

THE ACTS OF GILGAMESH

Forescene

[Spoken by Flavius Josephus, né Joseph ben Mattyahu he-Cohen]

Who knows how long Gilgamesh lived? There was at least one Gilgamesh on the historical list of Sumerian kings, but I mean the original hero of the epic. Was every tradition of his fate suppressed or lost? Or was his existence simply a demigod's story that had no ending? Anyway I was never satisfied with the comic conclusion of the play Herodotus wrote about him, of which here in Rome my chief collaborator discovered a copy unknown even to the author himself. Apollonius, the best amanuensis and foremost translator of my Aramaic, major domo in my Jewish Greek and Roman scriptorium, was at the time researching other things for me in Epaphroditus's library. I gave him free rein to study it because he was already interested in the attempts made by Berossus of Babylon, a priest of Baal--or Bel, or Bel-Marduk (originally Enlil)--to discover Oriental elements in our Hellenic culture. That emigrant to the island of Cos had been inspired by Mesopotamian allusions in the known works of Herodotus to write his own history of Chaldea. Without him your Elizabethans would never have heard of Pyramus and Thisbe. But even by Berossus the search for Sumerian theater was a lost cause.

With his usual gusto my Apollonius, though only a slave, dubbed himself Apollonius of Athens because he was enthralled by the epic poetry of the Alexandrian known as Apollonius of Rhodes, preferring that deracinated Panhellenist and his circumstantial details to the latterday imperialism of our august Virgil. He admired his namesake for a somewhat reactionary independence in bucking with a long narrative poem the skeptical scholars and literati who regarded that genre as outworn discursive and unsophisticated; for a practical knowledge of ships seamanship and geography; for a plain aversion to both allegorical rationalization and sheer fantasy; yet above all for the negative capability of accepting traditional myth in an age of reason, as if a new *logos* was wanted to generate the *muthos*! (His Muse was Euripides.) He was intrigued by the idea of Jason and his Argonauts as antecedent to the heroes in Homer.

In private familiarity I called my versatile assistant Apollo for short. I can blame him for introducing or not correcting the notorious statement in my History that Roman soldiers wore their swords on the left side. Eventually in the very first clause of my last will and testament I

could do nothing less by way of benison than authorize, along with a gentlemanly endowment, his absolute manumission as a Roman citizen, in Athens or elsewhere.

Apollo was always pestering me with questions about who came before the Jews: “after all, Greeks came before Romans!”. And why did the Jews (as well as the Chaldeans before and after them) lack a theater, considering their famous love of drama and talent for acting throughout the succeeding Roman world?

His dry aspersion was a jest about my reputation for dissimulation in the old country. (His awareness of how much my reputation depended upon his willing cooperation rendered him a little too bold, but even as a slave he was by no means antisemitic.) My Roman friends called me “Son of Herodotus”, having known that historiographer as “the father of lies” simply because he respected Egyptian and Persian traditions. But the frank simulations that make theater have always been under suspicion among the Gentiles, from Plato to your Augustine and his northern epigones, even unto Nietzsche who redoubled the Jewish connection. Jewish malleability, says the latter, provides “a world-historical arrangement for the production of actors.” Listen to him: “What good actor today is not a Jew? The Jew as a born ‘man of letters’, as the true master of the European press, also exercises his power by virtue of his histrionic gifts; for the man of letters is essentially an actor...” How do you like that! Were the Jews histrionic in the Second Temple (with its Corinthian columns and Greek lyres)? In the Diaspora? In the ghettos? In hiding among Hitler’s Germans? Even in the camps with chimneys?

I was indeed introduced to the Palatine by a Jewish actor after my shipwreck, but what my Roman friends chaffed me about was as nothing compared to the excoriations I suffered from my own people, especially of course the Zealots. Before High Priest and Emperor, in Galilee and Jerusalem, as general and as diplomat, on the battlefield and in the lucubrations of solitude, I have defended the factious Jews against Gentiles and barbarians—and especially against themselves! Many were the times that my life came nearly to a bloody end on their behalf. Yet it was the Romans who rewarded my profane leadership of these their most troublesome rebels.

How quarrelsome and narrowminded the Jews seemed in the days of our war! There was always an unscrupulous opposition, and opposing oppositions to both government and oppositions, orthodox and heterodox. As priests they were at best men of principle with no sense of the logical fact that high principles may conflict with each other; as fighters they ignored the political forces confronting a governor; as politicians they hardly distinguished the different functions of infantry and cavalry, to say nothing of organization, supply, or engineering. It was left to me to improvise countermeasures against the world’s most effective siege army, but their thanks for my necessarily limited successes were far more than decently limited.

