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*From Gilgamesh to Fatwas:  
Reading the Ideology  
of al-Qaida as Epic*

**T**HE GRITTY SMOKE HAD HARDLY BEGUN TO CLEAR from around the ruins of the World Trade Center when al-Qaida issued a series of statements claiming responsibility and appealing to other Muslims to join its jihad against the West. In one especially striking phrase, al-Qaida spokesman Sulaiman abu Ghaith declared, “The Americans should know that the storm of plane attacks will not abate, with God’s permission. There are thousands of the Islamic nation’s youths who are eager to die, just as the Americans are eager to live.”<sup>1</sup>

“Youths who are eager to die.” To a western audience the words must seem an odd rhetorical flourish. But al-Qaida had multiple audiences, and to anyone who was Muslim or who had studied Islamic history, the words were as recognizable as they were significant. They drew almost verbatim on the challenge of an early Islamic military commander, Khalid ibn al-Walid, as he boldly confronted a much larger Persian host in 634 C.E. And so with most of al-Qaida<sup>2</sup> and al-Qaida-related franchises: there is nothing haphazard or casual about their message. Ranging across centuries of Islamic history and writings, and in carefully styled prose, the radicals spread their themes of war and sacrifice. In effect, Osama and other radicals are simply retelling a story, a narrative almost 1400 years old. Homers of the blogosphere, the Islamists are refashioning, for their contemporary followers, an historical epic for a new millennium.

## A matter of definition

At first, the comparison of al-Qaida fatwas to classic epic must seem a stretch.<sup>3</sup> And indeed, al-Qaida's pronouncements lack certain literary conventions we typically associate with epic narrative. For instance, the statements do not generally begin *in media res*. Nor are the pronouncements poetry. But the statements are not casual in any sense, nor are they written and delivered in less formal, regional dialects. Rather, they are conscientious in their prose, using the more formal *fusha*, both because that will reach a greater number of educated Arabs and because it reflects the gravity of the message. Moreover, if we consider—instead of formal distinctions of literary style—various epic themes and epic functions, we discover al-Qaida's fatwas carry striking resemblance to the essential features of literary epics from the ancient Babylonian *Gilgamesh*, forward. As I will seek to show, al-Qaida messages bear what one writer has termed the “spirit of epic.”<sup>4</sup>

The definition of epic I will offer here, seeking to focus on content and function rather than formal distinctions, is this:

In content, epic is an extended narrative in elevated language about a hero on a difficult journey, death ever imminent, to accomplish some worthwhile goal. These difficulties may be strictly physical, but they often involve conflict with an enemy, whether mortal or supernatural. In function, the hero's journey identifies a group with its differentiating and critical cultural values, and—explicitly or implicitly—identifies “the other.” In doing this, the epic situates the individual in a distinct community, provides a cognitive roadmap by which to live, and motivates the individual to uphold the group's values and security in the face of various difficulties and even death.<sup>5</sup>

Al-Qaida tells such a story. In simplest terms, it is the narrative of the prophet Muhammad seeking to live a life *fee sabeel Allah*, in the path of God. Along the way he must face a variety of enemies: hostile Makkans, warring desert tribes, unfaithful followers, and—especially this—widespread *jabiliyyah*, or spiritual ignorance of God's plan. Compelled to resort repeatedly to battle, Muhammad faces death fearlessly. He offers himself in *islam*, complete submission, to the will of Allah. Having lived such a life, Muhammad then becomes the *batil*, a hero, whose life is worthy of emulation by the people of the *umma*, the Islamic nation. To this point, the message is unexceptional, and Muslims worldwide can subscribe to it. But what this essay will seek to do is explore specific ways al-Qaida has, in its morally perverse way, glossed that message, and offered a wartime epic for its “youths who are eager to die.”

### The new mujtahids and the al-Qaida epic

The first step in reading al-Qaida's *fatwas*<sup>6</sup> as epic is seeing the way Osama and others have crafted their message. In both traditional and secondary epics, the role of "author" is more that of skillful redactor who draws on historical and legendary materials to fashion his narrative. Thus, for instance, Homer drew on oral mythologies and legends about the historical Troy to produce his *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The anonymous but presumably Christian writer of *Beowulf* reworked older Anglo-Saxon traditions, employed historical figures (e.g. King Hygelac), and developed non-historical figures who embodied the traditional virtues (Beowulf) to produce his Old English masterpiece.

