

## Mesopotamian social values and principles in light of the Epic of Gilgamesh

**Prof. Dr. Fayhaa Mawlood Ali**  
College of Arts -University of Baghdad

### **Abstract:**

The subject of social values is one of the fundamental pillars upon which civilization is built, encompassing various concepts, meanings, and implications. In this context, values refer to the customs and traditions of ancient societies, which were reflected in ideals such as heroism, friendship, the call for goodness, and the fight against evil and corruption. These values also encompassed deeper connotations, including effort, hardship, struggle, pain, sin, guilt, remorse, repentance, despair, misery, pleasure, happiness, failure, and success, among others—values that emerged with the formation of early human communities.

The **Epic of Gilgamesh** stands as one of the most remarkable literary works that encapsulated the essence of noble morals and human and social values, passed down through generations. This epic, recognized by scholars as a literary, social, and intellectual text, intertwines various stories and legends from the era of heroism. Initially transmitted orally, it was later inscribed on twelve cuneiform tablets and remained in circulation across different periods and generations. Its imagery and scenes were also depicted on cylindrical seals and terracotta artifacts.

**Keywords:** Mesopotamia, Gilgamesh, values, principles, society, epic, ethics, goodness.

## القيم والمبادئ الاجتماعية الرافدينية في ضوء

### ملحمة كلكامش

أ.م.د. فيحاء مولود علي

جامعة بغداد - كلية الآداب

#### الملخص:

إن موضوع القيم والمبادئ الاجتماعية من الموضوعات المهمة التي تقوم عليها الحضارة بكل مفاهيمها ومعانيها ودلالاتها، ونقصد بمفهوم القيم والمبادئ هنا هي تلك المفاهيم التي كانت من عادات وتقاليد الشعوب القديمة والتي تجلت في مفهوم البطولة والصدقة والدعوة إلى الخير ومحاربة الشر والفساد، وتضمنت دلالات أخرى مثل: الجهد والمشقة والكفاح والألم والخطيئة والذنب والندم والتوبة واليأس والبؤس واللذة والسعادة والفشل والنجاح وغيرها من القيم التي ظهرت مع وجود التجمعات البشرية الأولى. في حين نرى في ملحمة (جلجامش) التي سجلت لنا أروع صور الإبداع في مجال الأخلاق الحميدة والقيم والمبادئ الاجتماعية والإنسانية التي توارثتها الاجيال من جيل إلى آخر، وأصبحت من السمات العامة والمتعارف عليها في مجتمع بلاد الرافدين. ومن الضروري معرفة طبيعة هذه الملحمة التي عرفها المتخصصون بأنها نص أدبي اجتماعي فكري جمع بين طياته قصصا وحكايات من عصر البطولة رويت شفويا ثم سجلت على اثني عشر لوح مسماري، وبقيت متداولة لعدة أجيال وفي حقب مختلفة، ونفذت صورها ومشاهدها على أختام أسطوانية وعلى فخار.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** بلاد الرافدين، كلكامش، القيم، المبادئ، المجتمع، الملحمة، الأخلاق، الخير.

#### Introduction:

The land of Mesopotamia included a great civilization that combined all the elements of development. Among the products of that civilization was the literary heritage that was transmitted orally for long periods and expressed a high awareness and culture. Also, the abundant literary heritage, if we compare it with the literature of other civilizations, we find it distinguished by originality, antiquity, and diversity (Lambert, 1993, P.272). Literary production was very great importance because it represented the first attempts of man to express about the meanings of life. The epics were among the most prominent literary works in the literature of Mesopotamia, and they revolved primarily around a person whose exploits, heroism, and everything related to him were mentioned (Saggs, 1962, P.446). The epic literature differs from mythological literature in the origin of the hero who achieves his primarily goal, based

on individual and personal characteristics made him unique by his strength and bravery. While the hero in mythology was a god, but in epics we find him became a human being, a king, a leader, or a sage. Here lies the importance of epic literature as a literary art that focuses on the image of man and highlights his will, which may be in agreement with the will of the gods. The events of the epic are linked by a comprehensive literary unity, although the epic sometimes includes a large number of people and its events take place in several locations. Also the epic has a harmonious structure based on a single or complex idea, such that if any part of it were deleted, the literary work would collapse (Todorov, 1986, P.39). The epic text also focuses on the element of excitement, anticipation and exaggeration (Klein, 2002, P.188). The epic is based on two societies: the society of gods and the society of humans which around of both the events revolve <sup>(1)</sup>. The epics involve exaggeration and imagination that are sometimes not devoid of a mythical character in the narration of some events (Foster, 2005, P.37). Therefore, the epic is built on a major and important event that has a historical basis. For example, the Epic of Gilgamesh, which began basically from the period of Gilgamesh's rule over the city of Uruk and his building of this city, and then his search for immortality (George, 2002, vol.51, P.91), in addition to the concept of heroism, friendship, the call to goodness and the fight against evil and corruption. It also contained other themes such as effort, hardship, conflict, pain, sin, regret, repentance, despair, misery, pleasure, happiness, failure, success, etc. As we see below.

