

17. GILGAMESH AND AKKA

The convened assembly of the city's young men gave answer to Bilgames: 'To stand on duty, to sit in attendance, to escort the king's son – To hold a donkey by the hindquarters – As they say, who is there has breath for that? Let us not submit to the house of Kish, let us wage war!' –

A.R.George(tr.): Bilgames and Akka

It had still been light when they arrived, but night was now falling. As a myriad of stars emerged in the darkening sky above them, the warm flickering glow from the fires reached out over the crowd as they sat together in small or larger groups, looking up at Abraham expectantly. Abraham waited a few minutes for the general rustling and chattering to die down. His glance around the crowd took in Sarah and Debra nestled in with Nana, Agga and Namtilla, and the children distributed in front and between them. He gave Nana a small nod and again glanced at Ensi suggesting that he approved of the way the Debra-situation was being managed.

In his firm, clear voice Abraham began, 'I'm going to tell you a special story about one of the great kings from before the flood.' There was an appreciative grunt from the crowd. 'I come from the north so I call him

Gilgamesh, but here you call him Bilgamesh,' to noisy cheers, particularly from the cluster of young men gathered around the beer-vat, '... and Akka. This story concerns your city, the city of Uruk and the city of Kish another great city, greater even than Uruk before the flood. In those days Uruk was the great city of the south in Sumer, but Kish was the great city of the north in Akkad.'

Abraham turned slightly to include Debra in his telling, 'Kingship was awarded to the city of Uruk by the goddess Inanna. Uruk, on account of King Gilgamesh who I'm going to tell you about today, was to become the first city to have a city wall, but it doesn't have one yet when this story takes place.' Abraham turned back again. 'I like to think that this episode was significant for Gilgamesh's ambition to build a city wall, but you'll have to hear about the building of that wall another time.' There was a groan of disappointment from the crowd. 'You'll also see in this story that, because his father was a king and his mother a goddess, in Gilgamesh's Uruk there's no separation between the temple and the palace. The temple is completely under the thumb of the palace, and the citizens have no alternative court of appeal with either the priesthood and the gods, or with the courts and the ruler,' with an amused glance at Ensi who did not respond. 'So, we see him here, a young man, negotiating as a warrior, a king and a god, with the elders, without having to refer to the priests for an opinion. You also see him come under attack from his own citizens who have to muster the courage to confront him directly and risk his anger when they have a problem with his behavior. But with a powerless temple they have no one else to whom they can appeal.'

Abraham waited patiently for the general scuffling that was taking place as everyone tried to find a better place or a more comfortable position to sit in, to die down.

'That morning Gilgamesh had as usual, been playing a boisterous game

of his own invention with as many of the men of the village as he could get together. The game comprised teams of two, with one player carrying the other on his back. The man on the other's back carried a large stick or cudgel of sorts. A ball was to be thwacked at a designated goalpost, while every other team was trying to get hold of the ball to do the same. An incessant loud drumming that could be heard all over the city accompanied the game and was thought to be indispensable to it. The game had been going on for over an hour and usually went on for much longer, but one man had fallen with his teammate, and the teammate had broken his arm. Gilgamesh had sent one of his own physicians to the man's house to set the arm.

After the game, he had gone for a swim, and on his way back to the palace, a group of women from the village had accosted *him*, their king.

"My Lord?" said the woman in charge.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, I think you can."

Whenever his mother had said that, it hadn't gone well but, remembering his position, Gilgamesh bravely gestured that she should continue.

"Often, as happened this year, our men go out on campaign straight after the planting and return in time for the harvest."

Gilgamesh nodded.

"When our men are out the entire morning playing silly games with you, they're not helping with the harvest."

He blushed. "If they have more important things to do, they should just say so."

"Who do you suggest they should say this to?"

"Well, to me, of course."

"To their king and god?"

He nodded as doubt seeped into his damp shoes.

“So, a simple village man has to say to his king, I’m sorry my Lord, but my wife says I’m not allowed to come out to play with you today? And today a man broke his arm. He won’t be helping with the harvest at all, and he won’t be any good for playing games with now either.”

“I’m truly very sorry about that. Has my physician been to see him?”

“Yes. Thank-you. He has received excellent treatment, and is right now lying on the roof of his house enjoying the sunshine, while his wife and children bring in the harvest. In a few days’ time, he’ll be well enough again to help around the house with things that you can do with one arm like, she looked around at the group of supporting ladies who were watching avidly, like buttering his toast, or ... deciding what to wear ...” There were snickers behind her.

