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At the House of Ūtanapišti
An Interpretive Essay

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Abstract This article employs a close literary reading of the last narratological block in the Epic of Gilgameš, the extended scene at the house of Ūtanapišti in Tablet XI. It argues that the end of Tablet X and the beginning of Tablet XI preserve two incompatible first meetings and dialogues between Gilgameš and Ūtanapišti, creating a deliberate narratological false ending that makes room for the Flood story. The analysis highlights Ūtanapišti's unnamed wife, whose apparently marginal role conceals complex agency and an ambivalent, partly sympathetic stance toward Gilgameš. Re-reading the sleep-deprivation test, the article contends that the loaves placed beside the sleeping hero not only mark time but represent a missed chance to share divine food and gain immortality, in dialogue with Enkidu's first bread and the myth of Adapa. A comparison with Abraham and Sarah's hospitality in Gen. 18, and with theories of hospitality from Pitt-Rivers, Levinas, and Derrida, frames Tablet XI as a dark meditation on hostile, manipulative hosting and guarded divine–human boundaries. Finally, the essay discusses Ūtanapišti's farewell gift.

Keywords Epic of Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh. Ūtanapišti. Abraham. Mesopotamian Literature. Mesopotamian.

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Tablet XI of the Standard Babylonian version of the Epic of Gilgameš comprises three distinct literary units. It opens with Ūtanapišti's first-person account of the Flood and concludes with Gilgameš's return to Uruk. Between these two frames lies an extended scene set in Ūtanapišti's house. This article centers on that scene, offering a new reading that is less strictly philological and more exegetical. In pursuing this approach, I draw on both the Old Babylonian and the Standard Babylonian versions of the epic, allowing each to elucidate the other and to address thematic gaps that arise between them. In this respect, my study follows a similar line of inquiry to that undertaken by George (2012).

I begin by observing that there are two disparate accounts of the initial encounter between Ūtanapišti and Gilgameš and two different conversations between them, indicating an important editorial seam in the epic (§ 1). Then I launch into an analysis of the role of Ūtanapišti's wife in the story (§ 2) and read afresh Gilgameš's sleep deprivation trial (§ 3) and (§ 6). I present a set of significant parallels between the description of Gilgameš visiting the house of Ūtanapišti and the account of the three wayfarers who receive hospitality in Abraham's tent in Genesis (§ 4), and in this context explore the concept of hospitality in Tablet XI in light of anthropological and philosophical theories (§ 5). In order to better understand the end of Gilgameš's stay in the house of Ūtanapišti, I examine the topos of bathing and changing one's clothes in the epic (§ 7). Finally, I investigate the meaning of Ūtanapišti's unexpected parting gift to Gilgameš (§ 8).[1]

1 All references to the epic follow the editions of George 2003 and eBL (I.4 Poem of Gilgameš). Translations are mine.

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1 Two Initial Meetings and False Ending

Tablet XI begins with Gilgameš addressing Ūtanapišti directly. He expresses astonishment that immortality has not altered Ūtanapišti's human form, leaving him indistinguishable from ordinary mortals. Gilgameš even admits that he once considered killing him. His speech ends with the question, "You, how did you find yourself present in the assembly of the gods, while you were seeking (eternal) life?" (XI 7).[2] At first glance, this appears to be the two protagonists' first encounter – but it is not. Gilgameš already met Ūtanapišti at the end of Tablet X (207 ff.). His astonishment at Ūtanapišti's human appearance is therefore puzzling, since the two had already spoken in Tablet X. There, in a long, partly broken passage, Ūtanapišti stands on the seashore and observes an unknown figure steering a boat toward Pī-narāti. Once ashore, Gilgameš greets him politely: "[Long] live Ūta-napišti, son of Ubar-[Tutu …!" (X 208). Ūtanapišti asks why he looks so weary (ll. 212-18), to which Gilgameš responds at length, recounting his struggles since Enkidu's death (ll. 219-65). Notably, the men seem to know each other by name. When Gilgameš blesses Ūtanapišti, he uses not only his personal name but also his patronym, "son of Ubar-Tutu". Later, he even adds his epithet *rūqu*, "the Far-away" (l. 250).[3] Ūtanapišti, for his part, already knows the name of the mysterious man arriving on his shore, even though he has never met him before and has received no notice of his coming (ll. 267, 270).[4] Setting aside the question of how they know each other's names, it is evident that the epic presents two irreconcilable versions of their first meeting – the first amicable, the second unfriendly, even hostile. Yet the inconsistency between the end of Tablet X and the beginning of Tablet XI goes beyond the differing tones of these introductions. The two ensuing dialogues are also completely different in character. The first exchange is existential and empathetic: Gilgameš shares his grief, and Ūtanapišti responds with sober wisdom that addresses his psychological turmoil. Death, he says, is sudden, sorrowful, and inevitable, and no human can escape it (X 266 ff.). Nothing in Ūtanapišti's long speech at the end of Tablet X mentions eternal life or suggests that he himself escaped death. By contrast, the dialogue at the start of Tablet XI follows a wholly different line. It answers a specific question – how Ūtanapišti gained access to the assembly of the gods – and unfolds as the story of the Flood. Here, Ūtanapišti's immortality and divine status form the central theme. The introspective empathy of the end of Tablet X gives way to the terse, sardonic exchanges of Tablet XI. Now Ūtanapišti is antagonistic, even dismissive, urging Gilgameš to depart. Thus, the epic does not simply offer two incompatible first meetings; it also presents two fundamentally different conversations. Without invoking source criticism, the presence of these parallel encounters and dissimilar dialogues clearly signals a major editorial seam between the end of Tablet X and the beginning of Tablet XI. Incorporating the Flood narrative – told by Ūtanapišti in the first person and arguably the Standard Version's most radical innovation – required significant editorial stitching.[5] The Flood story evidently came from a source that contained its own version of the meeting and dialogue, distinct in tone and structure from those closing Tablet X. Why the editor left these inconsistencies unresolved is uncertain. Whatever the reason, the result is a rare and intriguing narratological device: the false ending. This device makes a work appear to conclude, only for it to

