44,000 square feet

UTNAPISHTIM

The walls (which thrust straight up to heaven) were ten dozen cubits.

ACTOR FOUR

1 cubit = about 18 inches—

ACTOR TWO

10 dozen cubits = about 210 feet

UTNAPISHTIM

Each deck was ten dozen cubits.

ACTOR TWO

Ten dozen cubit by ten dozen cubits by ten dozen cubits: it's a cube.

UTNAPISHTIM

It had six decks to make seven parts.

ACTOR THREE

He's counting the top deck.

UTNAPISHTIM

And divided each deck into nine parts.

ACTOR TWO

For 54 rooms—

ACTOR FOUR

Plus the top deck.

UTNAPISHTIM

I sealed the ark with three shars of bitumen on the outside—

ACTOR THREE

24,000 gallons.

UTNAPISHTIM

—3 shars inside and 6 shars of oil.

ACTOR TWO

Pitch alone won't work—

ACTOR THREE

Oil keeps the reeds dry in water—

ACTOR FOUR

Important for an ark.

As the outline nears completion, the sound of rain can be heard: perhaps only a few drops at first but by the time the actors finish, the sound is steady. UTNAPISHTIM and ISHTAR take control of the four poles—ISHTAR outside, UTNAPISHTIM inside—and begin to move the ark to indicate the rising water lifting it up from the ground. The storm noise suddenly crescendos as ACTORS TWO and

FOUR realize their danger. At the same time, ISHTAR cries out in agony like a woman giving birth:

ISHTAR
Receive all that's past [break] O
clay, receive [break] receive all
this evil [break] this [break]
utter destruction [break] O my
children [break] my children will
fill [break] my babies [break] my
babies like fish fill the seas!

ACTORS TWO and FOUR
(variously) Utnapishtim! Where is
our place? You've abandoned us?
We are your neighbors, your
friends! I should be with you!
Let me in! You can't leave me
behind! At least take my child!
Don't let me drown! Save me!

*They are swallowed up by the darkness;
only UTNAPISHTIM and ISHTAR are visible.
The ark continues to be violently tossed
by the storm. When GILGAMESH speaks and
the sound stops instantly; UTNAPISHTIM
becomes an old man again and ISHTAR
removes the ark.*

GILGAMESH
You let them all die.

UTNAPISHTIM
Yes. Hardest thing I ever did. It didn't matter to any of them that it
was all for our future, that humanity was dead without me. They were
dying. [pause.] To this day, those voices are the first sounds I hear
when I wake up and the last in my head before I fall to sleep.

GILGAMESH
I would not.

UTNAPISHTIM
Oh, really? You came to me looking for immortality. For Enkidu? He's
already gone. For yourself. Be honest, now: this is about you.

GILGAMESH
You are immortal.

UTNAPISHTIM
No. I am not a god: I'm a man, like you. And I will die, like you. I
don't know when—no one does. But it will happen. Everything—every
thing—and everyone is impermanent. If I have any claim to eternity, it
will be for the things I have done: the good and the bad; I can only
hope the best of what I am is greater than the worst.

Immortality is not some *thing* that you can find. You have to make it
and yours can only be made in Uruk.

It's your human part that makes you capable of achieving great things:

but how do you use that ability? What have you done so far? Don't you think you've got more to offer the world than a few juvenile pranks with your buddy and this pigheaded snipe hunt?

Pause.

GILGAMESH

Are you sure? There is no way for me—?

UTNAPISHTIM

If you aren't just the most obstinate--what do you want, magic? All right, all right: what kind of host lets his guest go home empty-handed? I've heard there's supposed to be a plant--sharp thorns, penetrating roots--not far from here, in the depths of the abyss: "The Return of a Man's Prime," or something like that. It's been said that anyone who eats of this plant shall have life everlasting. Bon voyage!

The other ACTORS create the image of a boat with the four poles; GILGAMESH jumps eagerly into it and begins to row, singing as he does:

GILGAMESH

[Singing] Push push along
Face to the wind
Ten leagues on
You take a drink.

Once I have this plant, I will give it first to the elders. They will eat before me. They will be restored. For Uruk.

[Singing] Push push along
Against the waves
Twenty leagues more
You swig again.

They will eat and I will see what does to them. If it they do not--
[Pause.] If... if they become again what they were, then I will eat my part.

[Singing] Push push along
Across the sea
Thirty leagues pass
You need to piss.

Yes, one of them must eat a leaf first. To be certain. Then I can take all of the plant I need.