### **Where were the epic texts found?**

To give the reader a clear sequence, we present the newly confirmed and verified versions of the epic based on the latest archaeological excavations:

- 1- A fragment of an unpublished tablet from the epic was found in the city of Sippar (modern Abu Habbah), dating back to the Old Babylonian period, on which is written the part related to the taming of Enkidu, but it does not exactly match the old versions. From the same city, another tablet was found in the city library related to the subject of Gilgamesh's quest for immortality (George, 2002, vol.51, P.91).
- 2- Five tablets dating back to the Old Babylonian period were also found in three cities: Nippur (modern Nippur), Neribtum (modern

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) The community of gods, which consists of characters who do not differ from <sup>1</sup> humans except in their uniqueness in the quality of immortality, has given them all human qualities. This is what made ancient man develop a conception of the universe and the gods and made them close to him and able to deal with them. For more, see: (Al-Qutbi, 2000, p. 10 ff).

Ashjali) and Šadubum (modern Tell Harmal), and their topics relate to the part of Gilgamesh and his friend's journey to the Cedar Forest (Kavacs, 1989, P.xxi).

- 3- There is another tablet dating back to the Middle Babylonian period found in the city of Nippur and another in the city of Ur, the subject of which was about the heavenly bull (George, 2002, vol.51, P.92).
- 4- This epic spread outside Mesopotamia, as a clay tablet was found in the city of Hattuša (modern Bogazkoy) containing the subject of the journey to the Cedar Forest and the killing of the heavenly bull. A part of another tablet was also found at the site of Megiddo in Palestine, relating to the part about the death of Enkidu (George, 2002, vol.51, P.93).

The existence of the epic in this number of multiple versions indicates that people were transmitting it orally, and when the Babylonian writers wrote it on clay tablets, different versions appeared according to the oral account that the writer heard from the narrator, but in principle it was one, in addition to its spread not only in the cities of Mesopotamia, but also included some countries of the ancient Near East (Hirsch, 2002, PP.5-10).

### **Epic Summary:**

The Epic of Gilgamesh is one of the most famous heroic epics in all civilizations. Despite its antiquity, it has remained alive and immortal to this day, enjoying the attraction of its events being linked to fateful worldly issues that still occupy the mind of man to this day and affect his mental and emotional perceptions, including the mystery of life, death and immortality, love and hate, friendship and loyalty, as well as adventures (Baqir, 1980, P.10). The insistence of the hero of the epic “Gilgamesh” and his quest to change his inevitable human destiny, which is death, as he endured the trouble of traveling to learn the secret of immortality from the man of the flood, and the matter ended in failure, but he was given a calm feeling of surrender. This profound experience expresses in a high manner the heroic level and the extent of the strength of the poetic epic that made it win the admiration of people throughout the ages (Andrew, 2000, P.xvi). Moreover, the epic found an effective alternative to the sad ending, as Gilgamesh realized that he could be immortalized through his deeds and exploits in a tragic way (Heidel, 1963, P.10). The influence of this poetic epic spread throughout the centers of ancient civilizations <sup>(2)</sup>, and it was translated into several languages with all the topics that the epic dealt with, starting with Gilgamesh’s kingship, his friendship with

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<sup>2)</sup> Greek literature was influenced by this epic, as the story of King Polukia is similar to the story of Gilgamesh, as Polukia goes out with a close companion to obtain the Ring of Solomon in pursuit of immortality. For more, see: (Dalley, 2009, P.95).



Enkidu, their adventure together, then his grief over Enkidu's death, his journey in search of immortality, his learning of the story of the flood, and finally the death of Gilgamesh <sup>(3)</sup>.

Gilgamesh was considered in later times a god of prosperity and a protector of people from the evil of demons, and he was the just ruler of the world of death, and his image was placed at the entrances of residential homes in order to protect against evil spirits (Haupt, 1884-1890, P.5).

