

GILGAMESH THE KING

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Gilgamesh - brave warrior, handsome god-man - angers the gods and the people of Uruk by his failure to fulfill his duties as a king. The gods say that a king should be responsible and a protector of the people; he is one who promotes and furthers civilization and prosperity. A good king puts his country's welfare above his own and sacrifices his personal life to the good of the people. The king of Uruk, however, is selfish and barbaric. Gilgamesh breaks apart the families of his people, shows little respect for the gods, disrupts the order of nature, is generally irresponsible with the kingship Enlil has granted him, and therefore is not a good king.

One of a good king's first concerns is looking after the stability of his people's society, but Gilgamesh does the opposite of this by breaking apart families; he steals other men's wives and takes their sons for his armies. At heart, society is built upon families, so the protection of family is important to any civilization. "A king should be a shepherd to his people" (p 19). Especially in a time such as this, when civilization is new and humans are still learning how to live with one another, the king should protect his people and guide them. He destroys society rather than caring for his people. Gilgamesh's objective should be the security of Uruk, not his own self-gratification. Yet, by breaking apart the families in the community, Gilgamesh disregards the responsibilities of his kingship and the duties given him by the gods.

His disrespect of the gods is not limited to ignoring societal and social boundaries; he goes so far as to directly oppose the gods' will by killing Humbaba. Although he knows the gods want Humbaba to guard the forest, Gilgamesh kills him to get personal glory. He says, "I will set up my name in the place where the names of famous men are written" (p 23), revealing that his true goal is not protecting his kingdom, but rather becoming known to men. Despite the

fact that the gods warn him not to continue, he goes on with his journey. Gilgamesh disregards what the gods want him to do, since his only purpose is personal glory. His object is not the fulfillment of his kingly duties, but rather achieving fame. Gilgamesh is not interested, for instance, in benefitting humanity and his people; rather, he says that what he wants is to “leave behind... a name that endures...” (p 23). He is a brave man and a great hero, but his objectives as a hero are not what they should be as a king. As a king, he should think only of how his killing Humbaba will affect the good of his people and the stability of his country. A good king would be more concerned with the well-being of Uruk than with whether or not his name will be remembered. He would not desert his country for the sake of his own fame and glory. Gilgamesh, however, does not kill Humbaba for the good of his people - Humbaba is not affecting the people’s welfare at all. He is merely doing his gods-given task of guarding the forest, and Gilgamesh upsets the will of the gods when he kills Humbaba.

Gilgamesh does not stop at abusing his people and challenging the will of the gods, though. He challenges fate itself and tries to obtain eternal life, while it has been explicitly told the gods have explicitly told him that he is not allowed to live forever. He deserts his people to go and search for eternal life, when a good king would stay behind and care for the country. Gilgamesh simply leaves the inhabitants of Uruk to their own means while he goes off to search for immortality. Enlil told him in a dream that “...everlasting life is not your destiny” (p 23). Gilgamesh was appointed to a great place among men; he was to be the leader and guide of the people. His duties consisted of protecting the people from the dangers of barbarism and war, not of achieving eternal life or everlasting fame.

What Enlil had appointed for Gilgamesh to do was be the king of Uruk, and be a caretaker of the people. A good king thinks first of the people's welfare, and secondly (if at all) of his own. Gilgamesh thinks only of himself, and therefore is not a good king.

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