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## FORUM

### BABYLONIAN PERSPECTIVES ON THE UNCERTAINTY OF DEATH: SB *GILGAMESH* X 301-321

Sophus Helle\*

Rosencrantz: We might as well be dead. Do you think death could possibly be a boat?

Guildenstern: No, no, no... Death is... not. Death isn't. You take my meaning.

Death is the ultimate negative. Not-being. You can't not-be on a boat.

Rosencrantz: I've frequently not been on boats.

Guildenstern: No, no, no – what you've been is not on boats.

Rosencrantz: I wish I was dead.

(Tom Stoppard, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, act III)

Death is... not, as Tom Stoppard puts it. As he *has* to put it, because any attempt to describe death in assertive terms, and not merely through the negation of familiar images, quickly runs up against the impossibility of assigning predicates to something we invariably experience as absence, as “the ultimate negative”. Death defies grammar because it relentlessly negates whatever term we might use to describe it – death simply *isn't*. Guildenstern can circumvent the problem only by bending language to its breaking point, as Rosencrantz' misunderstanding makes clear.

\* It is my pleasure to dedicate this essay to my father Morten Søndergaard, as the following considerations on the nature of death have grown out of our wonderful conversations. The essay was first presented as a paper at the 6th Oxford Postgraduate Conference in Assyriology, and I would like to thank the organisers for their first-rate work. I would also like to thank Christopher Metcalf, for the essay to which the following is a reply and for taking the time to elucidate his thoughts on the matter. All shortcomings of course remain my own.

In the following I will argue that, although its poetic mode of expression was drastically different, Babylonian poetry also found of way of dealing with this same problem, and nowhere is that as clear as in the Standard Babylonian *Epic of Gilgamesh*. In a monologue spoken by Uta-napishti, the sage who gained immortality after surviving the mythical Flood, death is portrayed as profoundly unpredictable, unknowable, and even unrepresentable. In his meditation on the nature of death Uta-napishti shows that it cannot be depicted directly, but only through the gaps and absences of the text.

Through a close reading of Uta-napishti's monologue, I will first argue that Babylonian culture viewed death not only as inevitable but also as radically unpredictable, and then turn to a comparison with the *Dialogue of Pessimism* that will further elucidate the inherent poetic tension between the certainty and the uncertainty of death.

### The uncertainty of death

Uta-napishti's monologue on death is part of his conversation with Gilgamesh, who recounts to him his tale of love and loss and begs the immortal sage to end his sorrow by revealing to him the secret of eternal life. Uta-napishti begins his reply by comparing Gilgamesh' royal privilege with the fate of a fool, after which follow fifteen fragmentary lines. When the text is again readable, Uta-napishti questions Gilgamesh about what exactly he has achieved through all his labour apart from an exhaustion that will only quicken the pace of death.

The sage then turns to the nature of human mortality:

<i>amēlūtu ša kīma qanē api hašpu šumšu</i>	“Mankind – whose line is snapped like the reedbed's cane!
<i>eṭla damqa ardata dameqta</i>	Beautiful youth, beautiful girl,
<i>ur[ ] šunū-ma išallal mūti</i>	Death plunders their [ ]” (X 301-3) <sup>1</sup>

The snapping of the reed is a striking metaphor with which to open a meditation on death. It evokes a sudden, sharp moment of undoing, and the death that Uta-napishti will describe in the coming lines is thus no gradual fading, no languishing sickness. It is abrupt, and it is final. The victims introduced in the next line are taken away in their prime, so death clearly cares for neither age nor beauty. It comes, not as the natural conclusion to a long life, but as violence without warning.<sup>2</sup>

With this understanding of death in mind, Uta-napishti goes on to introduce the key problem of the monologue:

<i>ul mamma mūta immar</i>	“No one sees death,
<i>ul mamm[a ša mūti i]mmar paṇišu</i>	No one sees the face [of death],

1. The transcription here and below follows the text edition by George 2003, but the translation has been somewhat modified.
2. In Helle forthcoming, I argue that the passage of time in *Gilgamesh* is generally portrayed as a sequence of instantaneous transitions, rather than as gradual transformations, so this view of death as essentially abrupt may be explained as the result of a broader chronotopic pattern.

*ul mamma ša mūti rigmašu [išemme]*      No one [hears] the voice of death,  
*aggu mūtu bāšip amēlūti*      Yet furious death snaps mankind!" (X 304-7)

This stanza makes clear that while death has such a radical, furious effect on our lives, we have no way of knowing it. Unseen, unheard, and yet profoundly felt, death appears only through the sudden snapping introduced above.