In Jerusalem itself I became known to the next generation as a traitorous renegade Jew—an arrogant and brutal opportunist guilty of duplicity and cowardice, serving both sides of the same war! Then as historian of the campaigns I was called boastful self-serving and tendentious, and said to be as deceitful in my writing as shifty in my actions. I was execrated by my own people as at least half pagan—at bottom a trickster and turncoat in religion too! The tactful ones called me a morally ambiguous, a Janus of piety and pragmatism. Such is often the

misguided infamy of a prophet who risks his life in trying to prevent a maddened beast from eating its own flesh. There were times when God really did seem to move from the Jews to the Romans. I took upon myself a high responsibility for the survival of a religious nation confused about the will of God in its rebellion against the protective power of a comparatively tolerant regime. I had warned them that resistance was folly before I reluctantly tried to make the best of their revolution. At first in command, then in thankless mediation, I served my people with devotion and grief. Along with the pride of action, the will to power, and the weight of responsibility, I felt as a private man their pain of birth, joy of life, love of family, terror of violence, doubt of intellect, loss of Temple, comfort of synagogue, and the inevitability of extinction.

Though I honored the Pantheon for its civil power and the Acropolis for its pure art, and though I revered both their languages, I was always reserved in my acceptance of Greek philosophy and Roman values. Jewish critics accused me of spiritual insensitivity, but to the very end I was teased by tolerant Romans for my unswerving loyalty to the Law and the Prophets. That didn't prevent them from erecting in Rome itself a posthumous statue of Josephus the historian.

Yet this is not the place for self-justification. I have been a public man; knowing the world, I am content with my enduring fame as a problematic but essential scholar. Without me the children of Abraham would have been mostly overlooked in secular histories. Jews, Greeks, Romans, and even Christians (whose inchoate establishment I failed to notice in my time) have used my works for almost two thousand years, at least in default of others.

Three Emperors were my benefactors and friends. In honor of my valor and skill as a former enemy, in gratitude for my diplomatic services, in admiration of my sophisticated learning, they provided me with the comfort and leisure required for mature writing (though still smiling at my personal allegiance to the lost cause of their contumacious little province). I owed them an openminded employment of the good fortune they vouchsafed me. Hence my experimental sponsorship of an Athenian bondsman's synergetic imagination.

Of course Apollo the philologist failed to discover any oriental root of Western theater for which he could claim distinct influence. The initial tributaries of almost any creation are as distant and diverse as the Mississippi's. He found no Missouri Ohio or Arkansas. Perhaps a Sumerian or Akkadian drama was illiterate, or systematically suppressed. Maybe it was obviated by the arrested development of ritual, or by a precipitate decadence of liturgy that omitted its final stages entirely. An anti-theatrical prejudice probably prevailed in Mesopotamia for theological reasons. (God desires loyalty, not sacrifice, says Hosea.) But the failure of Apollo's research only kindled an enthusiasm for fabrication. This is his one and only play, intended as a complement to that of Herodotus.

With pride and trepidation he surprised me with it as a birthday present about a year before I died. You know how it is with novice poets and playwrights: they crave the praise to match their efforts. But I never could praise without perusal. Much to my eternal regret, though I made a good effort to express my gratitude and respect, I was too antipathetic toward amateur creative writers to believe that reading it would be worth preemption of precious time in my

work-dominated old age. I dreaded his inexperienced challenge to the classic rules of dramatic art. I feared to find heterodoxy and sacrilege. Despite a mounting sense of guilt for hurting his feelings I kept putting him off with apologetic promises of my attention—until it was too late! Then he couldn't expect me to read it on my death bed. Yet he declined my offer to return the manuscript neatly copied and dedicated to me in his own hand, even lovingly illuminated with symbols we had studied together. With the first tears in my eyes for half a century I asked his forgiveness, and told him sincerely that I regretted not to have adopted him as my son.

But perhaps it was not such a bad thing that not long after I was gone the original script perished with him at sea on the way home to Athens. In anachronistic comparison it is more fictitious than the *Argonautika*.

He intended it to be performed by some company of mummers that had already staged Herodotus's play about the earlier life of Gilgamesh, adding a few self-explanatory roles and dropping others, as follows.

PERSONS AND MASKS

From former play

Lil-Amin and Inanna

Widow 1

Widow 2

Rector (High Priest)

Optimate 1

Optimate 2

Gilgamesh

Norkid

Trooper 2

Eber

Engidu

New characters

Berosus

Urshanabi

Ziusudra

Mother of All

Melchizedek

Scout 1

Scout 2

Shepherd 1 (Dumuzi)

Shepherd 2 (Peleg)

Princess Enheduanna

Villagers