### **Social values in the epic:**

The most important topic of this epic is thinking and contemplating the issue of "death and immortality", and in it man realized the inevitability of death upon him and he must do something that immortalizes him after death through good remembrance and immortal deeds, which are the most prominent social values. We find that the epic has put forth appropriate solutions that are consistent with religious beliefs and social origins, as it abounds with topics of human values, the most important of which are love, hate, friendship, cooperation, altruism, challenge, the spirit of adventure, nostalgia for memories of the past, lamentation and sadness for a friend. The epic depicted many important aspects of the civilization of Mesopotamia, most notably the beliefs of the people, their opinions, religious ideas, their gods and their social origins. Among the most important of these values are:

### **1 - The principle of heroism:**

The character of Gilgamesh was characterized by heroism because of his important position in the literature of Mesopotamia on the one hand, and also because he is the hero of the greatest poetic production not only in the literature of Mesopotamia but also in the literature of the ancient Near East. Literary writings describe such heroes with extraordinary physical qualities such as tall stature, broad chest, and large body. Perhaps the reason for this is that man always needs to work and

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<sup>3)</sup> The hero Gilgamesh was mentioned in other stories, perhaps the funniest of which was mentioned by the Roman writer (Claudius Aelianus) from the twelfth century AD, about the upbringing and childhood of Gilgamesh: When Sychorus was ruling Babylon, the Chaldeans predicted that the son who would be born to his daughter would anger the king against his grandfather, so he was afraid and tightened the guard around her, but his daughter became pregnant without his knowledge by one of the men and gave birth to a child, so her guards threw him out of fear of the king, but an eagle saw the child fall and before he hit the ground, he got under him and carried him on his back and carried him to an orchard and threw him there gently, and when the gardener saw him and saw his beauty, he raised him and called him Gilgamesh and ruled over the Babylonians when he grew up. For more, see: (Baqir, 1980, P.75).

exert effort in his daily life to control the manifestations of nature around him. Perhaps muscular and physical strength is the most important wealth that man possesses because it helps him protect himself against the dangers of nature, in addition to the fact that a strong person enjoys a prestigious position among his people and may be the leader of his group because he is a hero and strong (Al-Hajj, 1998, P.187). As we see below:

**in battle, hero in battle, let me sing his song!**

**Lord Bilgames, hero in battle, let me sing his song!**

**Lord with beard of black, hero in battle, let me sing his song!**

**Fair of limb, hero in battle, let me sing his song! ( George, 1999, P.169).**

His heroism came from his fight against the predatory animals that were killing people and livestock in the periods that preceded him. Due to his height and the stature of his body and its prominent muscles, this gave him strength that exceeded the strength of ordinary humans. He was also distinguished by his boldness, strictness and severity, which made it easy for him to control his kingdom and defend his people. This is what was immortalized in artistic sculptures of images of his personality. There is a seal from the Neo-Assyrian period was found depicting Gilgamesh with a beard, wearing a short robe, kneeling on his knees and holding a lion in his hands, raising it up (Watanabe, 2002, P.69).



## **2- The principle of primitive democracy:**

The society in ancient Mesopotamia was distinguished by the presence of the oldest democratic systems known to ancient history, represented by the presence of two councils, one for the city's elders and the youth council or the general community council. The role of these two councils was mostly to discuss fateful issues that concerned the city and society alike. The first council, for elders, would meet at times of crises that affected the city and find solutions for them. It would make fateful decisions related to wars, floods, and other matters, so that the council would elect one of the people who had high competence in managing crises and finding solutions for them to take over the leadership of society during the crisis period. As for the other council, it would meet only at times of war.

This system adopted the principle of democracy in voting, consultation, electing competent people, crisis management, and other matters. This is what we find clearly in the epic when Gilgamesh met with these two councils and asked for their advice in the war of Uruk with its enemies and when he made his journey to the cedar forests.

We see him speech with old men in Uruk as follow:

**'[Hear me, 0 elders of Uruk-the-Town]-Square!**

**[I would tread the path to ferocious: Humbaba,]**

**I would see the god of whom men talk,  
whose name the lands do constantly repeat.**

Also he speech with young men in Uruk as follow:

**'Hear me, O young men [of Uruk-the-Sheepfold,] 11 260**

**o young men of Uruk, who understand [combat!]**

**Bold as 1 am 1 shall tread the distant path [to the home of  
Humbaba,]**

**I shall face a battle 1 know not (George, 1999, PP. 20-21).**

### **3- The principle of civilization and urbanization:**

We find this human value manifested in the Epic of Gilgamesh with all its details and social content in several locations (citizens) in the epic, when the hero Enkidu moved from the life he lived in the wilderness and forests in an uncivilized manner, when the epic described him as:

**He eating with animals and drinking like animals and living among them and did not know how to wear clothes and his body was covered with hair and did not know how to settle in one place (George, 1999, P.5).**

All these manifestations indicate a lack of civilization, while the other side was embodied by the emergence of the city of Uruk, that civilized and urbanized city that lies between its strong walls and luxurious houses and its flourishing temples and its high ziggurats, which was witnessing an period of civilizational and social prosperity that life had not known (was not familiar with) before it.