Gilgamesh shuffled his feet before the group of village women.

The woman nodded grimly and turned to the other women, “I think we can go now.”

“Thank-you for your time, my Lord.”

Gilgamesh squirmed on the pillows scattered on the floor of his throne room. He swatted angrily at a fly and gave a small yelp as the reed-swatter came down stingingly on his thigh.

‘Luckily Gilgamesh doesn’t have to think about his ball game for much longer,’ Abraham continued, ‘because the son of the king of Kish sends an ultimatum prior to his invasion of Uruk.’

‘There’s a heavy knocking on the palace door.’

The musicians leap into action and a loud ‘Boom, Boom, Boom,’ resounds over the assembled listeners.

‘Gilgamesh hears the sounds of the front-door opening in the hallway and the rustling of someone coming in, followed by a whispered consultation with the guard.’

The guard rushes up to Gilgamesh who is still lounging on his pillows

on the floor of his audience chamber pretending not to listen, “The envoys of Akka have come from Kish to Gilgamesh in Uruk. They have a message for the king.”

“Take their weapons from them and allow them to draw near,” says Gilgamesh authoritatively.

Gilgamesh seats himself carefully on his throne, which is a nicely carved wooden chair that he avoids sitting on, on account of the splinters.

The envoys, having been relieved of their weapons are brought before Gilgamesh to deliver their message. Under the impulse of a firm shove from the attendants, they prostrate themselves on the ground and kiss the cold and dirty mosaics that cover the floor in striking geometric patterns. Still lying down but keeping their chins up, they deliver the message. “From Akka, son of King Enmebaragesi, lord of all he surveys. We require your surrender. We will treat your people well. If you do not surrender, we will destroy your city, and we will only kill you after the very last scream from the very last woman or child, whom we will kill before your very eyes, has stopped.”

Gilgamesh makes a show of examining their weapons disparagingly. He curses himself that he doesn't have a city wall on which he can display the body parts of messengers who deliver cheeky messages. He suppresses the temptation to have the envoys killed anyway. He sends them home, humiliatingly without their weapons, having lazily promised (paying more attention to a buzzing fly) to think about it.

As soon as the envoys are out of sight, Gilgamesh yells for his messenger, his attendants and his scribe, “Convene a council-meeting of the elders. We're going to war.”

Gilgamesh lays the matter before the elders, “You all know what this means. Our gods will be made to bow to their gods. We'll be made to work and we'll be given all the worst tasks in the kingdom. All of us, young and

old,” he emphasizes to the elders, “will be worked and starved to death. We might as well die fighting for our freedom, because if we give up now, we’ll die anyway.”

Gilgamesh is discomfited by the timorous question from one of the ‘old’ members in the meeting, “When you say ‘work’, what do you think they’ll make *us* do?”

“Well ... they’ll probably put everyone who’s too old to work to the sword immediately,” he says pointedly. “Then everyone else would have to do anything that we here in Uruk would make captives do. We’d be treated as slaves, and we would replace oxen. We’d be blinded and tied to the handle of the millstone and made to grind grain. We’d be set to the plow and be made to drag it through the fields. Mostly, I suppose, they would make us dig wells for them.”

It seemed, Debra deduced, that digging a well was one of the worst jobs in the kingdom. Probably, she thought, because aside from it being hard, boring, and endless, you could only be terribly chagrined when you thought about how much you were enriching your enemy while you were digging. A well could keep them in water for generations.

Abraham continued, ‘In Akkad there’s less groundwater than here in Sumer, but it rains more. From where I’m standing, I can see the river that runs straight through Uruk, and all of you who’ve had to dig irrigation canals, know that here in Sumer there is enough water, but you have to do battle with the salt.’

There was an understanding silence.

‘In Akkad they have to dig wells to have a regular supply of water, apart from waiting for rain. The people of Kish thought they had come up with an ingenious idea when they thought of first conquering Uruk. That way they would rule over the most significant city of Southern Mesopotamia getting access to the groundwater, and at the same time acquire the man-

power to dig their wells for them in Akkad.’

There were hoots of derision from around the crowd.

‘But, let me also mention that this wouldn’t be the only task awaiting the people of Uruk if they lost the war. There were bound to be lots of other heavy, sore, tedious, and dangerous tasks awaiting them. Actually, the only good thing about the offer from Kish is that the agony won’t last long. As we know, the life of a slave who is whipped, worked, and starved is generally short. And all these tasks together are represented metaphorically in this story. Digging wells and drawing water, includes laying roads, and building, and going into battle on the side of people whom we regard as our enemy. Although when you’re using foreign soldiers, you try to use them against people who they’re used to thinking of as their own enemy too.

