

A Comparison: Sumerian and Hebrew Views of the Afterlife

For centuries religion has been a significant and intricate part of human societies. Some would say that religion is as important to mankind as food and water. While food and water keeps us going, religion provides a reason and purpose for that life. In short, religion is man's attempt to understand the world around them and their place in it. Furthermore, religious values maintain order and a code of how mankind should behave among their peers and families. As religion is man-made, it can reveal much about a society's standards and sense of self. So, religion is both a shaper as well as a reflection of society. The ancient Sumerian and Hebrew societies both held detailed religious beliefs which shaped their different perspectives. Each society also, under the canopy of their own religion, had a belief in and perception of the afterlife. Hence, their different beliefs in that afterlife can be seen as an explanation for the ways in which they perceived and lived life.

The Sumerians pursued life with voracious thirst and believed in enjoying life to the fullest, savoring all human pleasures. On the other hand, the Hebrew religion stressed the importance of

traditions and accordance with repressive laws that pleased their God, believing that their real life was after death in heaven. The Epic of Gilgamesh and the Old Testament of the Bible provide good sources for the comparison of these different civilization's perceptions of life and death.

The Epic of Gilgamesh presents a clear picture of Sumerian religious beliefs. Similar to Greek mythology, the Sumerians believed in many imperfect gods. These gods were not flawless or

unconditionally loving but could be playful, mischievous, fickle, and even unfair in their dealings with mankind. So in temperament, these gods were human-like and not always dependable. Furthermore,

there was no promising afterlife for Sumerians. In The Epic of Gilgamesh, Enkidu, upon his death, reveals a dream of the underworld to his friend Gilgamesh. Enkidu describes the world as desolate,

endless darkness, and says, "dust is their food and clay is their meat." (29) This underworld, ruled by the goddess Irkalla, (29) is obviously not a fun place. It is in this belief that one glean an explanation for the Sumerians way of life. The Sumerians believed in living to the fullest. They took on life voraciously and

valued those heroes, like Gilgamesh and Enkidu who did the same. Gilgamesh and Enkidu were handsome and strong and battled and fought to increase their fame. The Sumerians as a society heartily

embraced all that men could enjoy: wealth, pleasure, food. They lived in the ever now, seeing this life as their greatest fulfillment. This mentality is a direct result of their perception of the afterlife.

Furthermore, after Enkidu's death, Gilgamesh realizes his own mortality and is hence unable to enjoy life's pleasure. He begins to dwell on

the unfairness and inevitability of death and is greatly distraught and depressed. So, he goes out on his search for everlasting life. He travels and suffers in search of the one mortal to achieve immortality: Utnapishtim. Upon his search he encounters Siduri, “the woman of the vine” (33), and she tells him, “When the gods created man they allotted to him death.” (34) She then tells him to enjoy life, to eat well and cherish his wife and his children as these pleasures too are part of man’s destiny. (34) Regardless of Siduri’s advise Gilgamesh continues his search for Utnapishtim undeterred. Upon finding Utnapishtim, the immortal man recites to Gilgamesh this motto on life and the lot of mankind. In line with Sumerian belief, Utnapishtim tells Gilgamesh to enjoy life while he can because for all mankind, “There is no permanence.” So, in The Epic of Gilgamesh, through the lens of religion, the reader can greater understand Sumerian society and norms.

The Hebrews religious beliefs and perspective on life greatly contrasts to that of the Sumarians. The Hebrews believe in one God who is the creator of all things. They believe that their God is

omniscient, just, all-powerful, and holy. They also believe that the world they live in is not how God intended it, but tainted by sin and hence they are able to explain death and evil. As written in the chapter of Genesis in the Bible, the Hebrews believe that shortly after creation the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, disobeyed God and damned the rest of mankind with their sin. Hence all their decendents would be imperfect, separated from God, and ultimately die. But death was not the end for the Hebrew people for God provided a second chance in a happy afterlife. So, the Hebrews focus is on abiding by the laws of their God, and hence being righteous and avoiding sin. Furthermore, they believe in many traditions

which help to purify them of their sinfulness and redeem them in the eyes of God. The Hebrews then predict that if they keep their tradition and abide by the restrictive laws of their God that they will be allowed to join him in the afterlife. As opposed to the Sumerian beliefs about the afterlife, the Hebrews believe there are two “underworlds”. One is called Heaven, a place of eternal peace and celebration, while the other, called Hell, a place of eternal pain and suffering. So, while the Sumarians try to enjoy and fulfill themselves in their human lives, the Hebrews seek to gain admittance to a better world in their afterlife. The Hebrews religion, though more repressive, is also much more promising than that of the Sumarians as there is no finality, but only a passage from one world to, hopefully, a better one.

The Hebrew and Sumerian civilization’s differing views of the afterlife is a revealing explanation to the way they each approached life and duty. In Sumerian society, as evidenced in the Epic of

Gilgamesh, the people sought to gain fame, wealth, and pleasure in this life, while in Hebrew society the people sought to secure a good and eternal afterlife by repressing their flesh urges and abiding by their purging traditions. Two opposite mentalities, each the product of their own religious beliefs dictating the way these civilization lived and in the end, died.

Works Cited

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Keywords:

comparison sumerian hebrew views afterlife centuries religion been significant intricate part human societies some would that religion important mankind food water while food water keeps going religion provides reason purpose that life short attempt understand world around them their place furthermore religious values maintain order code mankind should behave among their peers families made reveal much about society standards sense self both shaper well reflection society ancient sumerian hebrew societies both held detailed religious beliefs which shaped their different perspectives each society also under canopy belief perception afterlife hense different beliefs that afterlife seen explanation ways which they perceived lived life sumarians pursued life with voracious thirst believed enjoying fullest savoring human pleasures other hand hebrew stressed importance traditions accordance with repressive laws pleased believing real after death heaven epic gilgamesh testament bible provide good sources comparison these different civilization perceptions death epic gilgamesh presents clear picture sumerian religious beliefs similar greek mythology sumarians believed many imperfect gods these gods were flawless unconditionally loving could playful mischievous fickle even unfair dealings with mankind temperament these gods were human like always dependable furthermore there promising sumarians epic gilgamesh enkindu upon death reveals dream underworld friend enkindu describes world desolate endless darkness says dust food clay meat this underworld ruled goddess irkalla obviously place this belief glean explanation believed living fullest they took voraciously valued those heroes like enkindu same were handsome strong battled fought increase fame heartily embraced could enjoy wealth pleasure they lived ever seeing this greatest fulfillment mentality direct result perception furthermore after realizes mortality hense unable enjoy pleasure begins dwell unfairness inevitability greatly distraught depressed goes search everlasting travels suffers search mortal achieve immortality utnapishtim upon search encounters siduri woman vine tells when created allotted then tells enjoy well cherish wife children pleasures part destiny regardless siduri advise continues utnapishtim undetered upon finding utnapishtim immortal recites motto line belief tells while because there permanence through lens reader greater understand norms hebrews perspective greatly contrasts hebrews believe creator things believe omniscient just powerful holy also believe world live intended tainted hense able explain evil written chapter genesis bible hebrews shortly after creation first woman adam disobeyed damned rest decedents would imperfect separated from ultimately people provided second chance happy focus abiding laws being righteous avoiding many traditions which help purify them sinfulness redeem them eyes then predict keep tradition abide restrictive laws will allowed join opposed about there underworlds called heaven place eternal peace celebration while other called hell eternal

pain suffering fulfill themselves lives seek gain admittance better though more repressive
also much more promising than finality only passage from hopefully better civilization
differing views revealing explanation each approached duty evidenced people sought
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