

Study Questions for Reading Selections in

Cunningham and Reich, *Culture and Values*

Chapter 1:

The Epic of Gilgamesh, Textbook, 295-96

This work can be considered as a type of *quest* literature, in which the hero's search for something important is described. What is being sought? Why? What trials are involved in the search? What other examples of quest literature, modern or ancient, western or non-western, can you name?

What are the similarities and differences between these examples and Gilgamesh?

The Flood: How did the Sumerians regard the relationship between nature and their gods? What is the source of the storm? How many gods are involved in bringing the storm, and what are their functions? Are there other gods not involved in bringing the storm? What is their reaction to it?

What does Ishtar's lament tell us about how the Sumerians viewed their gods?

The Afterlife: How does Enkidu describe his journey to the place of the dead? What gods are present there? Based on this episode, how did the Sumerians view death: with hope, or with dread? How does the view of the afterlife presented here compare with that found in the Egyptian Book of the Dead?

The Return of Gilgamesh: How is Gilgamesh's quest described? What is the significance of his sleep? Why does he despair when he wakes up? What is the significance of his washing? Of the plant that restores youth? What other well-known story from the ancient Near East involves a serpent in conflict with man?

The Death of Gilgamesh: What are Gilgamesh's accomplishments? What are his failures? What are the lessons for the reader/hearer? How does the author intend the reader/hearer to regard Gilgamesh? Does Gilgamesh's failure to achieve his quest affect his stature at all?

The Laws of Hammurabi, Coursepack, 11-15:

1. What picture of Mesopotamian life do you get from these laws? What are the common punishments or penalties for various crimes? What seems to be the rationale for these punishments? For what crimes is the death penalty given?
2. What is the role of women in Mesopotamian society? What rights do they have? What restrictions are placed on them?
3. How do these laws compare with the Ten Commandments (pp. 355-56)? with modern laws?
4. What is Hammurabi's relationship to the gods? to his human subjects? What is his mission? What do you think of the rhetorical style (what he says and how he says it) of the Prologue and Epilogue?
5. Note the different social groups mentioned in the laws on Personal Injury and Manslaughter and Physician's Fees and Malpractice. How was Mesopotamian society structured? What were some of the differences between these groups? Note the different occupations mentioned under Wage Regulations. How complex was the Mesopotamian economy? Note that some of the materials these occupations required (stone, wood) were relatively scarce in Mesopotamia.

Hymn to the Nile, Coursepack, 22-24:

1. How is the Nile regarded in this hymn? How did the Egyptians see the relationship between nature and their gods?
2. What does the Nile provide? What do the people give to the Nile in return?

3. Note the references to incantations and written spells. What seems to have been the role of magic in Egyptian religion? How powerful were hieroglyphics (the writing used for spells)?
4. Note the reference to the Nile as the “Establisher of justice.” In this context, what is justice? Does it refer to legal matters or perhaps to something else (see question 2 on *The Chapters of Coming Forth by Day*)?

The Designation and Divine Conception of Thothmes III, Coursepack, 25-28:

1. Thothmes became Pharaoh in 1468 B.C., and was one of Egypt’s greatest conquerors. How does he conceive of himself? What is his relationship with the gods? What makes him different from other human beings? What do the gods do for him?
2. Compare the rhetoric of this document to that of the Laws of Hammurabi. Especially look at what each king says about himself and how he says it. What can we say about the rhetorical styles of ancient Near Eastern kings? How and why do they say what they do? What is the purpose of this kind of rhetoric? Do you think ancient peoples readily believed these statements? Why or why not?

Selections from *The Chapters of Coming Forth by Day* (Better known as *the Egyptian Book of the Dead*), Coursepack, 29-46:

1. This particular version was written for a scribe, Ani, and consists of prayers and spells performed by priests. How does Ani relate himself to the various gods? What is the purpose of the various chapters?
2. Note the Feather of Truth in *The Weighing of the Heart*: This is a symbol of ma’at, or justice, or order (we will discuss this in class). The Two Truths of *The Negative Confession* likewise refers to ma’at.
3. How did the Egyptians view the relationship between life in this world and life in the next? What did a person have to do to be accepted by the gods? What acts were considered sinful or unacceptable? How does the moral code outlined here compare to modern morality? How many gods are mentioned here? Why so many? What view of the afterlife is presented here? What picture of daily Egyptian life do you get from the various acts mentioned (apart from their sinfulness)?

