'Gilgamesh': The Iraq War, 2500 B.C.

Dec. 5, 2004

GILGAMESH A New English Version. By Stephen Mitchell. 290 pp. Free Press. $24.

IN a famous episode in the 4,000-year-old epic of Gilgamesh -- whose resemblance to the biblical story of Genesis so electrified its Victorian discoverer that he began to tear off his clothes where he stood, scandalizing his British Museum colleagues -- the hero encounters the Mesopotamian equivalent of Noah. "I imagined that you would look like a god," Gilgamesh tells him. "But you look like me, you are not any different."

Gilgamesh's baffled wonder at his likeness to an ancient figure of legend provides a momentary flash of identification for the reader of Stephen Mitchell's latest book. The poem survives today in fragments on thousands of small tablets of hardened clay inscribed in long-dead languages, scattered from the eastern Mediterranean to Iraq. Its names, and the customs it describes, are strange; its pantheon is stranger; and as in most ancient epics, it is filled with characters who do not show complex psychological motivation for their actions. Yet here is a flowing, unbroken version that reads as effortlessly as a novel, where despite the alien landscape of gods and monsters we can discover startlingly familiar hopes, fears and lusts.

To Mitchell, who for years has reinvented canonical texts of world literature with an intrepid vigor befitting his hero, this is precisely the point. He believes literary greatness rests in what texts can teach us about ourselves, and he cracks open the lessons in "Gilgamesh" by rebuilding its clay fragments into a poem easy on the eyes and the transcultural imagination.

Gone are the brackets and dots that signify the presence of gaps and disputed interpretations in the sources. When he can, Mitchell spackles the standard Akkadian version with verses in other languages, from other traditions; when none are available, he supplies his own. The result is a quintessentially American version of the ancient Mesopotamian narrative -- vibrant, earnest, unfussily accessible -- whose moments of red-blooded splendor stand in contrast to stretches of bland sentimentality.

Mitchell's soothing, sanguine popularizations attract a large readership partly because they read as both self-help books and spiritual manuals. After his critically acclaimed translations of Rilke and the Book of Job, Mitchell turned to the foundational texts of Taoism, Hinduism and Christianity. Self-esteem and inner peace are among the touchstones in his various books, which include "Loving What Is: Four Questions That Can Change Your Life," written with his wife, Byron Katie, and a business leadership guide derived from the Tao Te Ching.

His "Gospel According to Jesus" (1991) proclaimed itself, with characteristic assurance, as the "authentic" good news for believer and nonbeliever alike. Promising not to parrot the Gospels' stories about "Jesus," as Mitchell chose to refer to the apocalyptic-minded figure he considered an invention of the early Christians, his book presented a sanitized Jesus whose maxims of love and tolerance reflect Mitchell's own Judeo-Zen inclusiveness. Admitting that excerpting the "authentic" words of Jesus from the Gospels is a borderline hopeless task, Mitchell relied on his own intuitive feel for Jesus' voice, ending up with a Gospel that is a liberal believer's wish list: no badgering about sin; no infuriated ejection of the money-changers from the temple; no star; and no manger either, these being (Mitchell suggests) suspect additions by confused storytellers. It's a big-hearted, best-selling formula.

THE authentic Gilgamesh, if he existed -- chances of that being about the

same as there having been a real King Arthur, which is to say fair to good -- ruled over the rich city of Uruk, in what is now Iraq, nearly 5,000 years ago. This "Gilgamesh" is not Mitchell's own translation (like me, he is not fluent in the original languages) but a version built on others, owing a special debt to the outstanding work of the Babylonian scholar A. R. George. This in itself poses no special problem: anyone familiar with the work of Ezra Pound knows that expertise in the original is unnecessary for effective adaptation. The muscular eloquence and rousing simplicity of Mitchell's four-beat line effectively unleash the grand vehemence of the epic's battle scenes, and the characters' ominous visions emerge with uncanny clarity.

But smoothing the reader's path exacts a price. Mitchell's additions range from the ham-handed ("The man was huge / and beautiful. Deep in Shamhat's loins / desire stirred. Her breath quickened") to the mawkish. Here is Gilgamesh's wild friend Enkidu on his deathbed, crying to the king:

You told me that you would come to help me

when I was afraid. But I cannot see you,

you have not come to fight off this danger.

Yet weren't we to remain forever

inseparable, you and I?

George's literal translation, by contrast, shows us an Enkidu not lamenting abandonment but recalling the terrors of battle as he dies unheroically in bed. Mitchell rewrites this speech and scissors out an earlier one in which Enkidu retells his greatest deeds with a desperate rage born of his awareness of imminent death. And when Mitchell overreaches in his attempt to move the reader, the epic's subtle balance between the quest for

immortality of the body and for eternal life through fame is undone.

What is alien does not always alienate, however. There actually is enlightenment to be found in this jolting confrontation with the foreignness of the past. And in light of the attempts to remake Iraq into a democratic reflection of the United States, Mitchell's well-intentioned Americanization of Mesopotamia's ancient epic has an uncomfortably ironic flavor.

Shared with you by a Times subscriber.

Shared with you by a Times subscriber.

You have access to this article thanks to someone you know.

Keep exploring The Times with a free account.