Reader’s Response

Utnapishtim on the Vietnam Shuttle

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In Babylonian mythology Utnapishtim has, by special favor of the gods, escaped a devastating flood and secured immortal life. Years later Gilgamesh—his grandson and king—goes in search of Utnapishtim to be cured of a foul disease and to learn the secret of immortality.—The Editors

Years ago, after graduating from fundamentalist Wheaton College in Illinois (Billy Graham’s alma mater), I was, as a theological student at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia (Carl McIntire’s alma mater), surprised at the legalistic distinctions the Dutch students used to justify smoking. Not mentioned in the Bible, smoking was one of the adiaphora, i.e., indifferent actions, wholly determined by the individual conscience, and in the face of American Puritan pressure almost a requirement to maintain Christian Liberty.

Now I am just as surprised to read in Peter Berger’s “Gilgamesh on the Washington Shuttle” (Worldview, November) defense of his “filthy habit.” One suspects his European background may have provided some of the same cultural conditioning the Dutch-Scottish viewpoint did at Westminster. Just so Henry Kissinger cannot get Metternich out of his consciousness.

Berger does not use subtle theological distinctions. Instead, as a sociologist he scientifically teases evidence out of personal columns of the left-wing press, the raids of Nader, the attacks of Ivan Illich, the demonstrations against nuclear energy, the claims of natural foods buffs to construct a whole New Class of secular crusaders against whom he must defend his turf as a humble sinner whose “coffin nails” affirm his finitude. And that is reality!

The spirit of Gilgamesh is alive and well—on the Washington shuttle and everywhere else—looking for immortality of an illusory character.

It all seems to prove too much. As my fundamentalist buddies with a gimlet eye on Roman Catholicism used to praise H.G. Wells’s Crox Ansata for its devastating attack on the papacy, little realizing that it demolished the whole of Christianity, so Berger’s denigration of the Gilgamesh Epic has implications for the epic of Job, who hoped for immortality too. Without previous theological programming, the average person today cannot see much difference between Gilgamesh’s sneaky snake and the one in Genesis.

The Gilgamesh Epic had another interesting incident in the search for immortality. The gods had saved Utnapishtim (the Mesopotamian Noah) and his wife on a reed raft through the Great Flood. Then they confirmed them in immortality (which Adam and Eve missed out on in Eden to our sorrow). The couple lived in the land of Dilmun, the island of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf (Arabian, if you prefer—but let me warn you that the Shah has 400,000 troops to the Saudis’ 25,000), as revealed by Bibby’s excavations with his Danish colleagues. So if we can believe any of these ancient stories, Utnapishtim must still be there on Bahrain, lurking among the fifty thousand burial mounds or in some sheikh’s palm garden. It’s as likely as Elijah’s chariot or Muhammad’s ride on Bulaq.

Someone said of Herbert Danby’s great English translation, The Mithnahu, that every young biblical scholar should sell his shirt and buy a copy. Shouldn’t we all sell our shirt, pants, and under-wear to buy a ticket on the Concorde to Bahrain? By all means get to Utnapishtim, who has found immortality. Job isn’t around, and we let Lazarus slip through our fingers. Now Moody and Kübler-Ross are straining at any wisp of evidence. And here old Utnapishtim and his missus have already “found it.” I can see them sitting there under the shade of their reed raft (and people are still looking for Noah’s Ark on Mt. Ararat).

I used to ride the shuttle to Bahrain-Dilmun. Maybe I didn’t find immortality any more than Gilgamesh did. Still, things have happened that may be explained by my connection with Dilmun and thus with Utnapishtim (his influence inhaled like carcinogenic air pollution). Returning home from the Middle East, I and my missus dropped a thousand meters over the Alps when our Air France Caravel hit a down draft. Like Paul at Melita, I guess I can claim that we saved that jet plan “and all them that sail with thee.” Of course Utnapishtim should get the credit.

At any rate what I saw on the Utnapishtim-Dilmun shuttle, and later reflected on, helped question my rigid mind-set, and I think I am now better able “to sit down by the water” with Gilgamesh “and weep” with mankind.

In the 1950’s I was one of the early chaplains in the Aramco oil camps in eastern Saudi Arabia. I shepherded my fat, unfleeced American sheep on the sand hills above the largest pool of oil in the world. None of us had begun to face the implications of the fact that a celestial sense of humor had put what was needed most by us good Christians where it was needed least by “rag-headed” Moslems. (Oh, the chummy nicknames light-hearted Americans use!) Similar to the oil on the Indian reservations in the U.S. We were able to
bilk the Indians but not the Arabs.

I was conservative in theology and politics and economics, as befitted an Aramco chaplain. The “Seven Sisters” are very conservative ladies. Aramco was overly cautious about asking the Saudis for churches and chaplains living in the oil camps, so our family had to reside on Bahrain (Dilmun). One day in 1954 I flew back to Bahrain from my pastoral duties in Arabia. A French plane landed right behind us. It was the Vietnam shuttle bringing the broken pieces of French humanity home from the battle of Dien Bien Phu, the end of a century of colonialism.

As I watched the bandaged, limbless, blinded veterans help each other down the ramp—those who were at all ambulatory—this naive, smug fundamentalist thanked God the U.S. was not a colonial power getting involved in such intrigues as these poor devils had. My three sons, blissfully pedaling their bicycles around the tropical island of immortal Utnapishtim, would never have to face such horrors. Amen.

Little did I realize that the U.S. had been bankrolling the French fiasco, having agreed with Great Britain to let the French return to Indochina after the Japanese surrender. This was to get De Gaulle to cooperate in NATO. We lost on all scores and deserved to. I had no way of knowing that the U.S. would agree to the Geneva Accords for a plebiscite in Indochina, that Ho Chi Minh, our ally against the Japanese, would have won hands down. Then we worked to prevent the plebiscite. And our advisors became troops and more troops—the whole debacle.

Our oldest son rode to Vietnam on the U.S. shuttle, like a tourist from Oakland to Bien Hoa, arriving just in time for Tet. Drafted on his way to graduate school to become a new “China hand,” which we now need so greatly, he was devastated by the experience. It took him a year after his return to face his fellow men; he felt unclean from what he was part of in Vietnam. The other two sons never returned to the U.S. but became landed immigrants, like their forebears, and are now citizens of another country. Their loss was not physical but psychic, and that is hard to measure. Perhaps they absorbed at least a measure of Utnapishtim’s presence on Bahrain and he saw them through. Who knows? I know I can no longer plead “Gott mit uns.”

My sons and their friends belong to this New Class defined by Berger. (Incidentally, they smoke, and probably with a wider selection than just “cancer sticks.”) They are interested in many of the causes Berger cites, not because of an illusionary quest for immortality, but because of a realistic need for fundamental change in the way spaceship Earth is traveling, the shuttle of mankind. Their concern is not a seat in a shrinking smoking section, nor is their thought preoccupied by tortured arguments to prove a conspiracy for hapless dreamers. They know Walter Lippmann’s fury against old men who send young men to fight the old men’s wars. Never again!

Move over, Utnapishtim, and let me under the reed raft. That Concorde is a veritable time capsule! Light up the hubbly-bubbly and give me a drag. Ah-h-h-h!