Afterlife in the ancient world

Philosophy

9 July 2007 Analyzing the Afterlife in the Ancient World Introduction Each civilization has its own conclusions regarding the existence of an afterlife and whether there is a Heaven or a Hell. Three such civilizations, the Mesopotamians, the Greeks, and the Romans each had their own unique views on life after death.

The Afterlife

Around 2000 B. C. E., ancient Mesopotamians faced hardships in their daily lives, and the afterlife they envisioned mirrored these hardships. In The Epic of Gilgamesh: Enkidu's Dream, Enkidu describes a frightening view of life after death to Gilgamesh. Endiku is sick and near death as he recounts this dream in which he is greeted by a hideous monster with large claws that transports him to the Queen of Darkness to the " house from which none who enters ever returns" (Sandars, 1960). He sees people with dark gray faces, starving for food and looking hopeless. On this same day after he awakens from this dream, Enkidu dies, and Gilgamesh is so consumed with grief he will not bury him until his body starts to decay. From this description, it is clear that the afterlife Enkidu was describing was more of a Hell-like place than Heaven. Furthermore, Gilgamesh appears to believe that his friend has ended up in this place and that Enkidu's dream was some sort of prophecy come true, as Gilgamesh is so overwhelmed with rage and grief, as he " tore out his own hair and stewed around it" (Sandars).

Homer wrote the Odyssey in 800 B. C., and many passages speak of the afterlife and conversations with ghostly figures occupying the afterlife. In Book XI, Ulysses encounters several apparitions who will only speak to him if he allows them to drink blood. These visions are ghostly advisors or seers who tell Ulysses how he should proceed on his travels and battles. This

Greek view of life after death is not a horrific vision as in Enkidu's dream, yet Argives tells Ulysses, "'Say not a word''in death's favour; I would rather be a paid servant in a poor man's house and be above ground than king of kings among the dead'" (Homer, 800). Therefore, Argives indicates being dead is not as envious as being alive. The Greek afterlife appears to be a place of neutrality, filled with neither sorrow, nor happiness; just an empty void where souls journey after their physical bodies have expired.

In approximately 54 B. C. The Dream of Scipio was written as the conclusion to Cicero's treatise On the Republic. Contrary to both Enkidu's dream, and Ulysses encounters, Cicero's view of the afterlife is quite calm and serene compared to either of them. In this story, Scipio encounters his dead father who embraces and kisses him. He longs to be united with his father in the afterlife, however, his father tells him he must wait for his Heavenly rewards and God will decide when to reward him with death, as " Your so-called life [on earth] is really deathUnless that God whose temple is the whole visible universe releases you from the prison of the body, you cannot gain entrance here" (Eliade, 1978). Clearly, the Romans viewed life on earth as a Hellish existence and in death a Heavenly afterlife exists for all those deserving.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Mesopotamians and Greeks held a view of the afterlife that was unenviable. Although Enkidu's vision was much more dark and anguished, Homer did not see the afterlife as a place to be desired either. To the contrary, the Romans' view of life after death can be seen as Heavenly and serene, a place that all desired to be as soon as was possible, rather

than be trapped in the earthly prison that is the physical body.

Works Cited

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