Chapter 2:

Homer’s *Iliad*, selections, Textbook, 297-305

1. What is the role of the gods? (See, for example, p. 297-98, ll. 461-470; p. 298, ll. 485-490; p. 62, ll. 529-533.)
2. What impressions of the various heroes do you get from the battle scene, the wrestling scene, and the confrontation between Priam and Achilles? What virtues do they display in battle? in competition with each other? face-to-face with each other? What might Homer have been trying to convey to his listeners (who were they?) by such portrayals? How do these virtues and values compare with modern ones?
3. What are your impressions of the battle scene? Why does Homer describe the battle in this way? What might he have been trying to convey to his listeners? Does it seem realistic? What is Homer’s attitude to war? does he glorify it or condemn it?
4. How do Homer’s heroes compare to Gilgamesh as a hero? How do these two epics compare with each other?

Sappho’s selected poems, Textbook, 305

What is the difference between Sappho’s poetry and Homer’s? How do their audiences differ? What kinds of things does Sappho write about? What kinds of feelings does she describe?

Presocratic philosophy, Textbook, 305-306

What subjects do Heraclitus and Parmenides address? Can you see any similarities or differences between these two? What are their attitudes to time and change? Do you see any relation between their ideas and those of modern science?

Herodotus' *Histories*, excerpts, Coursepack, 60-62

1. What is Herodotus' approach to writing history? Does he believe everything he sets forth? If not, why does he write it down? What are his motives? Is this "good history"? Is it even history? If not, what is it?

2. What do you make of the legends he tells of the various Scythian peoples? Did he think his hearers would believe them? Note, for example, the Androphagi ("Man-eaters") of 4.106, and also the fabulous creatures and beasts of 4.191. We will encounter these peoples and beasts later in the course, in the Middle Ages.

Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, excerpts, Coursepack, 63-64.

1. The excerpt comes from the end of the opening chapter of Thucydides' history. Most scholars believe he is criticizing Herodotus. Why is he doing so, and for what? What are Thucydides' approach, goals, and motives? Is he any more believable when he admits that he puts words in his speakers' mouths?

Compare the concerns of Homer with those of Sappho, the philosophers, and Herodotus. What kinds of changes were occurring in Greek society to allow poets like Sappho, philosophers like Heraclitus and Parmenides, and historians like Herodotus to flourish?

Chapter 3:

Sophocles, *Oedipus the King*, Textbook, 308-21.

1. Remember that this play was an oral, theatrical event presented as part of a religious festival and ritual; it was not just entertainment. The words were sung according to a special meter and not just spoken; it was not meant to be read silently, as we are accustomed to do. As you read and study it, try reading, or even singing, a few lines out loud to get a sense of the rhythm. Since the play was also choreographed, try moving around the room as you read.

2. How does the plot develop? How does Sophocles tell the story? How does he use dramatic irony? What does he assume the audience already knows about Oedipus? Remember that in Athens, the spectators would have no prior indication of the play's title, theme, or characters; the playwright would have to make these immediately clear, though other plot elements would present themselves as the play proceeded.

3. What is the theme or message of the play? Is there any kind of moral or lesson? (See p. 316, ll.945-951; p. 321, ll. 1482-1488.) How would this affect the lives of the original audience? How would this theme fit in with the religious context of its original presentation?

4. Is Oedipus a victim? Does he deserve his fate? How free was he? how free from forces beyond their control must ancient Greeks have felt themselves to be? Could he have escaped this fate in any way? Compare his fate with that of Gilgamesh: a hero who fails in some way. Can we say that the Babylonians and Greeks had similar outlooks on life? Compare also this concept of fate with the principles of the "Classical Ideal." Do you see any conflict?

5. Read Oedipus' last speech to his children (p. 320), the messenger's description, and the priest's speech (p. 309). What values of the society are expressed? Do we hold to any of those same values? What values does our society have that are different?

Plato, excerpt from *The Republic*, *The Philosopher King*, Coursepack, 65-67:

1. This is a dialogue between Socrates and several other people at a “symposium,” or drinking-party, at which the participants discuss deep topics. It gives a good example of the Socratic method of questioning and arriving at truth. How does this method work?
2. What is a philosopher, according to Socrates? Why are philosophers best suited to run a city? How likely are they to want to do so? Why or why not? How likely are the common people to receive them? What seems to be Plato’s opinion of democracy?
3. Compare the philosopher-king to modern leaders. How many modern leaders seem to be philosophers? Would they lead better if they were?

Plato, excerpt from *The Republic*, *The Allegory of the Cave*, Textbook, 326-27.