This stanza, in effect, begins to tackle the representational challenge posed by death. It is clear that Uta-napishti cannot describe it with any assertive attribute, that he cannot tell us of the appearance of death or the sound that it makes. The only adjective he can attach to it is “furious”, but this has more to do with its effect on us than with its own nature. Death itself can be described only through negation, as that which we cannot hear or see. As he insists on its invisibility, it also becomes apparent that Uta-napishti is abstracting “death” from any particular instance of dying. Final throes and fatal agony can, of course, be seen and heard – painfully so. But what Uta-napishti is describing is the very moment that agony turns to silence, death in its most metaphysical form.

The sage then goes on to elaborate narratively on this representational crux.

*immatīma nippuša bīta*      “At some point, we build a house,  
*immatīma niqan[nana] qinna*      At some point, we make a nest,  
*immatīma abhū izuz[zi]*      At some point, brothers divide it,  
*immatīma zērūtu ibbašši ina [mārūti]*<sup>3</sup>      At some point, hate between [sons] occurs” (X 308-11)

In this beautifully compact stanza, Uta-napishti tells an eternal story of generations coming and going in miniature format, no more than fourteen words. Families are made, possessions accumulated, but at some point the family’s inheritance has to be split between heirs, leading to conflicts and feuds – which might in turn lead to more deaths. The anaphoric repetition of *immatīma*, an adverb referring to an unspecified or customary time, underscores the regular nature of this scenario; as Andrew George has put it, the repetition establishes that “men endure forever through the cycle of generations”.<sup>4</sup> Time flows onwards as ever, and the story is told yet again, and again.

What gives the stanza its poetic effect is how evocatively it portrays its subject matter, which, I would emphasise, remains death, in this case the death of the father that leads to the division of the inheritance. But death appears here only as an implication from the sequence of events. Somebody dies in the silence between line 309 and 310 (again and again), but we cannot know who, how, when, or where, for their demise is but a pause in the structure of the stanza. Uta-napishti has here drawn the logical conclusion from his previous statement: if death cannot be seen directly, it can be represented only through absence, here realised as the silence of a poetic caesura. Death disappears from the text, even as it remains central to it.

3. The restoration of “sons” in l. 311 is uncertain, and hinges on two broken signs that might be read ‘*ma-ru*’-[*tu*]. Another manuscript has place for only one short sign at the end of the line, leading Lambert 1996, 54, to restore [KUR] and “*ma-ti?*”, respectively. George 2003, 696 and 875 presents both possibilities, ultimately opting for the latter. However, regardless of the restoration both Lambert and George agree that the line refers to feuds arising from the division of an inheritance.
4. George 2012, 238.

The next line begins once more with *immatīma* but marks a shift in tense, from gnomic present to preterite, whereby Uta-napishti moves to a more concrete image.

<i>immatīma nāru iššā mīla ublu</i>	“At some point, the river rose, brought high water,
<i>kulīlu ūq̄qeḫp̄p̄ā ina nāri</i>	A mayfly drifting on the river.
<i>panūša inattalū pan šamši</i>	Its face looked on the face of the sun,
<i>ultu ullānum-ma ul ibašši mimma</i>	But in that very moment, nothing was there” (X 312-5)

The image of the previous stanza is here retained but also partly shifted, as we are introduced to the contrast between a fly and the flowing of the river. The two belong to different times altogether – the fly lives but a day, the river flows forever – and as such the metaphor elaborates on the previous image of a single mortal’s death viewed against a much broader background.<sup>5</sup> Death mediates between those two temporalities, robbing us of our individual perspective to inscribe us in the larger flow of time. Again, Uta-napishti’s description of death is nothing but suggestive. As in the previous stanza death is not mentioned by a single syllable, but instead represented only through its effects.

The fly is of course an evocative metaphor in this respect, connoting death in more than one way. George points to the proverbially ephemeral nature of the mayfly, Erich Ebeling to the annual spring flood of the Tigris river that carried with it thousands of dead flies. Wilfred Lambert notes that “the stress again is on sudden death”, as the flies are whisked away by the flooding. Anne Kilmer has dealt with the symbolism of flies in connection with the Flood, arguing among other things that flies were associated with war since they hovered by the soldiers’ corpses.<sup>6</sup> In short, flies evoke death in many different ways.

