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Gilgamesh

Nearly 5,000 years ago, the people living between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers told stories of Gilgamesh, a king who searched for a way to live forever. These stories, which mixed history and legend, were passed down for hundreds of years. They were eventually written down, becoming one of the earliest surviving works of literature.

An epic is a long poem that tells the story of heroes or gods. Like most epics, the first stories of Gilgamesh were passed down by word of mouth. Hundreds of years later, these stories were collected and recorded on clay tablets.

The Cruel King and a Wild Man

Gilgamesh ruled Uruk, a city-state on the Euphrates River. He forced his subjects to build great palaces and massive walls to protect the city. The people lived in constant fear of Gilgamesh until a wild man emerged from the forest.

Enkidu was also big and strong, but he came from the forest, where he lived with the animals. Because of this, he was wild and ignorant of civilized life. When Enkidu learned of Gilgamesh's cruelty, the wild man challenged the mighty king to fight. As the two were locked in battle, they realized they admired one another, so instead of remaining enemies, Gilgamesh and Enkidu became inseparable friends.

The Cedar Forest

Gilgamesh dreamed of becoming a glorious hero whose name would live on forever, so he and Enkidu left Uruk to seek adventure. They entered a forbidden Cedar Forest guarded by a monstrous giant named Humbaba.

> *"…in order to protect the Cedar Forest* [the gods] *assigned Humbaba as a terror to human beings; Humbaba's roar is a flood, his mouth is fire, and his breath is death!"*

After a fierce battle, Gilgamesh and Enkidu killed Humbaba and cut down the sacred cedar trees. They floated the logs down the Euphrates River so the people of Uruk could use the valuable wood for building.

The Anger of the Gods

The goddess Ishtar became angry and sent the fearsome Bull of Heaven to destroy the crops of the people of Uruk. The bull ravaged the land, bringing famine and destruction. Enkidu helped restrain the beast while Gilgamesh struck it down with his sword. The enraged gods caused Enkidu to fall ill and die.

The Search for Eternal Life

Gilgamesh was heartbroken by his friend's death. The king also feared that he would one day die, so Gilgamesh began searching for the secret of eternal life. He learned that a great flood had destroyed the world many years earlier. One man, Utnapishtim, had been warned by the gods and was still living long after the flood. It was said that he would live forever, so Gilgamesh decided to meet this survivor and learn his secret.

Gilgamesh traveled across the Waters of Death to a distant place at the end of the world, where Utnapishtim lived. The old man told the king,

> *"The life that you are seeking you will never find. When the gods created man they allotted to him death, but life they retained in their own keeping."*

A Lesson Learned

Gilgamesh returned home filled with wisdom from his adventures with Enkidu and Utnapishtim. Gilgamesh became a gentle ruler who no longer mistreated the people of Urduk. Gilgamesh realized he could not escape death but could live on in the memories of the people he loved.

Gilgamesh and the Flood

The Epic of Gilgamesh has many parallels to the story of Noah and the great flood in the Old Testament of the Jewish and Christian holy books. Other cultures also tell stories of a great flood. In Greek myth, the god Zeus once sent a flood to punish humanity. In Hindu tradition, a man named Manu saves mankind from a great deluge.

Some scientists believe that rising sea levels at the end of the last Ice Age may have inspired these flood stories. As glaciers melted, water flowed into the oceans and changed coastlines. Stories like Gilgamesh may reflect memories of these ancient events.

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Fill in the Blanks

The Epic of G__l__a__e_h is among the earliest known works of l__t_r__t__re. The epic *p_____ began as a series of o_____ legends told throughout S__m__r by s__o__y__e__le__s nearly five thousand years ago. Later writers recorded the l__g__n__s on c_____ tablets.

Gilgamesh was a powerful k_____ who treated his people with terrible c__u__l__y. Gilgamesh was c__a__l__n__ed by a wild man from the f__r__st named Enkidu. The two powerful men b__t__l__d, but they also learned to r__s__e__t one another. Gilgamesh and E__k__du became great friends.

Gilgamesh began to search for the s__c__et of e__e__n__l life after the d__a__h of En__i__u. A wise old man told G__l__a__e__h, "The l_____ you are s__e__i__g you will never find. When the gods c__e__t__d man they allotted to him d__a__h, but life they r__t__i__ed in their own k__e__i__g." Gilgamesh returned home a much *w__s__r ruler. Though he could not e__c__pe death, Gilgamesh realized that he could live on in the m__m__r__es of the people he loved.

The Epic of Gilgamesh mentions a great f_____. Stories of a great deluge are common in the l__g__n__s of many c__l__u__es. Scientists have evidence that suggests s____ levels changed at the end of the last i____ a____ about 6,000 years ago. It is possible that Gilgamesh and other legends are connected with this ancient event.

Answer in complete sentences

1. How were Gilgamesh and Enkidu different from one another?

2. How did Gilgamesh's many adventures change him?

3. Explain how the epic of Gilgamesh is similar to the story of Noah from the Christian and Jewish holy books.

*This is a higher order learning question. You must answer the question to the best of your ability, but any reasonable answer will be graded as correct.

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