We find the value of civilization and urbanity when the hero Enkidu moved from the wilderness and forests to that ancient city with all its architectural manifestations, and the manifestations of city life appeared on him when he put on clothes and began to imitate the people in the city with all their social customs and traditions.



#### 4- The principle of conflict:

We find the principle of conflict embodied when the two heroes met in the city square, and a dialogue took place between them that led to the two heroes fighting at the end. Perhaps the reason for this conflict was the result of the tyranny of the hero Gilgamesh and his arrogance that overwhelmed the city as a whole. Therefore, it was necessary for a rival to him appeared with the same heroic qualities so that it would become clear to the arrogant hero that he had a competitor in life and that he would not be arrogant and oppress others. The conflict that took place between the two heroes is an image that the ancient Iraqi writer wanted to show the conflict between Nomadism and civilization and the manifestations that were embodied between them, whether negative or positive. As we see in the text:

**“Then Enkidu stepped out, he stood in the street and blocked the way. Mighty Gilgamesh came on and Enkidu met him at the gate. He put out his foot and prevented Gilgamesh from entering the house, so they grappled, holding each other like bulls. They broke the doorposts and the walls shook, they snorted like bulls locked together” (George, 1999, P.16; [www.aina.org](http://www.aina.org)).**

#### 5- The principle of friendship:

This principle came as a result of the conflict that occurred between the two parties when the two were equal in strength, skill, brutality and speed of performance, which represented the characters of (Gilgamesh and Enkidu) the two heroes, and friendship came after that strong conflict between them until they were exhausted. As we see:

**'Why, my friend, [did your eyes] brim [with tears,]  
your arms fall limp, [your strength *ebb* away?']  
Said Enkidu to him, [to Gilgamesh:]**

**'My friend, my heart is aggrieved ... (George, 1999, P.18; [www.aina.org](http://www.aina.org)).**



This situation can be likened between nomadism and civilization when they meet in one place. In the beginning, bitter conflicts occur between them, but in the end it leads to an ethnic and intellectual blending that ends in friendship, harmony and peace between the two conflicting parties.

#### 6- The principle of fighting evil:

After the bonds of friendship were established between the two heroes, they decided to embark on a journey to eliminate Humbaba, the guardian of the Cedar Forest. After a long and arduous journey, they reached the Cedar Forest at night and stayed outside it. In the morning, the two heroes entered the forbidden forest. Gilgamesh began cutting down trees to anger its guardian, Humbaba, so he became enraged and attacked them. Terror spread between them and he almost killed them if it were not for their supplication to the god Šamaš. Then he answered their prayer by sending violent winds on Humbaba, which caused him complete paralysis and they were able to kill him. After that, the two heroes returned victorious to the city of Uruk and participated in the victory celebrations held in their honor and safety by its people. As we see:

**'That is a journey [which must not be made,]  
[that is a man who must not be looked on.]  
He who guards the [Forest of Cedar, his *reach* is wide,]  
Humbaba, his voice is the Deluge (George, 1999, P.19).**



#### 7- The principle of transcending the gods:

After the victory that Gilgamesh achieved over Humbaba and the celebration of it in his city, Gilgamesh appeared in his most beautiful clothes and attire, the eyes of the goddess Ishtar fell on him, she was infatuated with him and addressed him saying: ((**Come, Gilgamesh, and be my chosen bridegroom ...**)) (www.aina.org), and she offered him many temptations and promised him immortality and greatness for the rest of his life, but Gilgamesh rejected the offer of the goddess Ishtar and listed her faults and insulted her and reminded her of her treachery

towards her previous lovers, foremost among them (Dumuzi) whom she sent down to the underworld.

