

Life, Death, and Afterlife in Ancient Israel and Canaan

1. Mesopotamia, continued.

See #3 on handout from January 6.

2. Canaanite religion

Anthropology: It seems that when human beings die, it was thought that the breath/wind/spirit (called *npš*, cognate to Hebrew *nefesh*) leaves the body. Only gods could be exempt from death, although even some gods themselves could die! As in Mesopotamian culture, it seems that mortality was viewed a key component of the human condition, with which human beings must grapple, receiving wisdom along the way.

Eschatology: No sense of collective eschatology or final judgment (i.e., end of all history as we know it), nor of personal judgment after death (cf. Egyptians). Humans live on as ghosts or shades in the Kingdom of Mot (cognate to Hebrew word for death = *mavet*).

Cult of the dead: Rituals were done continually by the living in order to care for dead relatives and to ensure that they would not trouble the living. Bodies are buried with grave goods (unlike, apparently, Israelites), and the dead ancestors were thereafter “fed” and appeased with offerings as well as venerated and asked for help. The Canaanite cult of the dead seems to presume the need to maintain an on-going and positive relationship between the living and the dead.

Cosmology and ouranology: Apparently, a three-tiered cosmology (heaven-earth-netherworld), as in Mesopotamia. Gods reside in heaven and/or on high mountains, with the exception of the ruler of the underworld. There is a divine council. No hint of heaven as a place that good human beings could go after dead.

3. Reading the Hebrew Bible in historical context

- Major textual sources for pre-exilic beliefs include Torah/Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy), Former Prophets (Joshua, Judges, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings) as well as some of the Later Prophets (Hosea, Joel, Jonah, Amos, Obadiah, Micah, Nahum, Zephaniah, parts of Isaiah), Ruth, Psalms, Proverbs, portions of Isaiah, Amos, and other prophetic books, and possibly Job.
- Biblical literature bears many marks of polemics against neighboring Canaanite religion and culture, for polytheistic and idolatrous worship in general (esp. worship of sacred poles [*asherot*]) as well as for religious practices that Israelites deemed immoral (e.g., religious prostitution; human sacrifice) and other rituals that they deemed “magic” (e.g., necromancy). Those responsible for the Hebrew Bible saw Canaanite religion in active conflict with Israelite religion, but – ironically – these writings also attest the adoption of religious beliefs and practices by Israelites, esp. in the repeated prophetic polemics against them.
- In addition, we see in the language and ideas of the Hebrew Bible influence from Canaanite culture in particular and the ancient Near Eastern culture milieu more broadly.

4. Life and death in ancient Israel

Lack of interest in the afterlife: We find in pre-exilic sources no coherent narrative about what happens once one dies; we must infer beliefs from references here and there. It is possible that no coherent system of beliefs existed, only scattered ideas, due perhaps to the overall lack of interest in the question and/or resistance to Canaanite ideas (esp. as related to the cult of the dead).

Some Major Canaanite Gods

- EI** – Paramount god in the Canaanite pantheon; mountain and sky god, who typically presides over the divine council in heaven.
- Baal** – Warrior god and son of EI, a storm god who fights against the forces of chaos: sea, drought, even death.
- Mot** – God of death and chaos and ruler of the underworld, who is defeated by Baal in a cyclical battle where Baal visits the underworld every seven years.
- Asherah** – Consort of EI, goddess of life; worshipped by means of the erection of sacred trees (Hebrew: *asherot*), a practice against which many biblical prophets repeatedly polemicize (suggesting that it was actually rather widespread in ancient Israel).

Stress on the singularity of the divine and God's power over life and death alike: What is stressed, instead, is that it is the One God who gives death just as He gives life (e.g., *Deut 32:39; 1 Sam 2:6*). It seems that death is a natural part of God's plan for humankind. Accordingly, we find few negative views of death: life is sweet and fleeting but also hard; death is inevitable, but it is also a welcome rest and a return to one's ancestors.

Stress on family and progeny: Immortality is conceived, it seems, not in terms of the individual, but in terms of family. People survive in their children. Accordingly, there is a strong stress on accurately recording and tracing genealogy. Strikingly, there is no sense of a beatific afterlife for anyone, however elevated. In Genesis, Abraham dies but lives on in the many nations that come from his sons. Jacob dies but lives on as Israel, the nation which bears his other name and which comes from his 12 sons, whose names, in turn, are given to the tribes that come from them. This continuance is poignantly expressed in the death-bed blessings that fathers (e.g., Jacob in Gen 48) give to their sons, during which they also pass on wisdom (e.g., David in 1 Kings 2:1-12). The importance of such blessings is clear from the rivalry over blessings (e.g., Esau and Jacob over Isaac's blessing in Gen 28, etc.) no less than over the birthright and the concrete inheritance of land and possessions that it represents.

Burial and mourning: The practice of burying the dead is attested very early. It seems to be important, early on, where one is buried, as clear from Genesis' account of Sarah's burial in the Promised Land (the cave for her grave being the very first piece of land purchased by Abraham's family in that land; Gen 23). Joseph, too, wishes his bones to rest there. Mourning consists of tearing clothes, etc.

Cosmology: Heaven is the abode of God's angels, as clear from Genesis' tale of Jacob's ladder, in which he sees angels in a dream traveling up and down between earth and heaven. Esp. in Psalms, it is clear that God resides in the heavens and has a throne. As in ANE, the association between the skies and the divine abode is manifest in the attitude towards towers and mountains: humans who wish to be like God build high towers to reach the heavens (e.g., Tower of Babel in Gen 11), and God communicates to humankind on mountains (e.g., the giving of the Torah on Mt. Sinai in Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers). Sheol below is realm of the dead, as clear from Jacob's lament when he mourns Joseph in Gen 37, as well as other sources that we will consider next week.

Reversal of death: No notion yet of the possibility of resurrection – in part because of blurry lines between life, sickness, and death (the boundaries of which, in fact, are still difficult to determine). We do find a couple cases of revivification of those appearing to be dead, esp. by prophets (e.g., 2 Kings 4:1-37; 13:14-21). The stress, however, is not on the possibility of escape from death in any general sense, but rather on the power of the prophet, whose powers of healing are said to extend even to those who on the boundaries between life and death.