Al-Qaida has done the same according to current exigencies. As "authors" who rework traditional materials, they see themselves as *mujtahids*, those who give independent legal interpretations.<sup>7</sup> Their messages are replete with Quranic verses, as one would expect, but they also draw heavily on the *sunna* (examples from the life of Muhammad) and from Islamic history, especially those aspects that treat heroic figures in battle. Additionally, one finds in al-Qaida's messages frequent reference to older Islamic theologians who have developed the doctrine of jihad, most prominently ibn Taymiyah and Sayyid Qutb. Ibn Taymiyah (d. 1328 C.E.) is significant, for he developed the doctrine that justified revolt against rulers who claim to be Muslim but who fail to implement Islamic law. And Qutb, whom the Egyptian government hanged for treason in 1966, wrote extensively about the perennial, global warfare between faith and unbelief, appealing to a "vanguard" to take up jihad against Islam's enemies.

Working with this range of materials, al-Qaida produces its fatwas. Rather than seeking to produce something novel, al-Qaida seeks to adapt older materials for a contemporary audience, as do other epic storytellers. And the enterprise is intentional and explicit, not incidental. For instance, in his 1996 "Declaration of War against the Americans Occupying the Land of the Two Holy Places," Osama writes of a global war that the United States has waged against Muslims.<sup>8</sup> He then writes of the inspiration Muslims can derive from the past in waging a counteroffensive: "They [should] consider the Seerah of their forefathers as a source and an example for re-establishing the greatness of this Ummah and to raise the word of Allah again." Later, addressing Muslim women, Osama admonishes them to "adopt the Seerah" of pious women in early Islam, looking to them as examples of "courage, sacrifice and generosity in the cause of the supremacy of Allah's religion." *Seerah* can mean simply "biography," but it also can indicate, as it does here, "heroic epic," "heroic deeds," or "warlike episodes."<sup>9</sup> Here, as elsewhere, Osama does not create ex nihilo. Rather, like Homer or Virgil or other epicists, he re-narrates traditional

materials for a contemporary audience as he summons them to war. And this he does, taking full advantage of the internet to spread an epic of religious violence.

### Values of the community

Traditionally, epics have borne a critical didactic task, articulating in literary form the essential values a community wants to promote among its members and by which it identifies itself. It is through the actions of a hero and his companions that the epic writer most clearly presents those values, especially as they set out on some arduous journey. Thus *Gilgamesh* reflects boldness and tireless perseverance as he travels to find Uta-napishti the Distant, and loyalty as he joins hands with his friend Enkidu to do so. The Indian hero Rama embodies filial piety, even though betrayed by his jealous stepmother, believing “there could be no word higher than that of a father; no conduct other than obedience to it” (64). Moreover, he is the epitome of selfless bravery as he endures a rigorous exile and ultimately travels to the island of Lanka to battle the evil Ravana, a supernatural being who would try to subvert “all the moral and spiritual values” (85). Similarly Beowulf. The Anglo Saxon hero leaves his homeland and travels to aid Hrothgar against Grendel, and thus “purge all evil” from Herat (l. 432). Then, in his last desperate battle as the aging king faces a dragon, the author puts forward one of Beowulf’s young companions to illustrate yet again the Anglo-Saxon virtue of bravery and uncompromising loyalty to one’s leader: “[W]hen Beowulf needed him most / Wiglaf showed his courage, his strength / and skill, and the boldness he was born with. Ignoring / the dragon’s head, he helped his lord” (ll. 2694-97).