The last line of this stanza gives this familiar image a key twist. Even as the fly lies upturned, gazing at the sun and illuminated by it in a seemingly peaceful scene – even at that very moment, it sees only emptiness.<sup>7</sup> Uta-napishti boldly reverses the point of view, presenting us first with an exterior description, and then with the fly’s own perspective. Even as it drifts along looking at the sun, from its point of view there is nothing to be seen. The external description of the fly is but a veil of metaphors for the reality of death, a veil which Uta-napishti then tears away to reveal the true essence of that reality: pure negation.

Then follows the most difficult stanza in Uta-napishti’s monologue.

<i>šallu u mītu kī ‘ka’ aḫāmiš-ma</i>	“The plundered and the dead are <i>so alike</i> ,
<i>ša mūti ul iṣṣirū ṣalamšu</i>	And one cannot draw the image of death.
<i>lullā mītu ul ikruba karāba ina māti</i>	But the dead do not greet a man in the land” <sup>8</sup> (X 316-8)

5. See George 2012, 238.

6. George 2003, 876; Ebeling 1971; Lambert 1996, 57; Kilmer 1987. Note that Kilmer deals primarily with the common fly, *zubbū*, and not the mayfly of this passage, *kulīlu*.

7. George 2003, 697 translates “then all of a sudden nothing was there” – but surely, the “nothingness” has already struck it, for the fly is already dead. Lambert 1996, 57 argues that in this line the fly “disappear[s] for ever under an eddy”, but its mere submergence seems to me a much less dramatic image than its death. As the expression *ultu ullānum-ma* has the more usual meaning “at that very moment”, “then and there”, I prefer to see the line as reflecting not a change in the state of the fly, but in the perspective from which it is viewed.

8. For the reading of this line see the discussion in George 2003, 876-877.

These lines have in the past proved difficult to interpret, and the reading below is therefore tentative, but it seems to me that there is a contrast between the first and the last line of the stanza. In l. 316, Uta-napishti stresses the similarity between the dead and those who have been abducted, such as prisoners of war carried into servitude in a foreign land. Like the dead, they have been forcefully removed from their home, suddenly taken from their friends and family. The grief of those they leave behind will be the same as if they had died. But they are, crucially, still alive. They still walk the streets, though those streets may be foreign to them. Whereas one may well meet such a person, one is guaranteed never to be greeted by a dead man walking around.

If the stanza is read correctly here, it begins by pointing to the likeness between the abducted and the dead, and ends by stressing the difference between them. Despite their similarities, the dead are still much further removed from the life of the land than their abducted counterparts. What separates them is exactly what Uta-napishti describes in line 317: death. Even as they are exiled and mourned, the abducted have not been taken by death, and being captured in battle is still preferable to dying in it. Yet for all the difference it makes, death remains as indescribable as ever. It still resists representation, here most explicitly, as Uta-napishti states that one cannot draw its image.<sup>9</sup>

Whether or not there is a contrast to be found in the stanza, l. 317 confirms a central theme in Uta-napishti's monologue, namely that death is not and cannot be described assertively, only through negations that call any such description into question. Death is that which we do not hear, cannot see, that whose likeness we cannot draw, and which we experience only as nothingness, and yet death strikes us with savage and irreversible force.

In the last line of his monologue – and the last line of tablet X – Uta-napishti articulates the paradox that has run through his entire argument, that is, that death is at once guaranteed and unpredictable.

<i>Anunnaki ilū rabūtu paḥrū</i>	“The Anunnaki were assembled, the great gods.
<i>Mammetum bānat šimti ittišunu šimātu išimma</i>	Mammitu, creator of destinies, fixed a destiny with them:
<i>ištaknū mūta u balāṭa</i>	They established death and life,
<i>ša mūti ul uddū ūmīšu</i>	But did not reveal the day of death” (X 319-22)

Of all the things we want to but cannot know about death, the most pressing question is this: When? How long do I have left? Should I hurry, or do I have time? But this question, Uta-napishti concludes, has been made impossible to answer by divine decree.

The final couplet consists of two statements, one on the certainty and one on the uncertainty of death. On the one hand, death has been established by the gods, it is a destiny fixed by the Anunnaki themselves, and so despite all of Gilgamesh' toils there will be no escaping it. It is as inevitable as life itself. On the other hand, we do not know the day of our death, in fact we do not *anything* about death. We do not see its face or hear its voice, and so we have no way of knowing its coming. There is no escaping it, but there is no predicting it either. Recall that death, in Uta-

9. For the representational problem of this line, see Glassner 2017.

napishti's speech, is not the slow and foreseeable wilting of age or sickness, but a single day, unknown to us, as sudden and final as the snapping of a reed.