2 In George 2003, 703 (continued in eBL), XI 7 is translated "How was it you attended the gods' assembley, and found life?". Commenting on this line, George (2003, 878) assigns a special perfective-resultative sense to *balāṭa še'û* in this context: not simply "to seek", but "to seek successfully, to attain". This he contrasted with *balāṭa bu''û* or *balāṭa saḫāru* elsewhere in the epic, which George took to denote unsuccessful searching for eternal life. Worthington (2004, 229-30) accepted this interpretation and further applied it to *balāṭa bu''û*. In my view, however, this ad hoc semantic proposal is unwarranted. The straightforward understanding of *še'û* as "to seek", attested in numerous instances (see e.g. V 312), suits the passage perfectly. Gilgameš asks Ūtanapišti how it came about that he (Ūtanapišti) was invited to the assembly of the gods while seeking eternal life – whereas he, Gilgameš, was not. A fitting parallel to this usage is found in VII 78: [*šamaš*$^{?}$ *l*]*ušte''a ilukka*^{sic} (*i-lu-ka*; I can see no other option but locative) *lusḫu*[*r*] "I will look for [Šamaš], I will appeal to your god". (See also V 47, if correctly restored: *mūta mišī-ma balāṭa* [*še'i*$^{?}$] "Forget death, [look for] (eternal) life!").

3 Letting the OB version to our discussion, we find that Gilgameš could have known the name of the immortal hero of the Flood from what Sursunabu the boatman told him (OB VA+BM b6, contextually parallel to SB X).

4 Similarly, Siduri (in OB VA+BM a16) and the Scorpion-man (IX 90) know Gilgameš by name, though none of them has ever met him before. In fact, the only person in the entire epic who Gilgameš encounters and exchanges names with is Sursunabu, the boatman. In this encounter, which is found only in the OB version, the two are strangers, and the boatman, after being attacked by Gilgameš, looks him in the eyes and asks: "What is your name? Tell me!". Before Gilgameš can answer, the boatman offers his own name: "I am Sursunabu, (the man) of Ūtanapišti the Far-away" (OB VA+BM b5). Gilgameš responds: "Gilgameš is my name". He omits any mention of his heroic deeds – specifically, his adventures in the Cedar Forest and the killing of the Bull of Heaven – which he had earlier recounted to Siduri and Ūtanapišti (in the Standard Version). Instead, he simply states that he is from Uruk-Eanna and that he traveled through the mountains by a lengthy route, a reply that reiterates the account found in SB IX.

5 For a succinct and useful summary of the editorial process of the Standard Version of the epic, see George 2012, 227-8.

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resume with new developments, twists, or scenes.[6] In other words, the close of Tablet X functions like a potential epilogue to the epic – only to lead directly into the dramatic Flood narrative and the encounter at Ūtanapišti's house in Tablet XI.[7]

2 Ūtanapišti's Unnamed Wife and the Sleep Deprivation Trial

After the story of the Flood in Tablet XI, an independent literary unit of about two hundred lines, a new character is introduced: Ūtanapišti's unnamed wife. The narrative now leaves Ūtanapišti's past and moves back to the present in Pī-narāti. The wife makes two appearances. She serves freshly-baked bread to the slumber-stricken Gilgameš, and she later urges her husband to give a farewell gift to the departing guest. Although a side character, she demonstrates her independence by acting sympathetically towards Gilgameš, against her husband's wishes. Her role in this part of the epic has considerable importance.[8]

The sleep deprivation trial is the central episode in this part of Tablet XI. It is initiated when Ūtanapišti sarcastically poses a question to Gilgameš (mirroring the latter's question in XI 7): "Now, as for you, who will gather gods for you so that you will find eternal life that you seek?" (XI 207-8). Then, without any explanation, he tersely challenges his guest: "Come on! Do not sleep for six days and seven nights!" (XI 209). What follows is reminiscent of the unsettling atmosphere in various trials recorded in *Grimms' Fairy Tales*, except that in the epic the hero received no help. Succumbing to fatigue, Gilgameš is instantly engulfed by Sleep, Death's brother (ll. 209-11), proving him unworthy to become a god (ll. 213-14). Then, Ūtanapišti's wife urges her husband to wake the weary traveller up: "Touch him, let the man wake up! May he return safely by the road he came. May he return to his land through the gate he came out!" (ll. 216-18). The result is a complex state of affairs, in which the man and his wife adopt opposing and unexpected positions towards their slumbering guest. The wife who seemed favorable to Gilgameš now wants to wake him up, and Ūtanapišti, who was ill-disposed towards him, is determined not to disturb his sleep. On the surface, the wife seems to be revealed as an inhospitable host and Ūtanapišti a proper one. However, not all is as it seems. The wife is actually working on Gilgameš's behalf because if he can remain awake for the duration of the trial, he can acquire immortality. Likewise, Ūtanapišti's real intention is not benevolent, as he wants to prove that his guest is unfit to be immortal. This is a rather complicated triangle in which everyone has a hidden interest. On the surface, Ūtanapišti is welcoming Gilgameš to his home, but in fact he is hostile to him, doing all he can to prevent him from joining the community of immortals. His wife is more friendly, but like her husband, she too is manipulating Gilgameš. She baldly states that she wishes Gilgameš would wake up and go home, and she urges her husband to give the guest a farewell gift.[9] As for Gilgameš, he is a guest who is dependent on his hosts' goodwill, but he is anything but innocent. He comes to Ūtanapišti's house determined to join the immortal ranks of his hosts, even though he is undeserving.