Odysseus is the paragon of intelligence and perseverance through years of suffering, unlike most of his contemporaries who “are always blaming the gods / for their troubles, when their own witlessness (*atasthalia*: recklessness, a total disregard for order and propriety) / causes them more than they were destined for!” (I, ll. 37-39). Throughout Odysseus’s long journey, Homer repeatedly underscores the critical importance of *xenia*, hospitality to strangers. King Alcinous of the Phaeacians extends it, Polyphemus the Cyclops refuses it, and Penelope’s suitors have the hubris to consume it. Aeneas, of course, is the paragon of *pietas*. Virgil pictures it most dramatically when the Trojan hero leaves the burning Troy with his father Anchises on his shoulders, carrying the *penatēs*, the household gods. And he is pre-eminently the man of duty. “And though [Aeneas] sighed his heart out, shaken still / with love of [Dido], yet [he] took the course heaven gave him” (IV, ll. 549-50).

The epic writers of al-Qaida have undertaken precisely the same task, using their fatwas to reinforce the values of the community. As with the earlier epics, the trope of a journey figures prominently. The Quranic expression *fee sabeel Allah*, in the path of God,<sup>10</sup> recurs frequently in the contemporary writings. Most often

it is in the context of a call to battle, one in which believers are summoned to defend community values against a hostile “other” that threatens the community. Appealing to Muhammad’s own example and the examples of virtuous believers, al-Qaida leaders from Osama to Zarqawi have issued their fatwas. “This is a call to all the Sunnis in Iraq,” Zarqawi declared in one of his last statements before his death in Baquba.<sup>11</sup> “Awaken from your slumber, and arise from your apathy.... The wheels of war to annihilate [us] have not and will not halt.... If you do not join the mujahideen to defend your religion and honor, by Allah, sorrow and regret will be your lot, but only after all is lost.” Moreover, Zarqawi tells his audience, the “virtuous sisters” of Tal Afar have been violated by the enemy in this total war (“Their wombs [are] filled with the sperm of the crusaders”). It is time, therefore, for religious leaders to defend their religion, honor, zeal, and manliness.

Zarqawi’s appeal is typical, invoking as it does the theme of war to *defend* values. Consistently in al-Qaida fatwas, Muslims are summoned to battle because they are under attack. Virtually never does al-Qaida describe its actions as pre-emptive and unprovoked. Thus, in his 1996 “Epistle,” Osama describes the Arabian peninsula as having been defiled by an occupying force. It is incumbent on Muslims to restore righteousness, justice, and unity under God’s law. In the jointly signed 1998 fatwa,<sup>12</sup> the Americans are said to have declared war on God, Muhammad, and the Islamic nation. Muslims, therefore, must take the path of jihad to cleanse the peninsula, establish justice, and protect women and children. Osama’s October 2001 declaration<sup>13</sup> asserts al-Qaida actions have been taken on behalf of the innocent children of Iraq and Palestine. And in particularly forceful language, the Saudi commander of an al-Qaida cell gave an interview describing the operation in May 2004 that killed twenty-two people living in a western housing compound.<sup>14</sup> The housing area had become “the center of the greatest licentiousness and prostitution.” Thus, Fawwaz bin Muhammad declared, his mujahideen fought past the Saudi guards who were “idoltrous dogs” and were then able to “purge Muhammad’s land of many Christians and polytheists.”

In these epic battles, the believers are enjoined to ritually cleanse themselves, ask God’s forgiveness, and then follow the prophet and his early companions both in their boldness and means of warfare. So the injunctions of Muhammad Atta’s letter<sup>15</sup> to the 9/11 hijackers: “Say your prayers with a group”; “Pull your clothes tightly about you, for this is the way of the pious ancestors.... They pulled their clothes tightly about them before a battle”; “Be courageous as our forefathers did when they came to the battle”; “Remember the saying of the prophet: ‘O God, revealer of the book... defeat them and make us victorious.’” And at the end, Atta exhorts, “When the zero hour comes, open your chest and welcome death in the cause of God.” Why attack the World Trade Center and embrace death in the cause of God, *fee sabeel Allah*? The answer is an epic answer, and it invites comparison. For

instance, in the Indian classic *The Ramayana*, we read that “Rama’s whole purpose of incarnation was ultimately to destroy Ravana, the chief of the asuras [demons], abolish fear from the hearts of men and gods, and establish peace, gentleness, and justice in the world” (67). In its own perverse moral calculus, al-Qaida asserts the same. The call for jihad is to battle “Satan’s U.S. troops and the devil’s supporters allying with them.” This, the co-signers of the 1998 fatwa declare, is “in accordance with the words of almighty God: ‘Fight the pagans... until there is no more tumult or oppression, and there prevail justice and faith in God.’”