There is no question that death in cuneiform cultures was held to be an unavoidable certainty, and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* makes this profusely clear: not even the epic's super-human hero can escape its grip. But death is also an entirely hollow certainty, for the only certain thing about it is that it is certain. Everything else remains unknowable until the fatal moment, as each attribute of death is cast in doubt or negated: the day, the place, the manner of death, the face, the voice, the image of death. In other words, death is fundamentally certain in the abstract, but at the same time fundamentally uncertain in its actual instantiation. It is this central problem that Uta-napishti addresses as he tries to describe that which cannot be described, and it is the same problem that Gilgamesh rails against when he cries out that "death lives in my bedroom, wherever I turn, there is death!" (*ina bīt mayyālīya āšib mūtu / u ašar [pañyā] luškun šū mūtum-ma*, XI 245-246).<sup>10</sup> Gilgamesh can have no rest because he can have no certainty: death is nowhere, and so potentially everywhere.

Based on a reading of Uta-napishti's monologue Thorkild Jacobsen concluded that "[s]ince we are not told what Death is like, and so cannot know, there is no basis for fear of it".<sup>11</sup> I would argue that this is quite precisely wrong. Exactly because we cannot know what death is like, there is every reason to fear it. That is, after all, what fear is, an emotional response to threatening uncertainty. Unknowable, unrepresentable, and uncertain, death haunts us all, and Gilgamesh in particular, because of its simultaneous absence and presence in our lives. Benjamin Foster summarises the point quite differently from Jacobsen: "The poet's final lesson was that human beings, unlike animals, must learn to live with the advance knowledge that they will die, though without knowing when or how".<sup>12</sup> To accept the certainty of death is thus also to accept that it is unknowable. This may indeed lead to overcoming the fear of death, but that will be despite and not because of its unpredictability.

### Mastering uncertainty

This essay is, in part, a reply to Christopher Metcalf's "Babylonian Perspectives on the Certainty of Death", where he addressed the composition known as the *Dialogue of Pessimism*.<sup>13</sup> As argued by Nathan Wasserman, the *Dialogue* responds to the *Epic of Gilgamesh* in a number of ways, subtly critiquing its outlook on life, and so the two compositions may be fruitfully read in relation to one another.<sup>14</sup> In the following, I will show that the epic's portrayal of death adds a new perspective to the concluding irony of the *Dialogue of Pessimism*.

The *Dialogue* is a satiric conversation between an indecisive master and his clever servant. The master proposes an activity, and the servant readily supplies good reasons to do just that, but then the master decides against it, after which the servant just as readily supplies reasons not to do it.

10. George 2003, 718.

11. Jacobsen 1980, 21. It should be kept in mind that the text from which I quote is only the abstract of a fuller argument that never saw print.

12. Foster 2011, 118.

13. Metcalf 2013.

14. Wasserman 2011, 7-11.

The exchange is repeated again and again until at last the master asks the servant what he should do. The servant proposes suicide. This seemingly bizarre reply makes sense, according to Metcalf, because the servant then metaphorically evokes the proverbial certainty of death: by its very inevitability, death can be a relief from the indecisions of everyday life.

Therefore the *Dialogue*, argues Metcalf, should be read not as meaningless satire, but as containing also serious philosophical reflections on human mortality. In order to show this he traces the phrase “Who is so tall as to reach the heavens? Who is so wide as to encompass the earth?” as it winds its way through Sumerian and Akkadian literature. He finds that the phrase is used to express a contrast between humans and gods. Only the gods are as tall as the skies, and so metonymically the phrase refers to human limitations in general.

“The gods are able to achieve such dimensions, and the gods are immortal. Man is unable to emulate the gods in the former respect, which can by analogy serve as an expression of the latter: the image thus comes to be used as an illustration of man’s mortal, non-divine nature”.<sup>15</sup>

This, according to Metcalf, is the background for how the phrase is employed in the *Dialogue*. Here, having considered and rejected all kinds of possible activities, the master finally asks:

<i>eninna mīnū t̄āba</i>	“What, then, is good?”
<i>tikkī tikkaka šebēru</i>	“To break my neck and yours,
<i>ana nāri našāku t̄āba</i>	and throw us into the river is good!
<i>ayyū arku ša ana šamē ēlū</i>	Who is so tall as to reach the sky?!
<i>ayyū rapšu ša eršetim ugammeru</i>	Who is so broad as to encompass the earth?!”
<i>ē arad adākekā-ma panātūa ušallakka</i>	“No, servant, I will kill you and make you go first.”
<i>u bēlī lū 3 ūmī kī arkīya iballutu</i>	“But my master would not outlive me by three days!” (l. 80-86) <sup>16</sup>