Reading the scene carefully, another element of friction is revealed between Ūtanapišti and his wife. She does not know how Gilgameš has reached their house, and her words reflect the assumption that he arrived at Pī-nārāti directly from Uruk. That is why she suggests that he return home by the same route. This misconception reveals that Ūtanapišti has not informed her of what Gilgameš recounted to him at length when they first met (X 220-65).[10] The simmering tension between the couple boils over when Ūtanapišti belittles his wife with a sagacious saying: *raggat amēlūtu iraggigki* "Mankind is evil! It will ill-treat you!" (XI 220).[11] This dictum tells us two things. First, the wife is immortal like her husband, as she is not equated with *amēlūtu*. Her immortality – first mentioned in XI 204 – is reaffirmed through

6 On false ending in literature and film, see Bazhanova 2019.

7 Another notable false ending in the epic occurs in the episode of the plant of life and the snake that eats it at the end of Tablet XI, discussed below.

8 My analysis of Ūtanapišti's wife differs from that of Harris, who considers her "passive, acted upon" (Harris 1990, 225).

9 On this, see § 8 below.

10 Gilgameš told the same story to Siduri (X 29-66) and Ur-šanabi (X 120-43).

11 Translation based on CAD R, 62 (*ragāgu* is attested only here). Harris (1990, 226) describes it aptly as a "jaundiced proverb". A similar pessimistic view of human nature and morality, connected directly to the Flood, is found in Gen. 8:21: "And when the Lord smelled the pleasing odor, the Lord said in his heart, 'I will never again curse the ground because of humans, *for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth*…'" (translations of biblical texts follow the New Revised Standard Version, Updated Edition).

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the fact that she lives beside her husband. (Note that the other members of Ūtanapišti's family, who were saved from the Flood, seem to have died). Second, despite the wife's unclear attitude towards Gilgameš in the sleep deprivation test, the narrator puts the wife on Gilgameš's side. This aligns her with other female characters in the epic who, directly or indirectly, try to help Gilgameš get home to Uruk:[12] Šamḫat (Tablet II *passim*), his mother Ninsun (Tablet III 46 ff)., the wife of the Scorpion-man (IX 50-1), Siduri (X 78-91 and OB VA+BM iii 1-15), and, to some extent, even the infatuated Ištar in Tablet VI. In contrast to his wife's empathy, Ūtanapišti perceives Gilgameš not as an individual but as a representative of evil humankind. By this point, Ūtanapišti has been fully integrated into the divine community, so that he is reminiscent of the enraged Enlil when discovering the boat on Mount Nimuš and realizing that someone had miraculously survived the Flood (XI 175-6). Having been accepted into Enlil's divine circle (XI 199-204), Ūtanapišti adopted an attitude more in line with his new divine patron than with Ea, the deity with a stronger focus on humanity whom he initially revered.[13]

3 Not Sleeping or not Eating?

Determined to prove to Gilgameš that he will fail the sleep deprivation test, Ūtanapišti devises the idea of placing a freshly baked loaf (*kurummatu*) in front of the sleeping hero every day, as a way to mark the time elapsed. Naturally, he tasks his wife with baking and serving the bread. Placing baked loaves next to the sleeping Gilgameš reminds the reader of Enki's suggestion to Atra-ḫasīs to stop venerating all the gods and offer a baked pastry (*epītu*) to Namtar (and then, to Adad) alone, so that the god would stop killing humanity (Atr. I 380 ff. and II 42 ff.). On a deeper level, the baked bread in both episodes – which have the same hero, Ūtanapišti//Atra-ḫasīs – symbolizes the constant human attempts to reach into the divine realm, thereby stressing human frailty vis-à-vis the gods.

Gilgameš sleeps for seven days without eating. This can be said to parallel a previous scene in the epic, in which Enkidu, after spending seven days with Šamḫat (I 194), is given bread for the first time (II 44-51). Both scenes involve a recumbent hero who stands at the threshold of humanity being presented with bread. Enkidu, after making love to Šamḫat and eating the bread, is cast out of the wild and sent into civilized life; Gilgameš, after failing to gain divine acceptance, is compelled to return to human society. So, both heroes, after seven days of lying down and being served with bread, transition irrevocably into humanity. The rationale underlying the two episodes is that eating together equals living together.[14] A *locus classicus* demonstrating this principle is the myth of Adapa, who after being tricked by Enki declined the food and drink offered by Anu in heaven, thus missing out on eternal life.[15]

A surprising corollary of the above is that Gilgameš was not denied eternal life because he failed to stay awake. His slumber prevented him from consuming the bread baked in the oven by order of the semi-divine Ūtanapišti, so he missed the chance of partaking in divine food. In other words, the bread provided by Ūtanapišti's wife was more than a means to track the passing time, it was a way to grant him entry into the divine realm.