Gilgamesh says to the elders, “Let us not submit to the house of Kish. Let us wage war.”

But, contrary to what Gilgamesh expects them to do, the elders vote in favor of submitting to Kish, “We prefer to submit to the house of Kish, we don’t want to wage war.”

Gilgamesh is shocked, “Elders, I can’t believe that you’re saying this. The dynasty of Uruk is the oldest in the land. Our dynasty is so steeped in honor and tradition that it is ruled over by me, a man and a god. That is no longer possible for kingdoms where the dynastic chain has been broken and the link with the gods is gone. You, the elders, who won’t even have to fight, are prepared to give up our sovereignty to Kish. You’ll do that simply based on a threat from that inexperienced idiot who hasn’t even inherited the throne yet, but already wants to throw his weight around and thinks we’ll be an easy trophy.

Either we give up now to face an extremely unpleasant future and certain death, or we fight and yes, maybe we die, or we lose the battle, but we’ll be

no worse off than if we give up now, and if we win, well ... we'll have won."

To no avail.

Gilgamesh reminds himself that the sovereignty of Uruk must be very close to Inanna's heart, both in her position as the city goddess and as the bestower of kingship.

Although he has been refused by the council of the elders and as such may legally no longer refer the matter to the council of the young men, he decides to trust that Inanna who also has her position to lose will be on his side on this issue and overruling the privilege of the elders, he goes to the young men.

"After all, you're the people who'll have to do the dirty work both ways - if we decide to reject the elders' advice and go to war, you'll be the ones doing the fighting, and if we decide to accept Kish's offer and never put up a fight at all, you'll be the ones doing the slave labor. If you stand with me and agree to resist Kish, we'll be at war with Kish and many lives will be lost. The elders have already rejected the option of going to war, which is why I've now come to you. If we lose," loud jeers from the audience, "we'll all have to join Kish. Our women will be impregnated and our children will be put to work. Us soldiers will be made to enter into combat against people who are maybe our own friends and family and die fighting them, or die under the heavy yoke of slavery."

The raucous crowd around the barbecue shouted drunkenly, 'We won't submit to the house of Kish, we're going to war.'

'Correct' said Abraham, smiling indulgently at the enthusiastic group around the fire.

Abraham looked over the crowd at Debra and asked, 'Tell me Debra, have you ever stood behind a donkey?'

Debra blushed and shook her head, 'No'.

There were mixed giggles and gasps from the audience. Abraham

opened his mouth to reply, but was interrupted. Two of the young men from the barbecue darted to the low mound on which Abraham was standing and gave Debra a demonstration of the risk of standing behind a donkey. One man got down on all fours, pretending to be a donkey. Another stared vacantly over the crowd while he chewed a straw, not noticing the 'donkey' that he was standing behind. The 'donkey' promptly gave him a massive kick that sent him to the ground. The two of them, both laughing while the victim tried to cuff the man who had kicked him, went back to the group.

Abraham, having let the young men act out their demonstration, waited for the guffaws from the audience to die down. 'You'll have seen from this Debra, that standing behind a donkey is dangerous and unpredictable. In the story, the warriors compare working for a foreign royal with standing behind a donkey. Not very subtly, the story is also implying that the royal *is* the donkey. But the point is that the work is hard and unpleasant, and your boss is cruel and arbitrary, and he can treat you however he likes. None of the citizens of Kish will mind if foreigners who lost a war against them get hurt or die. There'll be no one to stand up for your rights. Your king is enslaved or dead, and your gods are bending the knee to their gods. You don't have any rights.'

Abraham continued with the story, 'Naturally for a decision like this, the warriors and everyone in Uruk would need the support of the gods. Without that support, the battle cannot be won. At the same time, it is the terrible responsibility of these young men who are now so willing to go into battle, to protect our gods. If we lose, the people from Kish will pillage our temples and lay their hands on our gods. They'll place our gods in their temples and our gods will have to pay obeisance to the city gods of Kish.'

Abraham looked around at his momentarily quiet audience. 'This

would be an unspeakably painful humiliation for everyone in Uruk ... and the ultimate betrayal of our gods, whom we have sworn to worship and care for, just as they have us in their keeping.’

There was a groan of sympathy from the audience.

Abraham continued, ‘Gilgamesh reminds them, “Back in ancient times when the world was being made, Uruk was the smithy of the gods. Even now the blacksmith is known for his strength. How great would that forge of the gods have been? It is here in Uruk that the gods forged the great steel flashes and thunder-balls of the storm-god, and the huge wheels for the chariot of the sun. The city of Uruk was their huge and awesomely powerful forge.”’