These words angered the goddess Ishtar, so she went up to complain to her father, the god Anu, and asked him to give her the heavenly bull. Upon her insistence, he handed it over to her, so she took it down to Uruk (Warka), and it began to kill its people, and panic spread among the people. At that moment, the two heroes rose up to kill it, and after a fierce fight between them, they were able to kill the bull. Meanwhile, the goddess Ishtar was watching the scene from above her temple, until Gilgamesh became aware of her location, took part of the bull (its thigh) and threw it in front of her, as an expression of his victory over her. She began to mourn the death of the bull and went up to the sky in terror (George, 2000, P.46). This behavior and transgression against the goddess was the reason for their punishment.

#### 8- The principle of punishment:

The gods decided to punish the two heroes, especially Gilgamesh, after he transgressed against the goddess Ishtar. Death was Enkidu's fate, since Gilgamesh was two-thirds god. Therefore, Enkidu saw a dream, the gist of which was that the three great gods (Anu, Enlil, Enki, and with them the god UTU/ Šamaš), they met and wanted to decide to eliminate one of the heroes, despite the objection of the god Šamaš, saying: **((Because they killed the heavenly bull and killed Humbaba, the one who uprooted the cedar trees must die))**, but the god Enlil, after thinking, said: **((Enkidu is the one who will die, and Gilgamesh will not die))** (George, 1999, P.55; [www.aina.org](http://www.aina.org)).

#### 9- The principle of grief and lamentation:

Enkidu died when they decided to do that, and Gilgamesh was deeply saddened by him and wept for six days and seven nights before his body was buried. After that, Gilgamesh wandered aimlessly in the wilderness, trying to escape the inevitable fate that had befallen his companion. He thought about this matter for a long time until he came up with the idea of searching for immortality. As we see:

**At the very first glimmer of brightening dawn,**

**Gilgamesh [began mourning] his friend:**

**'Enkidu, [whom] your mother, a gazelle,**

**and your father, a wild donkey, [did raise,]** (George, 1999, Issue 2, P.63; [www.aina.org](http://www.aina.org)).

#### 10- The principle of immortality:

After the death of his friend, Gilgamesh was guided to the idea of searching for immortality. After that, he went on a long journey to search

for the long-lived man is (Utanapištim), the hero of the flood story, to ask him about the secret of life and how he was able to obtain immortality (Ghaji, 2012, P.57). Then Gilgamesh began a new journey to Utanapištim, who obtained immortality and got rid of death. However, in the end, it became clear to him that man was destined to die, but good deeds and good morals are what immortalize man through his deeds and exploits. As we see:

**Sham ash grew worried, and *bending down*,  
he spoke to Gilgamesh:  
'Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?  
The life that you seek you never will find' (George, 1999, p.71;  
[www.aina.org](http://www.aina.org)).**

### Conclusions:

We see that the epic text that dealt with events from it confirmed a number of matters in view of the importance of this epic with its intellectual dimension in constructing the event and forming the character in the thought of Mesopotamia as a literary product represented in:

- 1- Gilgamesh is the hero of the greatest poetic production in ancient Near East literature, the hero of the epic poem "He Who Saw Everything" and this epic arouses special interest among researchers as it has been studied by a large number for several reasons, perhaps the most important of which is that it is one of the oldest great epics, and its events can be followed through the ages not only by analyzing the text but also by copying the epic that dates back to different times as we indicated at the beginning of the research.
- 2- The events of the epic are based on its two heroes Gilgamesh and Enkidu as two main poles in the structure of the event, so the image of Gilgamesh and his friend Enkidu in art.
- 3- The epic highlighted the unique personality of one of the kings of Mesopotamia, as we can deduce from it that Gilgamesh was a man who went through the stages of human instincts, such as arrogance and greed at first, and then the appearance of a rival who later became a close friend. Here, friendship plays the main role that brought Gilgamesh with Enkidu together. When they defeated Humbaba, we find the latter beseeching them, asking for forgiveness and promising them much good. Just as we find that the epic glorifies work, it also glorifies its tools, and perhaps the most prominent tool we find in the text and in the artistic scenes is the axe, which had many benefits for ancient man. Friendship and work were the best witness to the power of human beauty, and through work man understands nature.
- 4- There are also many social values that we did not mention in the research, such as: the principle of stability; the principle of



development (weapon manufacturing, for example, or trade...); the principle of faith; the principle of humility (accepting the fate assigned to him); the principle of rebellion (such as the principle of polytheism...); the principle of offering advice (by Siduri to the hero Gilgamesh), and many others. We cannot mention all of them here in this research because we want to conduct a separate study about them in the future.

- 5- Finally, this literary text carries many noble human meanings and values, as the true content of the epic is the issue of the inevitable fate of man, and that it is a product that overflows with the richness and depth of the human content presented in a high manner.



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