4 The Old Couple: Ūtanapišti and His Wife Vs. Abraham and Sarah

A striking parallel to Gilgameš's stay at Ūtanapišti's house in Tablet XI is found in Gen. 18:1-15. In Jewish tradition, these verses (known as the Visit of the Angels) are significant for the divine promise of a son to Abraham. Similarly, the Qur'anic tradition (Al-Hijr 51-4) emphasizes the glad tidings of the forthcoming son. Christian exegesis, on the other hand, focuses on the three visitors to the patriarch, who are viewed as a foreshadowing (a prefiguring type) of the Holy Trinity. In all three traditions,

12 Cf. Harris 1990. Male figures (Enkidu, Ur-šanabi) support Gilgameš in his wanderings. Emmanuel Levinas' fundamental view on Habitation and the Feminine is relevant here. Levinas sees the Feminine as the sources of primary hospitable welcome: "And the other whose presence is discreetly an absence, with which is accomplished the primary hospitable welcome which decribes the field of intimacy, is the Woman. The woman is the condition for recollection, the interiority of the Home, and inhabitation" (Levinas 1980, 155. Cf. Meijer-van Wijk 2017).

13 On the hidden tension in the pantheon, between Enlil and the rest of the gods, see Wasserman 2020, 149-52.

14 For discussion of commensality in ancient and modern societies, see Weiss et al. 2025.

15 For the myth of Adapa, see Izre'el 2001 and now eBL I.7 (`https://www.ebl.lmu.de/corpus/L/1/7`). On different interpretations of the myth, see Bing 1984; Izre'el 1998; Milsten 2015a; 2015b.

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though, there is an emphasis on Abraham's hospitality (known as *Philoxenia* in Christian writings). The biblical text reads as follows:

> The Lord appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre, as he sat at the entrance of his tent in the heat of the day. He looked up and saw three men standing near him. When he saw them, he ran from the tent entrance to meet them and bowed down to the ground. He said, "My lord, if I find favor with you, do not pass by your servant. Let a little water be brought, and wash your feet, and rest yourselves under the tree. Let me bring a little bread, that you may refresh yourselves, and after that you may pass on – since you have come to your servant". So they said, "Do as you have said". And Abraham hastened into the tent to Sarah and said, "Make ready quickly three measures of choice flour, knead it, and make cakes". Abraham ran to the herd and took a calf, tender and good, and gave it to the servant, who hastened to prepare it. Then he took curds and milk and the calf that he had prepared and set it before them, and he stood by them under the tree while they ate.
>
> They said to him, "Where is your wife Sarah?" And he said, "There, in the tent". Then one said, "I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son". And Sarah was listening at the tent entrance behind him. Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in age; it had ceased to be with Sarah after the manner of women. So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I be fruitful?" The Lord said to Abraham, "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son". But Sarah denied, saying, "I did not laugh", for she was afraid. He said, "Yes, you did laugh".

The structural-thematic parallels between the Mesopotamian epic and the biblical account are remarkable, and the differences are all the more revealing. (1) An old and childless couple[16] living in isolation unexpectedly receives a guest or guests, whereby (2) the divine and the human realms meet. In Tablet XI, the hosting couple is divine (that is, immortal) and the guest is human (consumed with fear of dying); while Gen. 18 reverses the divine and human identities of guests and hosts. (3) The member(s) of the divine sphere are physically indistinguishable from regular human beings. In Tablet XI, Ūtanapišti, though immortal, looks just like everyone else (XI 2-4), and in Gen. 18, the physical appearance of God and the two accompanying angels does not occasion any remark.[17] Neither do the divine protagonists perform any miraculous deeds. They behave quite normally; only their unique knowledge sets them apart. (4) Bread (alone, or together with other food) is prepared for the guest(s). In Gen. 18, food is prepared (by Sarah and the servant, vv. 6-7) and served (by Abraham, v. 8); in Tablet XI, the bread is prepared and served (by Ūtanapišti's wife) but left untouched (see above § 3). (5) The arrival of strangers generates tension between husband and wife, with differing reactions from the spouse. In Gen. 18, Abraham is hospitable and Sarah is half-hearted; in Tablet XI, Ūtanapišti is hostile and his wife is more friendly. (6) With the guests' departure, promises of eternal blessings are made. In Gen. 18, the departing strangers promise Abraham and Sarah that they will soon have a son, through whom "Abraham shall become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him" (Gen. 18:18). In Tablet XI, Gilgameš receives a magic plant of rejuvenation. When the plant is lost, he comes to realize that his only path to eternity lies in procreation.

There is a further correspondence that deepens the ties between the two stories. Ms. z of the story of the Flood (a Late Babylonian or Achaemenid fragment) includes a striking passage: "Enlil went up into the b[oat]. He took my hand and escorted me from the boat: 'You are Zisudra, (from now on) let [your name] be Ūtnapišti'".[18] No other Mesopotamian source records a name change by a god. The

16 Viewed across the epic as a whole, the absence of a complete, productive family is pervasive: nowhere do we find father, mother, and children together. Gilgameš has only a mother; Enkidu, neither parent. The hunter lives only with his father, while Šamḫat, the prostitute, lacks family or kin. Humbaba dwells alone in the forest. Ištar, in Tablet VI, is the only major goddess without spouse or offspring. The wise woman Šiduri and the boatman Ur-šanabi, in Tablets X–XI, are likewise solitary. Even the few couples are childless: Ūtanapišti and his wife, the Scorpion-man and his wife in Tablet IX, and the divine pair Šamaš and Aya. All protagonists are single, without offspring, or with only one parent. Questions of family and procreation thus permeate the epic, illuminating even Gilgameš's defiance of marriage custom in Tablet I, when he prevents brides from joining their husbands.