Proposing suicide as the only logical consequence of the master’s indecision, the servant employs this phrase to argue that humans cannot live forever anyway. The certainty of this human condition is, according to Metcalf, crucial for the servant’s reply to make sense: “Death is an absolute certainty, as the inherited proverb ‘Who is so tall...’ tells us, because we are not like the gods”.<sup>17</sup> Unable to reach the sky, we are also unable to live forever. The certainty of death expressed by this phrase stands out against the master’s indecision: “Death is an absolute fact of human existence that offers us release from the decisions that we are constantly forced to take and that offer us no absolute certainty”.<sup>18</sup> Death is “good”, according to the servant, in the sense that it relieves us of the burden of uncertainty, its very inevitability is what makes it preferable to life.<sup>19</sup>

15. Metcalf 2013, 260.

16. Lambert 1996, 148.

17. Metcalf 2013, 264-265.

18. Metcalf 2013, 261.

19. For this “suicidal philosophy of good” in a broader anthropological and ancient Near Eastern context, see Dietrich 2017, 180.

However, while the phrase employed by the servant may very well metonymically refer to the limitations of humans with respect to the gods, I am not so sure that the limitation being referred to here is *only* our limited lifespan. Uta-napishti's speech also concludes with an asymmetry between gods and humans: that only the gods know the day of our death. The problem is not only that we cannot live forever, but also that we have no control over or knowledge of when or how we will die. If indeed our limitations give us certainty – the certainty of death – then this remains a highly abstract and empty certainty.

In his concluding argument, Metcalf draws our attention to the role that power plays in the *Dialogue*. Drawing an analogy to Hegel's dialectic of lord and bondsman, he argues that the relation between master and servant is throughout asymmetrical. The servant has the intellect to make a reasoned decision but not the power to do so, while the master has this power but lacks that intellect.<sup>20</sup> In the final exchange, the master threatens to use his autocratic power to kill the servant, but the servant retorts that the master would not survive without his wit, reversing the relation of dependence.

While I think Metcalf is right to point to the dynamic of power in this piece, I would draw a different conclusion as regards the confrontation with death. Suicide becomes an alluring option because, as Metcalf says, it is an escape from the uncertain decisions we are constantly forced to make – but that does not make it a resignation to a higher certainty. If this were the case, death would surely be expected to come of its own accord. Rather, suicide provides a way of reversing our asymmetrical relation to death. Exactly because death is the *most uncertain* aspect of our existence, suicide becomes a way of regaining control.

As with the relation between master and servant, it is a matter of power. The world of the *Dialogue* is radically undecided, and the sophistry of the servant allows everything to be turned upside down. Reasons can be given for and against any given option, making choice impossible. In this over-interpreted world, it is no wonder that the master is stuck in indecision – no alternative seems inherently better than any other. Albert Camus claimed that the evacuation of purpose, which leaves the world absurd, necessarily leads us to confront suicide, for “in a universe suddenly bereft of illusions and lights, man feels himself a stranger”.<sup>21</sup> In the *Dialogue*, the opposite is true. Suicide becomes appealing not because the world is devoid of meaning, but because it is *oversaturated* with meaning. Reasons and purposes can be provided for any one option, leaving us ever more uncertain and indecisive.

Thus overwhelmed, the master turns to the servant to decide the matter for him. The servant suggests suicide as the only logical option, indeed pointing, as Metcalf argues, to the limitations of humanity in a wide and unknowable world. Yet this is no surrender to the inevitability of our condition, but a radical way for the perennially passive master to become active, to regain his lost decisiveness. He will have, at last, made a choice – the most important choice that anyone can make, Camus would argue. By actively choosing death, the servant proposes, we can make ourselves masters of uncertainty, we can gain control over that which is least certain of all: the time and manner of our death.

20. Metcalf 2013, 264.

21. “[D]ans un univers soudain privé d’illusions et de lumières, l’homme se sent un étranger”: Camus 2006, 223.

Babylonian considerations on human mortality thus combine two opposing perspectives, on the certainty and uncertainty of death respectively. These perspectives are not mutually exclusive, on the contrary it is their combination that proves so poetically fruitful in the texts analysed here. Utanapishti's depicts the paradox in a powerfully evocative way, describing death through nothing but negations, silences, and absences. The servant's quip is perhaps more sardonic, but certainly no less meaningful in its reflection on existence.

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