Epic of Gilgamesh

Introduction:

Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, is both divine and human. Despite his achievements, his rule is oppressive.

"Gilgamesh, two-thirds god and one-third human, is the greatest king on earth and the strongest super-human that ever existed; however, he is young and oppresses his people harshly."

The Creation of Enkidu:

The gods create Enkidu to challenge Gilgamesh's tyranny.

"In the steppe, there was a young wild-man named Enkidu. With the gazelles he grazes on grass, with the wild beasts he drinks at the watering-place, with the teeming creatures his heart delights in water."

Friendship:

After an initial confrontation, Gilgamesh and Enkidu form a deep bond.

"Enkidu spoke to Gilgamesh, saying: 'My friend, I have been talking to you but you have not been listening to me. You have been listening to the curse of Humbaba.'"

Defeat of Humbaba:

The friends journey to confront the guardian Humbaba for fame.

"Gilgamesh spoke to Enkidu, saying: 'Why, my friend, are we trembling when we hear the name of Humbaba? Let our hearts not be faint... Let us go down into the midst of the forest...'"

Upon Humbaba's defeat, he pleads:

"Take me to the sacred Holy Temple, to the temple of Enlil and of heavenly Shamash, and then slay me in the place where Enlil and Shamash tell you!"

Ishtar's Proposal:

Ishtar's advances are rebuffed by Gilgamesh, leading to her fury.

"Come, Gilgamesh, be you my bridegroom, grant me seed of your body, let me be your bride and you shall be my bridegroom."

Gilgamesh responds:

"And what would you give me in return? Oil-soaked crumbs of bread? The dregs from the winnowing-basket? ...You are the door through which the cold gets in..."

Death of Enkidu:

The duo faces the gods' wrath after slaying the Bull of Heaven. Enkidu's impending death leaves Gilgamesh desolate.

"Hear me, great ones of Uruk. I weep for Enkidu, my friend... I shall roam the desert in the skin of a lion."

Quest for Immortality:

Fearful of mortality, Gilgamesh seeks the immortal Utnapishtim.

"Tell me, how did you join the Assembly of the Gods and find life?"

Utnapishtim narrates the story of the Deluge:

"Load the 'Seed of all living things' into the Ship... The time arrived, as he was speaking, the evening became dark, to herald the onset of rain... I went into the Ship and sealed the entry!"

Gilgamesh, who is seeking to overcome death, cannot even conquer sleep. After instructing Urshanabi, the ferryman, to wash Gilgamesh and clothe him in royal robes, they depart for Uruk. As they are leaving, Utnapishtim's wife asks her husband to offer a parting gift. Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh that at the bottom of the sea there lives a boxthorn-like plant that will make him young again.

Gilgamesh, by binding stones to his feet so he can walk on the bottom, manages to obtain the plant. Gilgamesh proposes to investigate if the plant has the hypothesized rejuvenation ability by testing it on an old man once he returns to

Uruk. When Gilgamesh stops to bathe, it is stolen by a serpent, who sheds its skin as it departs. Gilgamesh weeps at the futility of his efforts, because he has now lost all chance of immortality. He returns to Uruk, where the sight of its massive walls prompts him to praise this enduring work to Urshanabi.

Later, after Gilgamesh fails the test of staying awake, Utnapishtim shares a secret:

"There is no permanence... But man's life is short, at any moment it can be snapped, like a reed in a canebrake... There is a plant... like a boxthorn, its thorns will prick your hand like a rose. If your hands reach that plant you will become a young man again."

Return and Conclusion:

Gilgamesh returns to Uruk with newfound wisdom, realizing that while immortality is elusive, a lasting legacy is achievable.

"Go up onto the wall of Uruk, and walk around! Examine its foundation, inspect its brickwork thoroughly— is not even the core of the brick structure made of kiln-fired brick? ... One square mile is city, one square mile is orchards, one square mile is claypits, as well as the open ground of the Ishtar Temple."