17 On the question whether the three visitors at Abraham's tent were three angels or two angels accompanying God, see Westermann 1985, 278 and De Hemmer Gudme 2019, 92.

18 *īlâma* [^{d}*Enl*]*il ana libbi e*[*leppi*] *iṣbat qāta* [*u*]*ltēlânni ul*[*tu*] *libbi e*[*leppi*] *att*[*am*]*a* ^{m}*Zisudra lū Ūtnapištīm* [*šumka*] (Wasserman 2020, 107: 15'-17').

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immediate parallel that comes to mind is in Gen. 17, where God changes the names of both Abraham (originally Abram) and Sarah (originally Sarai).[19]

I do not intend to press my argument further by proposing a genealogical link between the Mesopotamian and biblical sources. While the topical and structural parallels are significant, they alone cannot demonstrate a direct genetic relationship. Nonetheless, given the striking resemblances between the Mesopotamian and biblical Flood narratives – both in overall structure and in specific detail – it is not implausible that the episode of Gilgameš's encounter with Ūtanapišti, the Flood hero, and his wife was indirectly known to the biblical compiler in some form. The scene of Abraham, Sarah, and the divine visitors in Gen. 18 may, therefore, have been shaped along comparable narratological lines. In this light, the ideological framework of the Mesopotamian account, in which Ūtanapišti becomes the new progenitor of humanity, could have been reinterpreted and transposed onto Abraham – the patriarch of the Israelite nation and faith – for distinctly Israelite theological purposes.

5 Hospitality: Gilgameš, Ūtanapišti, Pitt-Rivers, Levinas and Derrida

Having compared Gilgameš's stay at Ūtanapišti's house with the arrival of the three mysterious wayfarers at Abraham's tent, I now wish to read Gilgameš's visit – perhaps the most ancient record of hospitality in world literature – through the lens of three major twentieth-century thinkers: the anthropologist Julian Pitt-Rivers (1919-2001), and the philosophers Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995) and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004).[20]

In the mid-twentieth century, Pitt-Rivers carried out ethnographic research in Spain that focused on interrelated sociological concepts, such as honour, shame, grace, generosity, and kinship systems. His distinct contribution was his analysis of hospitality as a fundamental social mechanism. According to Pitt-Rivers, hospitality is a strategy for managing potential conflict between strangers who enter stable communities. It creates a nuanced social space that mediates between hostility and inclusion, not by eliminating conflict, but by suspending it through a delicate reciprocal mechanism. The host-guest relationship is defined by a careful balance of power and honour: the host holds a superior position by offering protection and shelter, and the guest can either confirm or challenge it. Both parties are vulnerable in this exchange, because the guest depends on the host's goodwill, and the host risks dishonour if the guest is mistreated or challenges his authority. Each interaction, therefore, creates a cycle of honour or insult, governed by the principle of reciprocity. In this way, hospitality functions as a sophisticated social mechanism that transforms potential conflict into a structured, mutually negotiated encounter.[21]

At first glance, the scene at Ūtanapišti's house appears to fit Pitt-Rivers' 'law of hospitality': the host offers shelter, food, and rest, and the guest seems to respect the host's rules. The two enter into a delicate reciprocal relationship of power. However, a closer look reveals that the dynamic in the Gilgameš epic deviates from Pitt-Rivers' model. Both host and guest manipulate each other, openly displaying mutual dislike. Ūtanapišti is suspicious of Gilgameš, and Gilgameš is ungrateful. The atmosphere is heavy, full of contempt – so much so that one can almost hear Ūtanapišti's sigh of relief when Gilgameš departs for Uruk (for the meaning of the parting gift he offers, see § 8 below). The key elements of hospitality in Pitt-Rivers' theory – honour, respect, and mediated mutual acceptance – are strikingly absent from the scene in Tablet XI, opening it up for alternative interpretations of hospitality.

Hospitality is a key term in the philosophical writing of Emmanuel Levinas (1906-1995). In his 1961 *Totalité et Infini: essai sur l'extériorité*, he introduced hospitality as a central metaphor to elucidate the existential and ethical relationships between the 'I' (the subject, the self) and the Other (*l'autre, autrui*), establishing it as a cornerstone of his ethics and metaphysics. *Totalité et Infini* profoundly influenced mid-twentieth-century continental philosophy, and would go on to become one of the most significant works of the second half of the twentieth century and the early twenty-first century, a

19 See Wasserman 2020, 109, and *in extenso*, Wasserman, Bloch 2025.

20 In recent years, hospitality has become a much-studied topic. It has developed into a defined sub-field in philosophy and anthropology, as proven by *The Routledge Handbook of Hospitality Studies* (Lashley 2017). The applicability of the term to traditional and even ancient cultures is exemplified by George (2009), who reads the Indian hospitality tradition and ethos in light of Levinas and Derrida.

21 Pitt-Rivers 1965; 1977.

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period characterized by waves of immigration, conflicts between asylum-seekers and local populations, political tensions and rapidly changing communal identities.