1. Draw a diagram of the Cave in order to make its imagery clear. How does Plato define education? What is its purpose? What is the role of the philosopher here?
2. Describe Plato’s two worlds. In what world do most people live in? Is it the world of shadows or the world of reality?

Aristotle, excerpt from *The Nicomachean Ethics*, Textbook, 327-29.

1. How does Aristotle define *the good*? How does he define happiness? How does one arrive at happiness? What is the role of politics in achieving happiness? How is this different or similar from the modern quest for happiness?

Aristotle, excerpt from *Politics*, Textbook, 329-31.

1. Does this offer any insight into modern politics? What does Aristotle regard as the advantages and disadvantages of the various forms of government? Why do revolutions occur?

Chapter 4:

Cicero, *On the Laws*, Coursepack, 75-85.

1. What does Cicero (Marcus) believe to be the origin of law? What is the law’s purpose? What is the essential nature of both the law and God?
2. How does Cicero contrast law, generally conceived, and civil law? What are the terms of religious law? What do the laws concerning religious festivals tell us about Roman culture and values?
3. What is the function of magistrates? How much authority does Cicero give to them?
4. How does Cicero’s concept of government compare with Aristotle’s? with modern concepts?

Vergil, excerpts from *Aeneid*, Textbook, 332-41.

1. Why did Vergil link the glory of Augustan Rome with the lineage of defeated Troy? How does he describe Rome’s glory in comparison to other nations? What is Rome’s role in the world?
2. How does Vergil describe the gods? Do they seem any different from the gods of the Iliad? from Cicero’s God?
3. One of the main themes of the Aeneid is Aeneas’ obedience to his destiny. Compare Aeneas with Oedipus. How are they different in their destinies? Is one more free than the other? Can Aeneas avoid his destiny in a way Oedipus could not? Is he a victim of fate as much as Oedipus was? What would Aeneas do if he had the free choice to do so?
4. What Roman virtues does Aeneas demonstrate? Consider the following: “Aeneas is the hero of our whole civilization ... He is heroic precisely because he conquers himself—his human passions and anxieties—and renounces present happiness for a universal destiny. Only such behavior, Vergil insists, can guarantee the sort of empire that can give peace to the world.” Do you agree or disagree?

Chapter 6:

Genesis 1-2, Textbook, 352-53.

1. Why two accounts? What are the differences between the two accounts of creation (1:1-2:4a, 2:4b-25)? To what do you attribute these differences? Note the names of God and the creation of man and woman. What are their places in creation?
2. Genesis 1: Note what happens on each day of creation. Compare Day 1 with 4, 2 with 5, and 3 with 6. What do you notice? Compare this account with *the Epic of Gilgamesh*. What differences do you see in the way God/the gods are portrayed, especially in their relation to nature?
3. The present-day literal interpretation of Genesis 1 is the basis of modern Creationist attempts to refute Darwin's theory of evolution as an explanation of the creation of the world. Did the author of Genesis think in these terms—were ancient Near Eastern writers capable of distinguishing between “literal” and “symbolic” modes of thought (consider our earlier discussions of Plato and Aristotle)?

Exodus 19-20, Textbook, 355-56.

1. What view of God does Exodus 19 offer? How does Exodus 19 refer to the people of Israel? What does the covenant between God and Israel stipulate?
2. What are the specific values proposed in the Ten Commandments? How do they represent the covenant God makes with Israel? How specific are they to Israel and how universal are they?
3. It used to be common to see the Ten Commandments hanging in public schools and courthouses until the debate about the separation of church and state intensified, and they were taken down because it seemed to some people that the government was promoting religion. What do you think? given that the Judaeo-Christian traditions have contributed to American society and law (other cultures have contributed as well—our law is largely English and Roman) and the universal applicability of some of the commandments (You shall not kill, etc.), as well as the other, Israel-specific commandments, should the Ten Commandments be displayed in public buildings?

Matthew 5-7, Textbook, 358-59.

1. To whom does Jesus give these teachings? to everyone, or just to a few? Does it make a difference whether these teachings are intended for the masses or for a small group?
2. What kinds of people does Jesus call blessed? Is their reward in the present or the future? How important is life in this world?
3. What kinds of demands does Jesus make on his hearers? Are they reasonable demands within the capability of anyone to meet, or are they too difficult for any but the most holy? In Jesus' mind, what lies behind a person's actions?
4. How does Jesus refer to God? What view of God does Jesus offer? How does it compare with the views found in the Old Testament passages?
5. How do the values found in the Sermon on the Mount compare with modern values? What influence has the Sermon had on modern values? Does the modern West, which purports to be a Christian society, take the Sermon's values seriously? What would happen if it did?

