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ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN STUDIES

SUPPLEMENT 21

**GILGAMESH
AND THE WORLD OF ASSYRIA**

Proceedings of the Conference held at Mandelbaum House,
The University of Sydney, 21-23 July 2004

EDITED BY

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INTRODUCTION

There is something seemingly very inappropriate about a conference in Australia on Gilgameš. In geographical terms, how much further away could one be from the world of Gilgameš? Would one expect this country, which prides itself on being 'young', to be concerned with one who "brought back a message from the antediluvian age"?

Yet, there is obviously something very appropriate about a conference in Australia on Gilgameš. Where better to remember the one who "came a distant road" than in this land of distance and loneliness? This land that connects its national consciousness to a military defeat far away in the Old World can appreciate Gilgameš's discovery that behind the glory of war lies the bitterness of death and sorrow.

Perhaps this paradox of inappropriate and appropriate will become a little more explicable if we think in terms of Gilgameš's plant "The Old Man Had Grown Young". Let us suppose that Gilgameš at some stage had been rejuvenated by the plant. Would he have come back physically renewed but with the advantage of the wisdom learned through the previous years? Or would he be forced to learn again the hard way? Those questions are unanswerable and have value only as suggesting a parable of human history. Do the questions wrestled with in the past become part of a store of wisdom or must the same questions be asked naively by each generation?

In putting the questions this way Gilgameš stands both for the issues the epic raises and is also an icon for a broader landscape. Without denying for a moment the enriching of Australian life by migration from the Middle East, nor the magnet of war that has drawn Australian soldiers to the Middle East, in the broader scheme of things, there is no natural historical connection of Australia to the Ancient Near East. What form the links are not the historical specifics of ethnicity and historical heritage. Rather it is the universals of a shared human condition and a significant grappling with the dilemmas raised by that condition. Gilgameš belongs in Australia because we too know the conflict of human significance and death.

Of course, as elsewhere, there are those here who would prefer that those who travelled in search of meaning not be remembered. Yet students are voting with their feet. It is one of the intriguing and unexpected features of the state of New South Wales that more students conclude their high school careers studying Ancient History than studying Modern History. Of course a great deal of that interest is owed to students and teachers of Greco-Roman History, Biblical Studies, Egyptology and Archaeology. Nevertheless it is a reflection of the fact that in a 'young' country one cannot extinguish the desire and need to pursue old questions.