Departing from previous thinkers, Levinas claims that the host-guest relation denotes an a priori moral obligation of the host to the uninvited guest. This stands in opposition to Pitt-Rivers' account, which posits that the host holds more power than the guest in the intricate interaction. Furthermore, Levinas presents a non-reciprocal view of hospitality – again, unlike Pitt-Rivers. For Levinas, the host has a non-reciprocal moral responsibility, which does not derive from a conscious decision. This entails the paradox of the host becoming a hostage in his own home. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* summarizes this fundamental aspect in Levinas' thought as follows: "[The] other speaks to me, implores or commands me. In responding, I discover my responsibility to them. This is the ground of ethics or indeed our concern with ethics as the good of the other person".[22] The Other (i.e. the guest), accordingly, is regarded as higher than oneself (i.e. the host), coming from a position of transcendence.[23] Levinas provocatively states that the Other "resembles God",[24] for the guest is the non-'I' around which the moral web is spun. This point is significant for our discussion. In the Biblical story of Abraham and the angels, this is indeed the case: the guests are divine, albeit in disguise. By contrast, in Tablet XI, it is ostensibly the host, Ūtanapišti, who is a god, and not the guest, a fact that contradicts Levinas' model.

Jacques Derrida developed a philosophy of hospitality that both radicalizes and complicates Levinas' ethics. In his *De l'hospitalité* (2000) and *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (1999), Derrida critiques the very foundations of host-guest relations by distinguishing between two types of hospitality. The first is *unconditional hospitality*, an ethically absolute, non-reciprocal welcome of the stranger, for which one does not inquire about the guest's name, legal status, or expectation of return. This accords with the behavior of Abraham in the paradigmatic scene in Gen. 18. The second type is *conditional hospitality*, which operates within sociopolitical frameworks of law, sovereignty, and exchange.[25] For Derrida, hospitality is an *aporia*, that is, it demands that the host surrender control to the guest (as Levinas' ethics of infinite responsibility to the Other implies), yet this surrender is structurally impossible, because hospitality requires the host's authority to offer shelter, thereby maintaining a hierarchy.[26] This paradox, for which Derrida coined the neologism 'hostipitality' (from French *hôte*, both 'host' and 'guest', and *hostilité* 'hostility'), underscores how hostility always lurks in hospitality's shadow. Where Levinas frames the guest as a transcendent Other who ethically commands the host,[27] Derrida insists that real-world hospitality is mediated by the host's sovereignty (e.g. borders, citizenship laws) and by asymmetrical power dynamics, a position that shares something with Pitt-Rivers' emphasis on the host's superior position. Derrida explicitly rejects Levinas' metaphysical abstraction (and implicitly Pitt-Rivers' reciprocal social mechanism). For him, conditional hospitality risks reducing the guest to a transactional object, while unconditional hospitality remains an ethical horizon: impossible to enact fully, yet imperative to strive toward.[28]

With these conceptions of hospitality in mind, it is worth rereading the fraught encounter between Ūtanapišti and Gilgameš. Pitt-Rivers' theory of hospitality as a stabilizing social strategy does not fit, because the tensions are never defused. The Levinasian view of hospitality, which paradoxically accords the guest divine status, also falls short in Tablet XI, because it is not the guest, Gilgameš, but the host, Ūtanapišti, who belongs to the realm of the gods. Consequently, Ūtanapišti feels no moral obligation towards his human guest; instead of acting deferentially he experiences annoyance and acts against him. Derrida's view of hospitality explains the scene best. The host, Ūtanapišti, offers conditional provision of shelter, maintaining his sovereignty over the guest, Gilgameš, while the latter's defiance exposes the absence of reciprocity. Derrida's 'hostipitality' thus illuminates the scene's underlying tension: hospitality is a fragile negotiation of power, where the guest's presence disrupts the host's authority, as the host seeks to control the interaction.

Derridarian 'hostipitality' accounts for the undercurrent of awkwardness, emotional tension, and unwelcomeness that exists throughout Gilgameš's stay at Ūtanapišti's house. The term *unheimlich* is fitting here, especially as the scene unfolds within Ūtanapišti's home (*Heim*). Gilgameš, the hero of

22 See the link: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/levinas/ § 2.3.

23 Levinas 1980, 79.

24 Levinas 1980, 293.

25 Baker 2010; Bulley 2015.

26 Derrida, Dufourmantelle 2000, 25-7.

27 Levinas 1980, 293.

28 Derrida 1999, 50-1.

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the epic, realizes that his host is suspicious of him and unfriendly towards him, despite the overtures of hospitality. And by denying him entry to the divine realm, Ūtanapišti is literally sending him to his inevitable death. As Gilgameš says to him before leaving, "What can I do now, Ūtanapišti? Where should I go? The Marauder has taken hold of my f[lesh]! In my bedroom, Death sits, awaiting me!" (XI 243-6). Ūtanapišti, however, does not bear sole responsibility for the disquieting encounter. Gilgameš, for his part, initially intends to kill Ūtanapišti (XI 5), and even after giving up this evil thought, he treats him only as a means to an end – the attainment of eternal life. This instrumentalist view undermines the hospitable guest-host paradigm, and lays bare an antagonistic relationship between a dogged pursuer and an evasive target. Seen through this lens, Gilgameš is no guest; he is a deceitful intruder who covets his host's precious status, namely, Ūtanapišti's immortality. This is characteristic of Gilgameš. Throughout his journey, all his encounters are either violent or manipulative: disturbing Enkidu's pastoral life and luring him to Uruk; forcing his way into Ḫumbaba's solitary forest abode and killing him treacherously; breaking into Sidūri's house as a would-be rapist (X 15-22). Gilgameš was never truly a guest before Pī-nārātim, and his time with Ūtanapišti demonstrates that he is incapable of sincere gratitude. As such, the earliest known portrayal of a stranger being received by a host in world literature can scarcely be regarded as a model of hospitality.

