2-2b Religion and the Afterlife

Our knowledge of the Sumerians' religion is sketchy and unsure. As in most agrarian civilizations, they believed in a host of nature gods (**polytheism** (A religion having many gods.) —Greek for "many gods") of various ranks. There were many male and female deities, each with specific competencies in natural and human affairs. Among the most important were *Innana* (or *Ishtar*), the goddess of love and fertility, and the water god *Enki* (ENG-kee). These gods were much like superhumans, with all the faults and weaknesses of men and women. Some were immensely powerful: their will affected all the Sumerian settlements, and they were believed to rule over all of nature and humanity.

In addition, each city-state had its local gods and spirits of the land and sky who were crucial to the prosperity of the citizens and who had to be carefully placated by professionally trained priests. The gods were thought to reside at times in the great temple complexes crowned and protected by the **ziggurats** ((ZIHG-goo-raht) The stepped and elevated temple structures that the ancient Mesopotamian civilization erected in honor of its gods.) (ZIHG-goo-rahts), or stepped pyramids. Here, hundreds of priests and their dependents ritually prayed and made offerings to the gods on behalf of the city-state's welfare. The best-known ziggurat, erected by the powerful city of **Babylon** (Most important of the later Mesopotamian urban centers.) long after the Sumerian Epoch, was the Tower of Babel of biblical fame.

The two features of Mesopotamia's natural environment that stood out the most were the aridity of the climate and the unpredictability of the rivers' annual floods, on which everyone relied for growing food. Like nature, which they controlled, the Mesopotamian gods were frequently cruel toward their human creatures and highly unpredictable. Men and women were the slaves of their god-creators, intended as the providers of the labors that the gods did not wish to perform. Every religious function was performed on behalf of the community; hence, there is little evidence of a personal, loving relationship between deities and humans.

Reconstruction of the Ziggurat at Ur.

The stepped pyramidal form has been used for religious monuments from one end of the earth to the other. It combines an overpowering sense of mass and permanency with a mystical projection of divine superiority over earthbound humans. Pyramids like this Mesopotamian ziggurat can also be found in Egypt, South and Central America, and, in modified form, Southeast Asia. The Mesopotamian variety was constructed of earthen bricks, which demanded frequent

renovation lest they dissolve into ruins through time's erosive force or an enemy's vandalism.

Reconstruction of the Ziggurat at Ur (colour litho), Italian School, (20th century) / Private Collection / Bridgeman Images

Warka Vase.

Sumerian priests from Uruk (3500–3000 B.C.E.) used vases like this one to make offerings to the gods. The vase depicts water, wheat or barley growing from the water, and naked priests gratefully presenting the "first fruits" of a successful crop to Innana, the goddess of fertility.

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Nor is there any trace of ethics in Mesopotamian religion. The demands of the gods had no intrinsic connection with doing good or avoiding evil on Earth beyond what offerings and ritual acts could win from them to ensure the regularity of the natural cycles on which a farm-based economy depended. The gods often punished humans, but not for “moral” failings, or what we would call *sin*. Being nature gods, the punishments often took the form of natural catastrophes, such as droughts or floods that harmed the entire community. To avert punishment, the gods had to be appeased with frequent, costly rituals and ceremonies, which were the responsibility of a hereditary priesthood and, to a lesser extent, the rulers.

The priests used their power as interpreters of the will of the gods to create large and wealthy temple communities supported by the offerings of the citizens. In some Sumerian cities the priests seem to have been the true rulers for a time. This practice ended when *lugals* (LOO-gals) replaced the priests as the true rulers of the city-states. When Sargon the Great conquered almost all of Sumeria, he superimposed another level of authority more like that of an emperor.

The religion was certainly not an optimistic one, and it seems to have had no clear ideas on the nature of the afterlife or who, if anyone, could enjoy immortality. The best approach seemed to be to honor and obey the gods as well as you could, appease them by making offerings through their powerful priests, and hope to prosper in this life and the afterlife, if there was one. Much of what is known about Mesopotamian religious belief derives from their literature, in which several major myths of Western civilization—including the Flood and the Garden of Eden—find their first expression.

Particularly important is the creation myth embraced in the **Epic of Gilgamesh** ((GIHL-gah-mesh) One of the earliest epics in world literature, originating in prehistoric Mesopotamia.) (GIL-gah-mesh), the first epic poem in world literature. Gilgamesh is a man, a king of one of the city-states, who desires the secret of immortal life; but the gods, jealous of his power, defeat him. The excerpts in the Framing History feature show the similarity between the flood stories in *Gilgamesh* and the book of Genesis of the Judeo-Christian scripture.