

hand and take also of the tree of life and live for ever. And the Lord God sent him out. . . ."¹

For those who see the Genesis story as simply one of many myths, constructed on the same general principle, certain questions arise. Man could attain divinity only by eating of the fruit of the second tree: the Tree of Immortality. Why, then, did the serpent tempt Adam to eat of the Tree of Knowledge which would only give him wisdom? If the serpent prefigured the spirit of evil, and therefore opposed man's attaining immortality, he must have "prevented" man from going to the Tree of Life. The serpent was the obstacle in man's search for the source of immortality, for the Tree of Life. This interpretation will be confirmed by other traditions we shall come to later. But another explanation is offered by some of the serpent's tempting: he wanted to gain immortality for himself (as, in some myths, he succeeded in doing), and he needed to discover the Tree of Life, hidden among all the other trees of Paradise, so that he might be the first to eat of its fruit; that is why he urged Adam to "know good and evil"; Adam, with his knowledge, would have revealed to him where the Tree of Life was.

107. THE GUARDIANS OF THE TREE OF LIFE

The pattern: primeval man (or hero) in search of immortality, Tree of Life, and serpent or monster guarding the tree (or preventing man by its trickery from eating of it), appears in other traditions as well. What these things (man, tree and serpent) mean together is clear enough: immortality is hard of attainment; it is contained in a Tree of Life (or Fountain of Life), placed in some inaccessible spot (at the end of the earth, at the bottom of the sea, in the land of darkness, on top of a very high hill, or in a "centre"); a monster (or serpent) guards the tree and the man who succeeds, after a great many efforts, in approaching it, must fight the monster and vanquish it, if he is to take hold of the fruits of immortality.

The combat with the monster seems, from all one can see, to have had the quality of an initiation; man must "prove himself", become a "hero", to have the right to possess immortality. Anyone who cannot defeat the dragon or the

¹ Gen. iii. 22-3.

serpent can have no access to the Tree of Life, can never attain immortality. The hero's struggle with the monster is not always a bodily one. Adam was defeated by the serpent without any struggle in the heroic sense (as was the case with Heracles, for instance); he was defeated by the serpent's trick in persuading him to try and become like God, to violate the divine order, and thus condemn himself to death. In the Bible text, of course, the serpent is not presented as the "protector" of the Tree of Life, but from the results of its temptation, we may well think of him as such.

The Babylonian hero, Gilgamesh, fared no better. He too sought to attain immortality; what happens is that he is struck with sadness by the death of his friend Enkidu and laments: "Must I too lie down one day like him, and never more awake?"¹ He knows there is only one man in the world who can help him—the sage Ut-Napishtim, who escaped the deluge, and whom the gods have granted life immortal—and to his dwelling, which stands somewhere at "the mouth of the rivers", Gilgamesh accordingly turns his steps. The way is long, laborious, fraught with obstacles like every road to a "centre", to Paradise or to a source of immortality. Ut-Napishtim lives on an island surrounded by the waters of death, which the hero, in spite of everything, manages to cross. It is fitting that Gilgamesh should stand powerless before some of the trials to which Ut-Napishtim submits him; he does not, for instance, succeed in watching for six days and nights running. His fate is determined beforehand; he will not attain to eternal life, he cannot become like the gods, for he has none of their qualities.

However, at the instance of his wife, Ut-Napishtim reveals to Gilgamesh the existence of a "thorny" herb (that is a herb hard of access) at the bottom of the sea, which, though it will not confer immortality, will indefinitely prolong the youth and life of whoever eats of it. Gilgamesh fastens stones to his feet and goes down to search the bottom of the sea. Having found the herb, he pulls a sprig from it, then unfastens the stones, and rises again to the surface. On the road to Uruk, he stops to drink at a spring; drawn by the scent of the plant,

¹ Tablet VIII; the passage is quoted by Virolleaud, "Le Voyage de Gilgamesh au Paradis", *RHR*, 1930, vol. ci, p. 204.