



Boundaries between Wild and Civilized Humans in Near Eastern and Biblical Mythology

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[1] A key function of mythology is to construct the human experience by defining what it means to be an ideal human. One literary method of handling this task is portraying flawed humans who are punished, which modifies or stops their transgressions. Ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament mythologies are riddled with interesting characters which exemplify the boundaries between ideal and flawed in terms of what is civilized and what is primal. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Genesis chapters 2-3, and 1 Samuel 17, civilized and wild persons are defined by their ontology, geography, and behavior.

Ontology's Role in Defining Civilization

[2] The ontologies of Enkidu, Adam and Eve, and Goliath are visual representations of their wildness. Civilizations impress what they conceive to be appropriate ontologies onto their members, and anyone who strays outside of the culturally manufactured norms will face rejection from the majority of citizens. There is a gradient of acceptability, however, and a body can change and greatly

affect its relationship to society. In these myths, each unacceptable body must change or be destroyed.

[3] Enkidu's physique, a symbol of his primal nature, is dramatically affected when he becomes socially mature and wise. At first Enkidu lived with the beasts on the fringes of wilderness, his untamed body reflecting an animalistic rather than a civilized state. When Enkidu is confronted with humanity, the wild man who was once "splashing in the water with the beasts" (Matthews and Benjamin 20) "felt weak, his body grew taut, his knees locked when the beasts began to run" (21). Suddenly, the naturally sculpted body that once supported Enkidu in his wild state is no longer useful. Enkidu's body undergoes a massive ontological change that sets off a domino effect on the rest of Enkidu's lifestyle. In order to conform to the image of a civilized man, Enkidu "bathed and oiled his body. He combed his hair. Enkidu became a man" (22). His body is a microcosm for the changes that are taking place within the definition of his whole being. Enkidu is no longer a wild being; he has become a member of a society with a greater awareness of societal norms.

[4] Similarly, the ontologies of Adam and Eve represent the progression of their life-changing move towards knowledge. Adam's body is created directly from the "dust of the ground" (Gen. 2:7). The absolutely natural ontology of Adam symbolizes a connection between humankind and the primal, wild nature of the earth itself. Adam has nothing to be ashamed of, for his body has been

created directly from his surroundings, and he and his wife “were both naked, and were not ashamed” (Gen. 2:25). Their nudity denies one civilizing factor: the distinctly human need to don clothing. Adam and Eve exist harmoniously and naturally until they are tricked into eating the fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, with the result that they become ashamed of their bodies: “Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked” (Gen. 3:7). As in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the peaceful harmony within the story is distorted when the wild persons become aware and consequently embarrassed of their exposed bodies, such that “God made garments of skins for the man and for his wife, and clothed them” (Gen. 3:21). This act by God entailed the death of a living being, further toppling the delicate balance between human and nature. Clothed and burdened with a divine knowledge, Adam and Eve are expelled from the garden and sent off to begin civilization.

[5] Goliath’s body itself is threatening and foreign to Israel.¹ Goliath is “six cubits and a span” tall (1 Sam 17:4). This exaggerated height frames him as a true monster, a towering menace to the Israelites. His giant frame is adorned in extremely heavy metallic armor and threatening weaponry (1 Sam. 17:5-7). Goliath’s appearance is clearly meant to inspire *mysterium tremendum* and asks the audience to measure the unbalanced odds of the Israelites winning this landmark battle. When David speaks out against the Philistine, it is in the form of a direct attack on Goliath’s ontology: “For who is this uncircumcised Philistine that he should defy the armies of the living God?” (1 Sam. 17:26). Being an

uncircumcised Philistine means that Goliath does not belong to the religious tradition that the Israelites were practicing at the time; thus, his body is ritually unclean and an indicator of his primal, uncivilized nature. In these ways, the author removes Goliath, a threat to Hebrew customs who must be destroyed, from Israelite civilization.

Geography's Role in Defining Civilization

[6] Geographical separation is one of the strongest boundaries that can be drawn against a maligned other. This boundary is employed to great effect by the story-tellers of the Ancient Near Eastern and Old Testament mythologies, who depict primal beings as being physically remote from civilized humanity.