I Corinthians 13, Textbook, 360

1. Paul is here contrasting spiritual gifts given by God to believers with love, Greek *agape*, which is unconditional, selfless love (nothing erotic or romantic). What are the characteristics of this love? What makes love greater than the spiritual gifts? Why is it more important than anything else?
2. What elements of Platonic philosophy do you see here? How and why did Paul, a devout Jew, use Platonic thought to convey the Christian message?

II Corinthians 11-12, Textbook, 360-61

1. What biographical material do we learn about the Apostle Paul from this passage? What trials and tribulations did he experience in his journeys? What mystical experiences did he have?
2. What impressions do you get of Paul as a person? What did he think of himself, and how did he justify his mission?
3. Compare Paul with Jesus. What differences and similarities do you see in their message and style?

John 18-20, Coursepack, 91-96

1. How does John's passion narrative present Jesus? Is Jesus a tragic victim of betrayal? What is his attitude to his arrest, trial, and sufferings? What is John saying about Jesus through this presentation?
2. What is the significance of Jesus' trial before and dialogue with Pontius Pilate? What contrasts are there between the two men?
3. What does John regard as the meaning of Jesus' crucifixion and death? Of his resurrection? What is the significance of the different resurrection appearances?

Chapter 7:

Augustine, excerpts from *Confessions*, Textbook, 366-69

1. Book VIII: Note Augustine's interior state during this experience. What two states of life is he wavering between? What terms does he use to describe the different things he feels? What is the outcome of his struggle? What role does he ascribe to God in this outcome?
2. Book IX: Note Augustine's conversation with his mother. What do they discuss? How does their conversation proceed—where do they “go” in their conversation, and how? What is heaven like? What philosophy does this sound like?
3. How does Augustine write the *Confessions*? To whom does Augustine address it? Why?

Augustine, excerpts from Book XIX of *The City of God*, Textbook, 369-74.

1. Augustine's theme in this long passage is peace, in its different forms. How does Augustine move from the discussion of peace in chapter 7 to that found in chapter 17? What kinds of peace does he talk about? Why is peace so hard to obtain? In the light of modern conflict, does his analysis of war and peace sound true?
2. Compare the peace found in the City of God with that found in the earthly city. How and why are they different? How does Augustine define true peace?
3. What elements of Platonic thought do you find here?

Justinian enters Hagia Sophia, Coursepack, 101:

1. Look at the pictures of Hagia Sophia in the textbook or on a website. Why might Justinian have taken so much pride in this work?
2. Compare this account with the following passage from the Bible: 1 Kings 8:1-21, 62-66. What parallels do you see? What do you think the author of this account intended by comparing Justinian to Solomon, and Hagia Sophia to Solomon's Temple? Note that in this account Hagia Sophia is referred to as a temple.
3. What is the significance of this story for understanding the Byzantine worldview? How did the Byzantines regard the relationship between themselves and the world of the Bible? How did emperors think of themselves?

Boethius, excerpt from *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Coursepack, 102-11:

1. How does Boethius combine elements of Christian faith with Greek philosophy? Is he more of a Christian or more of a philosopher?

2. What elements of Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy do you find in this work? How does Boethius combine them, and to what end?
3. How does his view of God compare to that of St. Augustine? His use of philosophy?

Chapter 8: Selections from the *Qur'an*, Textbook, 375-82:

1. Compare the Qur'an with the passages from the Bible at the end of chapter 6. To what kind of biblical literature is the Qur'an most similar?
2. What attributes does the Qur'an ascribe to God/Allah? How do they compare with the attributes ascribed to God in the Bible?
3. What moral and spiritual commandments does the Qur'an give to Muslims? How do they compare with biblical commandments?
4. How does the Qur'an regard Christians and Jews? What view of Moses and Jesus does the Qur'an give?

Selections from *Memories of Rabia*, Textbook, 382-83

What is the focus of Rabia's spirituality? What are her motives for loving God? What does she regard as false motives?

Selections from Rumi, *Poems and Meditations*, Textbook, 383-85

Compare Rumi's mysticism with Rabia's. In what way are they similar, and in what way do they differ? What is the point of Rumi's mysticism? What is the meaning of laziness?