Abraham paused for effect, ‘... and Gilgamesh reminds them he is the son of a goddess...

“Mine is the House of Eanna, come down from heaven,” he says to them.

We understand here that although the young men were very enthusiastic when Gilgamesh first proposed this action to them, naturally when they consider what they’re letting themselves in for, they’re having second thoughts. Gilgamesh is a great leader, and he understands this and doesn’t want them to change their minds just before a battle. He shares with them the information he used when he was deciding that he wanted to stand up to Akka - while they think about it. He reminds them that Uruk is strong and that it is his home and the goddess Inanna’s home. They do not have to fear that he or the other gods will desert them. The experienced and well-armed component of the Kish army is relatively small, and the bulk of their force is made up of an inexperienced and under-equipped rabble that will have had a long march behind them by the time they arrive. He shows them the weapons that he took from the emissaries, mockingly pointing out the shortcomings of the sword and the shield. When he hears the big,

eager roar from his warriors, Gilgamesh determines his men are properly motivated to fight against Akka's, and he sets in motion the preparations for the battle to come.

"Now make ready the equipment and arms of battle," he commands.

While the men are building sandbanks and filling barrels with oil, the blacksmiths are beating hoes and farming-equipment into swords, daggers and shields, and the carpenters are making bows and arrows. The people in the surrounding villages are harvesting everything that can be harvested and that might be taken to feed the enemy. They pack up their goods and foodstuffs and bury them out of reach of the invading army.

After thirteen days there comes the warning plume of smoke from the one-day-distant outlook post, and they run to take up their positions. Everyone who will not be taking part in the fighting goes to hide in the trees above Uruk. Noone gets any sleep as they spend a tense night waiting.

The next day, fourteen days after the departure of the emissaries, the enemy arrives.

Akka, son of the king of Kish, lays siege to Uruk.

The men of Uruk, in order to safeguard their city from the destruction of battle, leave the city precincts and go out to meet the enemy.

There is a tremendous battle.

The men of Uruk pour boiling oil and shoot flaming arrows to set the oil alight. When the enemy scatters to escape the flames, the men of Uruk await them as they come running. Swords and spears clash, and the men of Uruk smash their shields into the faces of the men of Kish.

That same day, the men of Kish are overwhelmed by the strength of the army of Uruk. Instead of having us dig their wells for them, they lie drowning in the water they had hoped would be theirs. And in the midst of the battle, Gilgamesh takes Akka son of the king of Kish, prisoner.'

Abraham waited for the cheering to die down, 'But at some previous

time, Akka had done Gilgamesh a favor.

Akka says to Gilgamesh, “Uruk, the smithy of the gods, is given into your charge. Repay me my favor.”

He is giving up his claim to Uruk and calling up that old favor in order to gain his own release while his men lie dead or dying around him.

Gilgamesh contemptuously grants him his request, “Before the Sun God, I hereby repay you the favor of old.”

He lets Akka go free to Kish.’

Abraham stopped and there was a moment’s silence. Then the cheering and whistling began, and Abraham and Ensi waving cheerfully left the mound. With another wave to the crowd they moved off.

Sarah jumped up, ‘Bye everyone.’

‘Bye Sarah,’ they answered in unison, as she ran off to join Abraham.

Looking at Abraham, now standing to one side with a small group of priests and Sarah, all laughing together, it occurred to Debra that Abraham was a priest.

The crowd was reluctant to end the day by going home and continued chattering amongst themselves in the warm evening air. Banti and Haia went up to help finish what was left of the beer. A priest came up to Ensi and interrupting the conversation with Abraham, said something to him. Ensi in response, looked out over the comfortably settled crowd who seemed to be in no hurry to leave, and nodded. The priest fetched a large pottery urn from one of the side-rooms in the gate and came back glancing again at Ensi to confirm that he had understood him correctly. He threw the contents of the urn onto one of the fires, causing the fire to sizzle and hiss. A column of greenish, sweet, muffling smoke rose from the fire. As the curious aroma hung in a cloud over the group, the band struck up and there were shrieks and exclamations of delight. A small group of women who had been sitting together stood up, and holding hands began to dance

in time to the lively music while more people joined in.

Debra's head was spinning. She wondered drowsily whether she'd had too much beer. Her imagination drifted away, and she settled herself more comfortably on the ground.

Dreamily she went in search of Gilgamesh.