### **The community and ‘the other’**

As epic asserts the values of a community, it simultaneously delineates the community itself. That, in turn, may serve to point out its enemies, sometimes construed as the threatening “other.” In *Gilgamesh*, “community” is a thin concept, simply the Sumerian city-state of Uruk. Earthly enemies are implied, in that *Gilgamesh*’s great achievement is the building of its defensive wall. But the primary enemies are superhuman: Humbaba, who guards the Forest of Cedar; and the city’s special deity, Ishtar—an enemy, at least, when her overtures of sex and love are spurned. In *The Ramayana*, “community” is thicker, and it is that more complex social network of people who live under a king and whose lives are ordered by religious principles. Like *Gilgamesh*, the enemies are primarily superhuman: the various asuras, the demoness Thataka, the demoness Soorpanaka, and, especially, Ravana, chief rival of Rama. (The narrative, however, does identify some enemies within the royal household: e.g., Queen Kaikeyi and her servant Kooni.)

Later epics make a sharper distinction concerning a given community, and the threats it faces take on more the coloration of the other. In turning to Homer, superhuman enemies abound, from that of the temptress variety (e.g., Calypso, Circe), to the angry and bereaved (Poseidon). But there are human enemies, as well: the Trojans, certainly, but more significantly the suitors whom Odysseus must confront at journey’s end. Yet it is through Odysseus’s encounter with the Cyclops Polyphemus that Homer subtly unfolds his ideas about the community of the Greeks. The island on which Polyphemus and the other Cyclopes live is fertile, but they do not till it. They do not sail and hence have no commerce. More especially, “they have no assemblies or laws but live / in high mountain caves, ruling their own / children and wives and ignoring each other” (IX, ll. 110-12). Thus, Homer indicates that law (here, *themis*, law as established by custom) and deliberation in the council (the *boulē*) demarcates the “community” of the Greeks. The “other” lacks those things. They lead almost bestial lives and “ignore each other” (literally, “do not speak to one another”), an epic idea developed more fully several centuries later in Aristotle’s *Politics*.

In turning to *Beowulf*, one may construe its community in several ways. In its epic setting (as opposed to its place of historical composition in England), the larger community is that of the Danes and Geats, peoples loosely related by old Germanic roots and mores. Alternatively, one may see the community as tribal, a king and his warriors bound together in the reciprocity of leadership, loyalty, and gift-giving. Most importantly, the community is symbolized by the mead hall. More than simply a place of feasting, *Beowulf's* Herot is that place where the warrior community re-narrates its most important values, both to recall the noble past and to prepare for the next battle. The enemies of this community are several fold, ranging from the human (Frisians and Franks) to the superhuman, Grendel and his mother.

Community in *The Aeneid* is especially interesting, for Virgil's epic serves *raison d'état* and enjoys Augustus' support as a result. In it, Virgil lays out a foundation myth that moves beyond mere tribe and looks at an evolved national character. It is Anchises, the epic hero's father, who tells the community myth most powerfully:

Others will cast more tenderly in bronze  
Their breathing figures, I can well believe,  
And bring more lifelike portraits out of marble;  
Argue more eloquently, use the pointer  
To trace the paths of heaven accurately  
And accurately foretell the rising stars.  
Roman, remember by your strength to rule  
Earth's peoples—for your arts are to be these:  
To pacify, to impose the rule of law,  
To spare the conquered, battle down the proud. (VI, ll. 1145-54)

The enemies this new Rome faces are several: petulant gods, a love interest, and—on one level—Turnus and the Italians. The larger enemy, however, is anything that would oppose the establishment of the new Rome itself (read, the Augustan imperium) and its growth and triumph.