Chapter 9:

Selections from Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias* and *Causae et Curae*, Textbook, 385-88:

1. *Scivias*: Would you categorize Hildegard as a mystic? Why or why not? If so, how does her mysticism compare with that of Rabia and Rumi? What kind of spiritual experiences does she have? What can she do as a result of them? What does she suffer as well? How does she interpret the visions?
2. *Causae et Curae*: How does Hildegard, a celibate nun, regard sexuality and describe sexual experience? Does she regard intercourse as solely a means of procreation? How does a man's love differ from a woman's? What does she see as the relationship between the calendar and conception? How does physiology affect a woman's temperament? her marital relationships, sexuality, and ability to conceive? What do you learn about early medieval science from this passage?

The Life of Saint Bertilla, Textbook, 392-94:

1. From what part of society did Bertilla come? Does this make any difference as far as the author's view of her holiness is concerned? How did she acquire her holiness? by her own effort or by the choice of God?
2. What virtues does this legend present? What faults?
3. What view of martyrdom does the legend present? To what degree did Bertilla achieve it? Is the view of death similar to or different from that found in the two plays?
4. Note that the latter part of the legend describes Bertilla as ruling over both men and women. Double-monasteries were common in early medieval France, and were usually ruled over by a woman.

Everyman, Textbook, 401-410:

1. Compare Everyman with Oedipus the King. What similarities and differences do you see in the dramatic style and presentation? in their outlooks on fate and freedom? What was the context in

which each of these plays was presented?

2. What view of the Christian life does Everyman present? How does it compare with the view found in the Sermon on the Mount and the letters of St. Paul?
3. What view of death is presented? How does it compare with views seen in other works and cultures?

The Song of Roland, excerpts, Textbook, 395-401

1. Compare *The Song of Roland* with the *Iliad*. What similarities and differences do you find with respect to the way warriors are described; battle; weapons and equipment; relations between friends and enemies; the role of God/the gods; narrative style. Did much change over the course of the 2000 years between these two works?
2. Stanzas 129-132 describe Roland's debate as to whether to blow his horn (the oliphant) and call Charlemagne's main body of troops back. Earlier, at the beginning of the battle, Roland had debated the same question and decided not to. Why does he now decide to do so, and what are the heroic considerations?
3. What is the importance of the relics in Roland's sword (stanza 173)? What is the relation between religion and being a warrior?
4. What view of Islam does the *Song of Roland* present? How accurate is it, based on what you know of Islam and what we have studied of it in this course?

Chapter 10:

Saint Francis of Assisi, *The Canticle of Brother Sun*, Textbook, 410-11.

1. How does this poem compare with the other religious poetry we have examined, e.g., Job? What sorts of things does Francis praise? Why does he praise death?

Saint Thomas Aquinas, excerpts from *Summa Theologiae*, I.i.1, 9, 10, Textbook, 411-13:

1. Compare Thomas' approach to theology with that of Francis. How does poetry differ from the disputed question as ways of discussing religious and philosophical truths? How are the two ways similar? What are the advantages and disadvantages of each? Which do you prefer, and why?
2. Compare the methodology of the *Summa* with the biblical literature we studied. The disputed question was a new form of examining religious and philosophical teaching in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, compared to poetry, which is a very ancient form, as we have seen. What does its development say about the state of religious thought and expression in European society at that time, compared to the state of religious thought and expression in biblical times? that is, can you imagine Jesus or Paul using a disputed question? Why or why not? (We should note that Thomas Aquinas, like Jesus and Paul, was a capable preacher.)
3. How does Thomas organize each question? Can you tell how he will resolve the question by the way in which he presents the different arguments?
4. What is Thomas' attitude to reason? How does he apply it to revelation? Do reason and revelation conflict with each other? Note Thomas' reply in article 9. Where and how do human beings acquire their knowledge? What ancient philosopher taught the same thing? (Note: Dionysius refers to Pseudo-Dionysius, the philosopher mentioned on 334-335.)
5. What is Thomas' approach to the study of the Scripture? Why all these different senses of Scripture? What is the importance of each?

Dante Alighieri, excerpts from *The Divine Comedy*, Textbook, 413-19, 421-23; 431-35.

1. Be sure to use the introductions to and the notes at the end of each canto to find explanatory notes.

2. Compare *The Divine Comedy* with Vergil's *Aeneid*, upon which the former is based. Especially compare it with Book 6 of the *Aeneid*, in which Aeneas visits the underworld? Book 6 became the model for the *Comedy*. What influences do you see? In what ways are Aeneas and Dante similar? In what ways are they different? In what ways are the two poems similar and different?
3. In what ways does the *Comedy* synthesize the religious and secular thought of the medieval world?
4. How does the *Comedy* compare with the other religious poetry we have read? How does it compare with the other "quest" literature (*Gilgamesh*, etc.)?