6 A Tale of Two Tests

Following Pitt-Rivers' analysis of hospitality in *The Odyssey*, Glassner (1990) drew attention to representations of hospitality in Mesopotamian literature. He examined many such instances, ranging from the descent of Ištar/Inanna to the netherworld and other myths recounting various gods visiting their peers, to accounts of people arriving in foreign cities and of envoys residing at foreign courts. What he found is that receiving guests generally equals commensality. By contrast, when a stranger wishes to settle down permanently and integrate into a new society, he is typically challenged and even forced to fight a representative of the local group. Only if the stranger loses may he be accepted. In Glassner's view, the prototypical example is Enkidu entering Uruk. Only after confronting Gilgameš and being overpowered by him is he allowed to stay there as the king's friend (Glassner 1990, 65-71). If one accepts Glassner's conclusions, the meaning of the trial to which Gilgameš is subjected by Ūtanapišti should be reconsidered. Faced with his guest's desire to permanently join the divine community, he challenges him in order to assess his suitability for acceptance.[29] If we analyze the scene this way, staying awake, rather than eating the freshly baked bread, is the key element and the true test. Gilgameš is faced with an impossible challenge: If he passes the test of not sleeping, he will be driven out of his host's house, since he threatens the latter's superiority. If he fails the test, he may perhaps stay at his host's house, but not as part of the community of his divine host, only as an inferior mortal. Gilgameš's failure is inevitable; it is a lose-lose proposition. The gulf separating human and divine cannot be bridged.

7 Changing Clothes as Sign of Existential Transition

After failing the sleep deprivation trial and realizing that death awaits him like every other mortal (XI 242-6), Gilgameš prepares for his journey home. The epic dedicates some forty lines to Gilgameš's departure for Uruk (XI 247-86). The sheer size of this textual block – equal in length to the entire description of Gilgameš's sojourn in Pī-nārātim (XI 207-46) – illustrates its importance. It is divided into two parts: Gilgameš's bathing and changing of clothes (ll. 247-70), and Ūtanapišti offering Gilgameš a parting gift (XI 273-86, see § 8). Gilgameš bathes, and his rough, ragged clothes are replaced with royal garments (XI 250-70). This act of bathing and changing clothes directly recalls Siduri's earlier advice to Gilgameš to keep his clothes clean, always wash his head, and bathe regularly (OB VA+BM iii 10-11). These actions suggest that Gilgameš has at last come to terms with his unavoidable mortality. Practically speaking, it is unwise for Gilgameš to don royal attire before reaching Uruk, since keeping such robes clean on a long journey is difficult (cf. 260-1, 268-70), and he is still quite far from his royal court. But the change of clothing is necessary, as it marks the end of Gilgameš's existential quest. The epic allows for no middle ground: Gilgameš can no longer remain a wanderer in the wilderness and must immediately reclaim his status as monarch at the heart of civilization.

29 Again, the myth of Adapa is instrumental here. There was no need to test Adapa's fitness to be a god, since his magic powers were already proven when he broke the wings of the South Wind.

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This motif of changing clothes recurs elsewhere in the epic. After Gilgameš and Enkidu return triumphantly from the Cedar Forest, Gilgameš washes, cleans his gear, shakes out his hair, discards his soiled garments, and dons clean robes, cloaks, and his crown (VI 1-5). Here again, the act marks the close of his adventures in the wilderness and his re-assumption of royal status in Uruk – the change of attire symbolizing this transition. Conversely, after Enkidu's death, as Gilgameš's despair deepens, he casts off his elaborate clothes and regalia (VIII 62-4) and puts on skins, signaling his departure from civilization and kingship to dwell in the wilderness ([*iltabbi*]*š maški labbim-ma irappud ṣ*[*ēra*] VII 147 and VIII 91).[30]

The final change of clothes discussed here does not involve Gilgameš but Enkidu, right before he arrives in Uruk. In Tablet II of the Standard Version the lines are incomplete, but the OB version in the Pennsylvania Tablet is fully preserved, allowing us to understand the scene. After making love, Šamḫat and Enkidu talk, and she describes the joys of city life. In the Standard Version, the couple seems to remain naked; in the OB version, Šamḫat has already dressed. Both versions, however, agree on the main point: Šamḫat gives Enkidu one of her garments and puts on a different one of hers (SB II 33-5; OB II 69-72). Clothed in the harlot's dress, Šamḫat leads Enkidu to the shepherds' camp "like a god" (SB II 36-7; OB II 73-6). Enkidu, who only days before lived in the wild, is now about to enter the civilized world, and he must be suitably attired. In this respect, Enkidu wearing clothes resembles Gilgameš changing his clothes in two scenes.

That said, the scene with Enkidu is more complex than the others and bears a deeper cultural meaning. First, the clothed Enkidu marks more than his transition from wilderness to civilization, but also his existential transformation from beast to human, and then, in the next line, to a being resembling a god.[31] Second, this dramatic makeover has a twist: Enkidu, clearly male, is dressed in female clothing. This surprising blurring of genders, right after Enkidu has proven his masculinity by coupling with Šamḫat for seven days and nights, shows that the category of "Human" in the epic transcends gender distinctions.