Similarly, al-Qaida sets forth its vision of a community and its enemies. It is a vision that is categorical and uncompromising, and it draws on classical Islamic doctrine developed during the Abbasid caliphate (750-1258 C.E.).<sup>16</sup> This older doctrine described two opposing camps: “the house of Islam” and “the house of war.” Perennial enmity exists between them, it held, and ultimately Islam will triumph. In the meantime, there may be temporary truces. Although categorical, Islam did recognize some groups as occupying a sort of middle ground, the Quranic concept of the “people of the book.” These were monotheistic groups that recognized the

sovereignty of Islam, while retaining their distinctive communities. Later, the Ottomans would continue the same approach under the so-called millet system.

It is this idea that modern fundamentalists have revived and which Osama and others have sought to make reality. Osama appealed to this division in the weeks after 9/11. "These events have divided the whole world into two camps, the camp of the faithful and the camp of the infidels. May God shield us and you [i.e., the Muslims] from them."<sup>7</sup> Often, other terms are substituted. For instance, the Quranic term *ummah*, nation, is frequently used for the house of Islam; and expressions like "infidels," "crusaders," or even "the West" will take the place of house of war. Indeed, there is considerable development of "the other" when fundamentalists describe their enemies, one that has a three-fold structure. At the head of the list of enemies of Islam is what Osama and others term the "main *kufri*," using the technical Islamic term for "unbelief." Most often, it is the United States that is so identified. Assisting the main *kufri* are Arab "agents," apostatizing Muslims who cooperate with the United States. Osama regularly lumps heads of state in the Gulf countries, as well as of Egypt and Pakistan, into this category. Finally, there is the "Zionist entity," which the fundamentalists view as a beachhead that the United States has established in the heart of the Arab / Muslim world for its own nefarious purposes.

Moreover, these categories sometimes get blended. Israel, for instance, is frequently accused of having formed a "Crusader-Zionist alliance" with the West. Great Britain and the United States have formed "armies of unbelief." Because of his cooperation in the war on terror, President Musharrif of Pakistan is "the traitor of Muslims." And Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is a "layman" who "bartered away the true religion." The interim prime minister of Iraq, Ibrahim al-Ja'fari, was the "servant of the cross" who declared war on his Muslim co-religionists.<sup>18</sup> And so on, in seemingly endless permutations.

It is worth noting that in all these descriptions, al-Qaida never includes the category, "people of the book." Instead, the fundamentalists have simply dispensed with all nuance in their categorical narrative. For them, the world neatly divides into true Muslims and all others. It is a worldview both reductive and dehumanizing, one in which all non-Muslims and lapsed Muslims are enemies who may be freely attacked, for they threaten the community. The account (cited above) given by the al-Qaida leader who commanded the "Khobar Operation" in May 2004 captures this. No longer are Saudis in the security forces Muslim. They are dogs, servants of the *tawaghit*, false gods. Westerners are infidels and part of an occupying force given over to debauchery. So, it is no surprise to read, "We found a Swedish infidel. Brother Nimr cut off his head." Or, "We found Filipino Christians. We cut their throats and dedicated them to... the mujahideen in the Philippines." But the al-Qaida commander doesn't dwell on the details of the twenty two "infidels" who

were killed. Instead, in his narration for a sympathetic interviewer, he describes what has already become for him and his comrades the “Battle of Khobar,” part of a larger “war of Islam.” Its aim, he says, was to “purge the land of Muhammad” and restore order under God. It was a battle, like the early battles of Islam, in which any Muslim combatant who was killed would become a martyr. And so for Brother Nimr, the one warrior who died. He had now become a *batil*, a hero, whose epic deeds for the community would be retold and whom others could emulate.

Ultimately, we cannot begin to understand the “Battle of Khobar,” at least as the fundamentalists do, until we see it as part of the larger battle of Islam. And that is a matter of seeing that it is the community of Islam—the all-important *ummah*—and its constitutive law, the *shari‘a*, which are at stake. The locus classicus for this reading is the Egyptian fundamentalist Sayyid Qutb. Writing in the chapter “The Universal Law” in his *Milestones*,<sup>19</sup> Qutb holds,

The Shari‘ah which God has given to [humanity] to organize his life is also a universal law....[O]bedience to the Shari‘ah of God is necessary for the sake of this harmony [with God and among people], even more necessary than the establishment of the Islamic belief, as no individual or group of individuals can be truly Muslim until they wholly submit to God alone in the manner taught by the Messenger of God.

