

# The Importance of Loyalty in The Epic of Gilgamesh

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The ancient Mesopotamian writing, The Epic of Gilgamesh, gives readers insight into the traditions and customs of the people who wrote it. Like all epics, The Epic of Gilgamesh is the story of a heroic national figure: this epic gives the story of the life of Gilgamesh from his birth as two-thirds god, one-third man to his death. Throughout the epic the importance of loyalty is addressed. In The Epic of Gilgamesh readers see that loyalty is the most important aspect of a Mesopotamian relationship and that there are always consequences for violating trust.

Insight into loyalty and the consequences of violating loyalty is first along with the civilization of Enkidu. Before his civilization "Enkidu ate grass in the hills with the gazelle and lurked with the wild beasts; he had joy of water with the heads of wild game" (63). Not only did Enkidu live with the animals of the hills "he helps the wild game to escape; he fills in my pits and pulls up my traps" (64). The animals of the hills trusted Enkidu. No other man would be allowed to run with these animals, but they accepted Enkidu.

The young trapper became displeased with the actions of Enkidu. The trapper journeys to Uruk to seek advice from Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh advises the trapper to "go back, take with you a child of pleasure. At the drinking-hole she will strip, and when he sees her beckoning he will embrace her and the game of the wilderness will surely reject him" (64). This passage demonstrates the known consequences of violating a loyalty. Gilgamesh knows that Enkidu will not be able to resist the temptation of a woman. The animals of the hills distrust humans and by being with a woman Enkidu will violate the trust of the animals. The trapper takes a harlot and returns the fields. Gilgamesh's plan works well:

"As he lay on her murmuring love she taught him the woman's art. For six days and seven nights they lay together, for Enkidu had forgotten his home in the hills; but when he was satisfied he went back to the wild beasts. Then when the gazelle saw him, they bolted away" (65).

Just as Gilgamesh had predicted Enkidu gave into human desire and became civil. The animals were betrayed and no longer accepted Enkidu as of their own. Because he could not resist the lust of a woman, Enkidu violated his loyalty, and lost the only home he had ever known.

Another example of the importance of loyalty comes with Utnupishtim's story of the flood. "So the gods agreed to exterminate mankind. Enlil did this, but Ea because of his oath warned me in a dream" (108). Ea's loyalty to Utnupishtim was so important that he went against the wishes of the other gods to exterminate mankind. After the flood Enlil forgave Ea because Enlil understood the importance of Ea's oath. The gods pronounced that "in time past Utnupishtim was a mortal man; henceforth he and his wife shall live in the distance of the mouth of the rivers" (113).

These two passages demonstrate to readers the importance of loyalty. They also contrast the consequences of betrayal. Ea betrayed the other gods, but since it was because of his loyalty to Utnupishtim they did not punish Ea. The wild animals, however, could not accept Enkidu's betrayal and reject him.