[7] In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, geographical distinctions clearly illuminate the interstices between primal and the civilized peoples. When the wise woman and the hunter are out searching for game, Enkidu, "like a creature from the hills," appears at the watering hole with the beasts (Matthews and Benjamin 20). He is not from the city of Uruk; he is from the wilderness of the hills beyond the city, where the untamed beasts roam. His separation from civilization promotes his image as a wild man, since the wilderness is a place where there is no human interaction. In the wilderness, Enkidu is certainly not communicating with humans, not involved in human social structure, and not tempted to pursue wisdom or sex - all marks of social inclusion. The wise woman of the divine assembly notices Enkidu, "this savage from deep within the treeless plains," and

she then “treated this savage like a man” (20-21). Civilization and sexuality come to him in the form of the wise woman. After Enkidu has sexual intercourse with the wise woman, he finds that “the beasts of the steppe shied away from him” (21). The wilderness itself now rejects Enkidu and he is forced to use his “mind . . . filled with a new wisdom” to make a decision on where he will live (21). He is then convinced to return with the wise woman to “Uruk, the city of great markets” (21), a city with an economy and hence a city with laws, business ethics and social norms. Later, after Enkidu has been immersed in civilization, he reflects on his past to Gilgamesh, saying: “When I ran with the animals, I learned that the Cedar Forest has no end. No one goes there” (23). Thus even Enkidu, the prototypical Ancient Near Eastern wild man, becomes profoundly aware of the geographical boundary between civilization and wilderness after he is successfully socialized.

[8] The function of geography in Genesis 2-3 is slightly different from that in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. In Genesis 2, God “planted a garden in Eden, in the east” (Gen. 2:8) and “took the man [Adam] and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). Eden is thus land given by God that is going to sustain Adam as long as he tends to it and follows God’s commands. The agrarian element of the story both reminds us of the original audience of the story and furthers the fertility imagery of the book, but more importantly, Eden is cast as a specific geographical location that symbolizes the pristine harmony of nature and humanity in God’s original creation.

[9] This harmony grows dissonant when Adam and Eve eat from “the tree that is in the middle of the garden,” the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (Gen 3:3). The tree’s central location seems to be an integral narrative device in the story. The tree is not to be eaten from, yet it is conspicuously placed in the center of the garden. The centrality of the tree of knowledge is meant to be a constant reminder of what Adam and Eve are not supposed to do, yet what is also a readily available temptation. As long as they know where the middle of the garden is, there can be no mistake about which tree to avoid. After Adam and Eve nevertheless eat from this tree, Adam is “sent forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which he was taken” (Gen. 3:23). God physically removes Adam from the garden and “at the east [the direction from which Adam would come if he tried to re-enter] of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim, and a flaming sword to guard the way to the tree of life” (Gen. 3:24). The geographical boundaries are drawn sharply with the institution of a guard whose job it is to keep humankind from attempting to revert to a primal, wild lifestyle. Because of their choices and behavior, Adam and Eve must literally leave their carefree lifestyle and home behind and enter the world of responsibility and suffering, thereby beginning civilization.

[10] 1 Samuel 17 employs geography in a still different way than do the creation accounts from Genesis 2-3 and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The westerly located Philistines, whom the Israelites are about to battle in the story, are

distinctly and geographically “other.” Their battle formation and spatial location vividly symbolizes their separation from Israel: “The Philistines stood on the mountain on the one side, and Israel stood on the mountain on the other side” (1 Sam. 17:3).

Behavior’s Role in Defining Civilization

[11] Civilizations necessarily stipulate rules of conduct that must be followed. Behavior that adheres to societal norms allows a society to function in a manner deemed to be beneficial to its members; erratic behavior could possibly throw a community into a rapidly degenerating state. In *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Genesis 2-3, and 1 Samuel 17, behavior which is outside of socially informed definitions of acceptability must be quickly forgotten, punished, or fought.