Put another way, the gravest threat to the *ummah* is the loss of the *shari‘a*, by which it has its community identity. When the law is removed, the community descends into chaos. That indeed is the very way in which Qutb opens *Milestones*. “The Muslim community (*ummah*) with these characteristics vanished (*inqata‘a*) at the moment the laws of God became suspended (*inqitaa‘*)<sup>20</sup> on earth.” No *shari‘a*, no community. And his solution? Qutb writes that a “vanguard,” a cadre of committed Muslims must initiate a revival of Islam, “marching through the vast ocean of *jahiliyya*.” Only then can the *shari‘a* be implemented and the *ummah* restored.

Precisely thirty years after the Egyptian government hanged Qutb, Osama applied the Islamist’s analysis. In his 1996 Epistle, Osama wrote that the Saudi regime had torn off its legitimacy by suspending the *shari‘a* and allowing in Crusader-Zionist forces. That led to “severe oppression, suffering, excessive iniquity, humiliation, and poverty.” Any action that genuine Muslims undertook in retaliation, to include terror, would be a “legitimate and morally demanded duty.” It is little wonder, then, that having been shaped by such a narrative of violence, Osama would aver three weeks after September 11th,

Our Islamic nation has been tasting humiliation and disgrace... for more [than] 80 years, its sons killed and their blood spilled, its sanctities desecrated. God has blessed a group of vanguard Muslims, the forefront of Islam, to destroy America. May God bless them and allot them a supreme place in heaven.<sup>21</sup>

The epic struggle to re-establish the ummah had begun, led by Qutb's called-for vanguard. Like heroes of old, these young men would, in turn, become the *batils* of another generation, exemplars of community values.

### **An Army Whose Men Who Love Death**

There is a final point at which the fatwas of al-Qaida both converge and diverge from classic epic narratives: the issue of death. Death is present in all of them, traditional epics and epic fatwas alike. Rama loses his father Dasaratha, as does Aeneas his father Anchises. Odysseus suffers the loss of his fellow sailors, and *Gilgamesh* must watch his companion Enkidu die. Beowulf loses fellow warriors and is himself slain in combat with the dragon. Of the epic heroes, only Rama will not die, for he is the avatar of Vishnu. The rest, even if bearing divine blood as Aeneas and *Gilgamesh* do, must face their own mortality. For epic, death is the inescapable theme. As every culture faces its reality, so every culture seeks to ameliorate its fear through narrative.

And this is the point at which war and literature often connect. If war calls young men and women to make the "ultimate sacrifice," epic narrative can supply the ultimate rationale. *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, Horace said; sweet and honorable it is to die for one's country. Epic's role has been to say why that is so. A nation summons its sons to war because an enemy threatens what is most dear. An epic narrative then describes why what is considered dear *must* be considered dear. It supplies, as well, the discourse of war. This meta-narrative helps make an enemy categorically different, the anti-nation that malevolently advances against one's own. In a word, epic makes death significant, for it shows that the one who dies in battle has done something to preserve a community and its most sacred values. Among the Danes, one who has died well (i.e., in bold sacrifice for his fellows) will be honored by poet's song in the mead hall. Similarly among the Greeks: the *rhapsode* will sing his deeds. And al-Qaida's *mujahid* who dies in battle with the forces of unbelief will become known as a *shahheed*, one who has been witness to the supremacy of Islam.

Yet the pall of death's inevitability remains. "Your strength, your power / are yours for how many years? Soon / you'll return them where they came from, sickness or a sword's edge / will end them.... It will come, death/comes faster than

you think. No one can flee it” (1761-64, 67-68). The words are those of Hrothgar to Beowulf, but they would resonate with any of the other epics. Most especially that is true in the very earliest epic, that of *Gilgamesh*. Before his death, Gilgamesh’s friend Enkidu dreams of a fearful man who

