

The epic of gilgamesh and inanna's journey to hell - the mesopotamian culture on ...

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



People in ancient Mesopotamia had a unique way of looking at life and afterlife, and when compared to the ideology of people at a similar time from slightly different cultures and geography, Mesopotamian culture was especially strange. By analyzing literary texts such as The Epic of Gilgamesh and Inanna's Journey to Hell, readers can somewhat identify this distinctive mindset and the mentality Mesopotamians had on death and afterlife, although, there are some ambiguities. Under some certain circumstances the characters in The Epic of Gilgamesh enable us to recognize how and why Mesopotamians had such a skeptical notion of death and afterlife. Inanna's Journey to Hell, in which even the goddess Inanna is terrified by the possibility of death, illustrates the inevitability of the prospect of a grim afterlife. Although it is quite evident that Mesopotamians have a pessimistic view on the afterlife, which is clearly exemplified in their literary works, the reason why they had this outlook is rather uncertain. The Epic of Gilgamesh and Inanna's Journey to Hell unquestionably give the readers some ideas that would explain the unique ideology of the Mesopotamians, like the mercurial environment, which may have resulted in the development of the notion that gods are not merciful and give out retributive justice in the form of death, hence, jealousy towards the gods' immortality and the belief that leaving a mark on the world is not as important as opposed to being immortal.

By taking some of the literary works of Ancient Mesopotamia into context, it is quite evident that people of that era saw death and the afterlife as a negative and the inauspicious part of their culture. According to their religion, only the gods and divine entities were allowed to have peaceful

immortality. The Epic of Gilgamesh gives the reader compelling evidence that people in Mesopotamia were jealous of the gods, specifically the gods' immortality. This is clearly seen in Tablet III, when Enkidu cries out, "Sun god, I beseech you." Even the greatest people alive such as Gilgamesh, King of Uruk and two thirds god, cannot outrun death. In the Epic of Gilgamesh, it was quite apparent that Gilgamesh was terrified by the concept of death and afterlife. After the death of his compatriot Enkidu, Gilgamesh realizes that "I[Gilgamesh] am going to die! - am I not like Enkidu?!" and hence his main goal in life becomes to find the secret to immortality, even if that meant to sacrifice his respect and dignity. This points towards the fact that Mesopotamian culture valued the ability of unending existence more than the achievements and possessions that one has gained in their entire lifetime. It could be argued that the thoughts of one person (Gilgamesh, in this instance) cannot be generalized as beliefs of an entire civilization, however, if we consider the fact a 'great' personality like Gilgamesh can be humbled by the thought of death, the common people who were not recognized by their actions at all must have been appalled by the thought of death. Nevertheless, there have been some instances in literary text of that time that may contradict this ideology. The best instance of this is of Utanapishtim, who is possibly the only human who knows the secret to immortality and has a completely different view of death and afterlife. The character of Utanapishtim, who appeared in The Epic of Gilgamesh, portrays a symbol which goes against almost every aspect of Mesopotamian ideology. Instead of death being bleak and dreadful, he describes it as "the fine youth and lovely girl . . . death" which is completely fascinating as no other time in

history did Mesopotamians make death seem innocent and peaceful. In spite of this, the anomalous opinions of Utanapishtim cannot be considered significant due to one very simple fact that he is immortal. Overall, almost every person in ancient Mesopotamia believed death and afterlife as being worse than all their life, and even the one person who has a slightly optimistic view on the topic of mortality, is immortal.

However, literary text from Mesopotamia doesn't always support my argument as we also look in the poem Inanna's Journey to Hell which, in many ways, challenges the Mesopotamian ideology. From The Epic of Gilgamesh we know that only gods have the power of peaceful immortality, however in Inanna's Journey, a goddess herself has to undergo the process of death. The more interesting point to note is that Inanna is petrified to think about her future outcome. Leaving behind all her possessions and powers, she enters the underworld and dies a gruesome death. There is a particular passage in the poem which implicitly shows the Inanna's view of death and the underworld

Father do not let you daughter die in hell,

Do not let the young girl Inanna die in hell.

In the whole text, this passage has been repeated many times. The first line itself categorizes death as something evil which cannot be escaped even by gods (in this case, goddess Inanna). For someone like goddess Inanna to say such humbling things, it proves that death is something even a god is frightened of. If a goddess can fall to her knees and beg for her life because

the afterlife brings misery, Mesopotamian culture makes death undermine the actions and achievements of one's life. Another thing to observe in this passage is that the multiple reiterations of this passage makes Inanna seem extremely desperate for her life, also proving that terrified of her own demise. From this passage, it is certain that in the Underworld, no one is safe from pain and misery. This bleak view of the afterlife encouraged Mesopotamians to take advantage of their time on earth because the material possessions and status they accumulated on earth would not follow them after death, regardless of who they were in life.

Taking this instance from Inanna's Journey to Hell into account cannot completely counter my argument, as this is the only occurrence in all the Mesopotamian literature where a god has met her end. At the end of the poem, Inanna did come back to life, which is a completely unknown incidence for a human or any mortal being. Inanna in the poem was completely ripped of her powers and possessions, making her seem vulnerable and very ungodly, however, there is absolutely no other evidence to prove that even gods can fall like humans. Gods' actions on some occasions portray them as humanlike as they have acted on impulse and anger, for instance the story of flooding in Shurruk caused by Enlil without any plausible reason, but there is no question that their power is unparalleled. Hence, rather than wise and omniscient beings, the gods in Mesopotamia were vengeful and easily angered. This might show us why Mesopotamians had a concept of a miserable afterlife, as to them, gods never show the

quality of generosity, therefore, they will not grant a peaceful end of life to mere humans.

Another plausible reason as to why Mesopotamians developed a horrifying concept of death and the afterlife is the extreme environmental conditions that people in Mesopotamia lived in, which is clearly mentioned in Mathisen's work, *Ancient Mediterranean Civilizations*. Unlike the world to today, people in ancient Mesopotamia did not understand nature and hence developed a sense of submissiveness. Everything not in their control was controlled by the gods, and the gods 'controlled' the nature as they saw fit. They thought that the treacherous nature was the result of gods because the people did not fulfil the wishes of the gods, or the people were not devoted enough. Hence, the notion that the afterlife was full of the greatest horrors one can imagine might have been established.

Finally, we can say that Mesopotamians were very negative people, who, could not understand the 'wrath' of nature due to scientific limitations and hence created an ideology which made death and mortality, which were the greatest mysteries of life, seem horrifying and depressing. They created a notion of gods in which various gods had a different motive and a reason to make Mesopotamians' life more miserable and hence instead of having affection and admiration of them, people were terrified by their powers and some sudden wrath. Therefore, it can be confidently said that people did not look up to the gods, instead just worshipped their supremacy to save themselves from their rage and destructive powers. This created another belief that no matter what one achieves in his/her lifetime, their afterlife will

always be full of horrors and intense suffering. From time to time there have been instances where these beliefs of Mesopotamians are challenged, however most evidence from The Epic of Gilgamesh and Inanna's Journey to Hell points towards the Mesopotamians' belief that the quality of one's life is measured not by wealth or fame, but by the quality of the time they spent while alive and the people with which they surrounded themselves.