[12] Enkidu’s behavior changes from a primal state to a state that is streamlined with the social expectations of Uruk. Enkidu is first spotted “grazing with the gazelles, watering with the wild beasts” (Matthews & Benjamin 20). At first, he is in a stasis and does not know that what he is doing is unacceptable and could be considered unclean for a human. However, when the wise woman “bared her breasts, Enkidu took hold of her body” (20). Her act of unclothing herself goes against the behavior of a wild animal, as does Enkidu’s response to the act, which thereby distances him from the animal world. It is this act that marks the beginning of Enkidu’s journey towards civilization. Enkidu, the previously untamed wild man, is then led “like a child” by the hand of the wise woman (22). His next lesson involves eating, a social practice which is defined

and surrounded by culturally specific mores.² As Enkidu evolves into a civilized state, he enjoys bread and gets drunk from beer - both products of controlled agriculture (22). While drunk, Enkidu “became cheerful and playful. His heart rejoiced and his face glowed” (22). In other words, Enkidu now has substances, luxuries of civilization, to alter his mood and hence his behavior. He then continues to evolve in a civilized fashion. Grooming is a behavior that most members of the mammalian family share, but Enkidu, in a distinctly human act, employs the use of oils and a comb (22).

[13] Ironically, it is Enkidu, the animal-turned-man, who later becomes aware of the complexities of death, warning Gilgamesh of the dangers of attacking Humbaba, monster guardian of the cedar forest (23). Enkidu is somehow able to contemplate the possible fates of their deeds, reasoning that the behavior will probably end in devastation. His powers of reason are on target. Enkidu is sentenced to death by the divine assembly for slaughtering Humbaba and a divine bull (23). Had he never been enticed by wisdom, left the wilderness, and reformed his behavior, Enkidu would never have met with the fate of becoming a societal scapegoat.

[14] In Genesis, God punishes Adam and Eve’s erratic behaviors. As with Enkidu, it is their acquisition of awareness of the knowledge of Good and Evil that is both the civilizing force and the initiation of their “downfall.” Shame weighs heavily into this particular myth. In their nudity, Adam and Eve “were not

ashamed” (Gen. 2:25). Yet after they eat of the tree of knowledge and defy God’s commandment, Adam and Eve simultaneously become self-aware and ashamed. Their reaction is that they “sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves” (Gen. 3:7). This move towards domestication and technology is one step towards becoming civilized human beings. When God comes walking through the garden, Adam attempts to hide his partial nudity from Him (Gen. 3:10). As a punishment, God forces Adam and Eve to live an agrarian (and hence civilized) lifestyle: “You shall eat the plants of the field. By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground” (Gen 3:18). Thus, in this myth, leaving behind the unrestrained lifestyle for a more complex one, the primal for the civilized, is a curse.

[15] Goliath’s behavior is dominated by aggression and hubris. He represents a destructive outside force that must be repelled from Israel and the Israelite culture, and his behavior follows suit. Goliath makes an appeal to the army of Israel saying, “Choose a man for yourselves, and let him come down to me. If he is able to fight with me and kill me, then we will be your servants” (1 Sam. 17:8). Goliath, brimming with over-confidence, is covered head to toe in armor, but his forehead remains open to attack. David promptly strikes Goliath between the eyes with a sling, and Goliath becomes a victim of his own pride (1 Sam. 17:49-51). Goliath’s fatal flaw is meant to transmit a moral to the reader, reinforce the status of the Israelites as God’s chosen people, and downplay the fear of the Other who may easily be labeled as wild.

Illuminating the Boundaries

[16] Civilizations want to preserve their cultures, and they do this by drawing boundaries. The “wild man” is a threat that can come dangerously close to crossing the boundary between civilization and nature. In the construction of a culture’s most fundamental myths, that which is primal is identified in a variety of ways. As these mythic examples from ancient Israel and the Near East illustrate, myths employ ontological specifications, geographical boundaries, and standards of behavior in order to construct and reify the boundaries between civilization and nature.

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¹ Editor’s Note: Also see the essay in this issue of GOLEM by Paul B. Thomas, “Smiting Goliath: Giants as Monsters in the Ancient Near East.”

² Editor’s Note: E.g., see the following sources on Israelite eating practices and culture. David Bryan, *Cosmos, Chaos and the Kosher Mentality* (JSPSup 12;

Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995); Seth Kunin, *We Think What We Eat* (JSOTS 412; London: T. & T. Clark, 2004); and J. Soler, “The Semiotics of Food in the Bible,” in *Food and Drink in History* (eds. R. Forster and O. Ranum; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 126-38.

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