[bound] my arms like the wings of a bird,  
to lead me captive to the house of darkness, seat of Irkalla,  
to the house which none who enters ever leaves,  
on the path that allows no journey back,  
to the house whose residents are deprived of light  
where soil is their sustenance, clay their food,  
...  
In the house of dust I entered. (VII, ll. 183-88, 193)

This report of death prompts the critical movement of the epic. Gilgamesh sets out on the central quest—that of finding a solution to the angst of death—and undertakes his greatest battle, that with fear:

For his friend Enkidu *Gilgamesh*  
did bitterly weep as he wandered the wild;  
“I shall die, and shall I not then be as Enkidu?  
Sorrow has entered my heart!  
I am afraid of death, so I wander the wild,|to find Uta-  
Napishti, son of Ubar-Tutu” (IX, ll. 1-6)

Gilgamesh fails, of course. He finds the great survivor of the flood, but he cannot gain immortality. He returns to Uruk where he realizes that he must acquiesce in the knowledge that the city wall he has built will endure and he will not, a wall that will be a kind of narrative in stone that will memorialize his name. The power of *Gilgamesh* is that it poses a question all succeeding epics, whether aware of the Sumerian story or not, would attempt to answer.

In a kind of historical irony, Islam gives its own response. In 634 C.E., Khalid ibn al-Walid, the Muslim Arab general whom Muhammad had dubbed “the sword of Allah,” advanced on the Persian controlled area of Mada’in. Located about 20 miles outside present-day Baghdad, Khalid realized the strategic importance of the route. There he sent a message to the vastly more numerous but enervated Persians. “In the name of God, the merciful, the compassionate. From Khalid bin al-Walid, to the kings of Persia,” he began, using formulaic language. Khalid announced his terms. Either the Persians could surrender, receive leniency, and allow the army to pass through, or the Muslims would march on them. In that case, Khalid warned,

the Persians would fall into “the hands of a people who love death just as you love life.”<sup>22</sup> Within three years, not just the Persian Empire but the Byzantine as well, would collapse before the advance of an army whose men loved death. It was a victory for the Muslims of epic proportions.

In 1996, almost 1400 years later, the sword of Allah for a new millennium delivered a fatwa which called Muslims to a battle for Islam. In his “Epistle,” Osama had a special challenge for US Secretary of Defense William Perry. In the challenge he described young Muslim warriors who had inherited the values of dignity, courage, generosity, and sacrifice from their ancestors. And this: “I say to you, William, that these youths love death as you love life.” So al-Qaida’s Sulaiman abu Ghaith was not being merely rhetorical in October 2001 when he boasted, “The Americans should know that the storm of plane attacks will not abate, with God’s permission. There are thousands of the Islamic nation’s youths who are eager to die, just as the Americans are eager to live.” He was, rather, offering radical Islam’s epic answer to a traditional epic question. Death is not something to fear or to avoid. Death is something to love and embrace. And especially is that true in confronting one’s enemies.

### **The Homers of the blogosphere**

Perhaps it is better not to call Osama a new “sword of Allah.” It is really better to see him as a kind of Homer. He has taken older materials, most of them written but many with a long oral tradition that precedes their recording, and refashioned them into a narrative for a contemporary audience. The materials tell of a journey that entails suffering and death, and the heroes who take that journey with boldness. They tell also of a community under siege, a community whose values are threatened. In this contemporary refashioning, the narrative summons its youth to defend community values, even if it means death. Today the story has spread globally, for Osama and his fellow epicists have turned to the internet to narrate it.

If we in the West would understand the real meaning of September 11th and the nature of the threat we daily face, we must read the story. And it awaits us, this narrative of religiously-inspired violence, there in the blogosphere. It could be the most important epic we will read, and it is only a log-in away.

### **Notes**

1. “In Full: Al-Qaeda Statement.” BBC On-line, 10 October 2001.