8 The Departure and the Farewell Gift

Gilgameš and Ur-šanabi have already boarded the boat (XI 271), when something unexpected occurs. Ūtanapišti, at his wife's prompting, offers a gift to Gilgameš. Why the sudden change of heart, and what exactly is the nature of his gift? Welcoming receptions for arriving guests, in the form of ceremonial meals, are attested in cuneiform sources.[32] But gift-giving to *departing* guests is not part of ancient Mesopotamian etiquette.[33] If we look westward to archaic Greece, there is ample literary evidence of this social practice – so much so, that some scholars apply the term 'Gift Economy' to ancient Greek society.[34] An important characteristic of Homeric civilization is that gift-giving was, ultimately, reciprocal. When a host gave a guest a sumptuous gift, he knew that one day, perhaps even a generation later, the guest or his descendants would give him a gift in return.[35] In our case, though, this ancient Greek parallel is lacking. First, in Tablet XI, reciprocity is unreasonable. Gilgameš will never return to Pī-nārātim, nor will Ūtanapišti and his wife ever visit Uruk, and they have no children to do so either. The whole point is that the two loci are not just remote, but separate realms entirely: the former belongs to gods (even if only parvenus), the latter to humans. Moreover, the abstract nature of Ūtanapišti's gift – a secret of the gods – prevents the giving of a gift in kind. What could Gilgameš possibly give Ūtanapišti in return?

30 Cf. also the regrettably partly broken VII 64, where Enkidu is the subject.

31 With George (2003, 167), I take the simile *kīma ilim* "like a god" as describing Enkidu, who was taken by Šamḫat by the hand, as divine statues were touched and guided by priests in different processions and ceremonies.

32 A fine example of a welcome party for new guests, which is not mentioned in Glassner (1990), is the MB Ištar-Dumuzi composition (JAOS 103, 26-7 = Wasserman 2016, no. 7), where young Ištar's parents, Sîn and Ningal, offer an affluent meal to Dumuzi, who is visiting with his boys. The social hierarchy is evident: Ningal and her daughter Ištar serve sweet cake to Dumuzi, who in turn takes care of his dogs and shepherds (in this order!) who remain outside. Alster discussed the Sumerian accounts of Gilgameš meeting Huwawa in the Cedar Forest, interpreting them "in terms of Gilgamesh playing the role of a visitor received in audience at a foreign court. His gifts aim at inviting Huwawa to reciprocate, and thereby give up his protection" (Alster 1992, 1).

33 George (2003, 523) summarizes this scene saying that giving a "departing guest [a] farewell gift [was] evidently required of good hospitality".

34 The literature on gifts and gift-giving in the ancient Aegean world is vast, of which I will mention only two studies: Bertelli 2014 and Mifsud 2007.

35 Donlan 1982; Beidelman 1989; Cook 2016. For a more nuanced view of reciprocity, see Hooker 1989.

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Upon closer inspection, it appears that Ūtanapišti's gesture is not a farewell gift at all. No actual gift was given, nor did etiquette demand one. It functions, as I see it, as a coda, the final act of his encounter with Gilgameš. As noticed by George,[36] Ūtanapišti's words to Gilgameš: *lupte Gilgameš amāt niṣirti u pirišta š[a ilī kâšu luq]bīka* "I will disclose, Gilgameš, a secret matter, and [I will] tell you a mystery of [the gods]" (XI 280-1), repeat verbatim his opening words to Gilgameš, before telling him about the Flood (XI 9-10). This repetition may be considered a scribal parsimony. But more importantly, *pirištu ša ilī* is the term used by the epic for Ea's warning to Ūtanapišti about the impending Flood. Later, when Ea explains himself before the angry Enlil, he says: *anāku ul aptâ pirišti ilī rabûti* "I myself did not reveal the secret of the great gods" (XI 196, cf. 197). The same term is also found in the OB version of the epic, where Enlil furiously demands to know from the gods: *ayyānu ūṣi pí-ri*$^{!}$*-iš-tum* "Whence did the secret escape"? (C_1(+)C_2 vi 9).[37] One could simply construe these as stock phrases typical of epic writing. But I think that this echoing is intentional. It conveys that toward the end of Gilgameš's meeting with Ūtanapišti, and the conclusion of the epic as a whole, the transmission of divine mystery does not stop. What started as a secret passed from Enlil to Ea, and then from Ea to Ūtanapišti, continues with a secret passed from Ūtanapišti to Gilgameš. It is no accident that Ūtanapišti tells Gilgameš his secret when the latter is standing on the boat. The divine secrets transmitted by Ea to Ūtanapišti and by Ūtanapišti told Gilgameš are all connected to *eleppum*, a boat.

The fact that Gilgameš eventually did obtain something tangible as a result of Ūtanapišti's words should not distract us from the larger point. The plant of rejuvenation is quickly lost by the water pool (XI 303-7), and its narratological role is exhausted in the short term – this is another false ending (see above § 1). After all his troubles and wanderings, Gilgameš enters Uruk empty-handed, with no spoils, and not as a victorious king. But he has become the bearer of esoteric knowledge, whose origin is divine, about life, death, eternity, perpetuity and transient existence. As such, he is indeed the one "who saw the Deep, the bases of the land" (I 1).[38]

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36 George 2003, 894 ad. 281-2.

37 For this reading, see Wasserman 2020, 28, 36 with comm. on 56f.

38 For the role of Uruk in the epic, see George 2012.

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