The plant appears near the foot of the stage: it glows as if lit from within. GILGAMESH, having arrived at a point far upstage, stops rowing. An ACTOR brings

him two large weights attached to long ropes that GILGAMESH takes and swings them around until he releases them to land downstage near the plant. As he climbs down the ropes toward the weights, the sound and lights change to indicate that he has gone underwater.

Once GILGAMESH is underwater, a SNAKE enters and swims menacingly around the space; it finally comes to rest near the boat and watches GILGAMESH's progress.

GILGAMESH reaches the ends of the ropes and wraps each one around one of his ankles and grabs hold of the plant. His struggle to remove it from the ground is violent and leaves his hands severely bloodied. He then unwraps the ropes from his ankles and returns to the surface. The SNAKE moves to where it cannot be seen by GILGAMESH. GILGAMESH gasps for air and carelessly drops the plant to ground.

The SNAKE moves to a position directly behind GILGAMESH and rears up as if preparing to strike. Instead, it suddenly lunges forward and grabs the plant; GILGAMESH attempts to stop the SNAKE but he is too late: it swallows the plant whole. It charges rapidly upstage and disappears. Silence.

GILGAMESH is astonished. After a pause, he begins to laugh.

GILGAMESH

What a fool! A complete fool! To have come so far... wasted-wasted!—so much time. [Pause.] There is no— [Beat.] Permanence. [Beat.] I must go back to Uruk.

The lights on stage begins to change as he sings:

Push push along home
Back to the hearth
Warmed by the stones
Bathed in the light.

The lights have fully changed to reveal the walls of Uruk; a group of CITIZENS,

performing their daily tasks, are not immediately aware of his presence.

GILGAMESH

The city of Ishtar, safe behind her walls. How high they rise—so far into the sky, grasping for the clouds. Every stone tells a story.

As GILGAMESH moves closer to the CITIZENS, they notice him and are astonished by his appearance; they exchange puzzled glances.

My people. Please. I must wash away my foulness, cleanse myself. Get rid of these filthy rags. Then I may enter Uruk.

One CITIZEN removes GILGAMESH's clothes, leaving him nude. Another brings a large sheet of white fabric that is wrapped around GILGAMESH until it covers him completely, head-to-toe, like a burial shroud. Another CITIZEN pours water over GILGAMESH until his body can be seen through the wet fabric. They then peel away the fabric, like a reptile shedding its skin and exit with it. One CITIZEN is left alone with the naked GILGAMESH. Pause.

GILGAMESH

I should stay as I am, as I truly am. Let everyone see that I have nothing.

CITIZEN

Unh-hunh.

After a pause, the CITIZENS return with clothes and redress GILGAMESH. Once he is clothed again, they pull him toward Uruk.

No! Wait. Not yet.

The CITIZENS stop, surprised by his reluctance; GILGAMESH gets down on his knees and bows before the walls. He begins to sing a hymn; gradually, the others join him.

HYMN

We proclaim you, o Uruk, and
Lift up our voices in praise.
We glorify your name and

Honor your threefold might:
 The clay quarries of our fathers
 The orchard gardens of our mothers
 The city home of our children.

GILGAMESH enters the city and leads them all into the Temple of Ishtar. The people all stay near the periphery as GILGAMESH approaches a statue of ISHTAR that holds the copper box. He kneels before it and whispers his prayer:

GILGAMESH

I return to you, O Ishtar. To you but not for you. I have stumbled through the wilderness, wandered across seas and mountains, for too long--on a foolish errand. While the people of Uruk--my people...

I left them adrift. Lost. For too long. I owe them a debt I can never fully repay.

I have returned now. To find my destiny here in Uruk.

Lights change. GILGAMESH turns and addresses the audience:

Uruk will flourish for 5000 years. The magnificent walls of the city will grow higher and more impossible to penetrate--until one day they are finally penetrated. The invaders will lay waste to the great walls and to the city within them--even to the great white temple of Ishtar at the center; all will crumble and return again to the earth.

The mighty Euphrates that feeds Uruk's canals will run dry and another river--not far from here--will some day lay claim to that name. The lapis lazuli tablets will not remain in their copper casket, of course: like the box itself, they will become the spoils of a victor who has no interest in their tales and converts them into rings, bracelets and necklaces--trinkets that are traded, sold, stolen or lost.

However... there are copies, carefully etched into simple clay. These copies will have copies and their copies will have variations on these tablets and all their tales will some day lie buried within desert mounds for centuries. And although each reproduction loses a fraction of its predecessor's story, or adds a previously unknown fact to the history, they will still preserve the lives of Humbaba and Utnapishtim, Shamhat and Ninusun. Of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. For how long? *[Pause.]* Who can say?

Blackout.

END OF TABLET 11