2. I will use "al-Qaida" as a kind of metonymy to indicate not only core leadership figures in the organization like Osama bin Ladin and Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri, but also leaders in affiliated groups and franchises such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his organization "Al-Qaida in the Land of the Two Rivers [i.e., Iraq]." Jessica Stern's "The Protean Enemy," *Foreign Affairs*, (July-August 2003): 27-40, gives an idea of the range and diversity of the groups. What is remarkable, however, is the degree to which the various writings converge in their central tenets.
3. A standard definition, such as that in *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, emphasizes that epic is "long, exalted narrative *poem*, usually on a serious subject" (emphasis added).
4. I am indebted to British scholar E.M.W. Tillyard, both for the phrase and illuminating discussion. Tillyard writes, "There is warrant enough for refusing to identify epic with the heroic poem and for seeking its differentia in matters other than nominal and formal." *The English Epic and its Background* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1976), 5.
5. In deriving this definition, I have considered a number of epics in a general way. But I have carefully re-evaluated and will make explicit comparison to five. They are the Babylonian story of *Gilgamesh*; the Indian classic, *The Ramayana*; Homer's *Odyssey*; Virgil's *Aeneid*; and the Anglo-Saxon work, *Beowulf*. I have chosen them for their value in deriving an inductive, trans-temporal, cross-cultural definition, spanning as they do almost 3,000 years and cultures as different as Sumerian / Babylonian, Indian, and Anglo-Saxon. I have used the Andrew George translation of *Gilgamesh* (New York: Penguin, 2000); the R.K. Narayan prose version of *The Ramayana* (New York: Penguin, 1972); the Stanley Lombardo translation of *The Odyssey* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2000); the Robert Fitzgerald translation of *The Aeneid* (New York: Vantage, 1983); and the Burton Raffel translation of *Beowulf* (New York: Mentor, 1963).
6. Strictly speaking, a "fatwa" is a legal opinion in Islam, delivered by someone who has had formal training in Islamic jurisprudence. I will use the term in a broader sense to describe religious pronouncements. In many cases, al-Qaida leaders are laypeople who lack formal religious training. But "fatwa" is their word of choice for their pronouncements, to include one of the most significant by al-Qaida: the 1998 "Jihad against Jews and Crusaders."
7. Traditionally, the mujtahid was thoroughly trained in Islamic law. In offering his independent decision on some theological or legal matter, he relied on the four *usul*, or fundamentals: the Quran, the *sunna*, *qiyas* (analogy), and *ijma* (consensus of other scholars). What marks out these new mujtahids, advocating violence as they do, is that many lack formal legal training, as note six above indicates. They are often well educated otherwise, however, and they make extensive use of the internet.
8. The text may be found at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn?pagename=article&n ode=&contentId=A4342-2001Sep21>
9. Hans Wehr, *A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, s.v. "sira"
10. The expression may sometimes be glossed, "in the cause of God," but the sense of a road or path—the path that God has approved—always underlies the expression.
11. The text is found at <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=subjects&Area=jihad&ID=SP98705>
12. The text is available at <http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm>

13. The text is in "The Sword Fell," *NYT*, 8 Oct 01.
14. The text is available at <http://memri.org/bin/articles.cgi?Page=subjects&Area=jihad&ID=SP73104>
15. The text is available at <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/network/personal/instructions.html>
16. An older but still useful exposition of the classical doctrine is *Majid Khadduri, War and Peace in the Law of Islam* (Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1955), passim. For a discussion of the origins and nuances of jihad, which was a part, see Jerry M. Long, "Jihad," in *The Encyclopedia of Religious Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 2003).
17. "The Sword Fell."
18. Examples abound, but an al-Qaida statement that contains most of these and a number of others is that of Zawahiri after the London bombings. See "Text of al-Zawahiri Statement," BBC on-line, 4 Aug 05. The comment about al-Ja'fari is that of the late Zarqawi in his 16 Sept 05 statement cited above. The 1996 Ladenese Epistle is also a rich trove of metaphors about the community and its multifarious enemies.
19. The complete text is available at [http://www.youngmuslims.ca/online\\_library/books/milestones/hold/index\\_2.asp](http://www.youngmuslims.ca/online_library/books/milestones/hold/index_2.asp)
20. I have shown the Arabic verb because Qutb uses it twice, as a verb and as a verbal noun, thus underscoring that law and community are coterminal.
21. "The Sword Fell."
22. The often-told story is found at *The History of al-Tabari*, ed. Ehsan Yar-Shater, vol. XI, *The Challenge to Empires* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 44.

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