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# A Journey Into the Land of No Return: Death Attitudes and Perceptions of Death and Afterlife in Ancient Near Eastern Literature

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**A Journey Into the Land of No Return:  
Death Attitudes and Perceptions of Death and Afterlife in Ancient Near Eastern Literature**

Leah Whitehead Craig

Senior Honors Thesis

Submitted to the Honors College of  
Western Kentucky University

Spring, 2008

Approved by:

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## **Introduction**

The majority of religious traditions express a belief in an existence after death. Death is a common human concern. Everyone must face death, and yet no one knows what death itself will be like. Many religious traditions seek to answer questions that, in reality, cannot be answered. Often, religions develop mythology which imagines what will be experienced in the afterlife. These myths often reflect how the author perceives the afterlife, and these perceptions reflect the psychological feelings the author may have regarding his or her own death.

Often referred to as the “cradle of civilization,” the Ancient Near East provides the earliest written records of human civilization. Literary works have been discovered that reveal the religious beliefs and practices of these ancient people. Some of the myths, lamentations, and other forms of literature include stories that reveal images of the underworld. This paper will examine works from four languages of the Ancient Near East, and therefore four cultures: Sumerian, Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Hebrew.<sup>1</sup> However, texts will be analyzed in their English translations, with the exception of some passages in the Hebrew section.

In each piece of literature, images of the underworld will be observed. The terms “underworld” and “netherworld” will be used interchangeably. It must be understood by the reader that the religions of the Ancient Near East did not have a dualistic worldview that many modern people have today. This dualistic perception of the universe is commonly seen as a paradise, such as a heaven, and a contrasting place of eternal punishment, such as a hell. The peoples of the Ancient Near East believed that there was one place in which they would spend eternity. As Dina Katz describes, the underworld is a place where “all spirits dwelled in one and

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<sup>1</sup> Egyptian literature is not analyzed in this paper because there is an extensive amount of information on the afterlife and the literature about death is much different than Sumerian, Akkadian, Ugaritic and Hebrew literature.

the same region; that the domain of the dead was separated from the world of the living.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the underworld, or netherworld, will be defined as the realm of the dead. Furthermore, images of the underworld were often thought of as metaphorical, rather than literal. It must be understood that these texts were not necessarily considered “true” in the same way, for instance, a literalist Christian interpreter of the Book of Revelation would consider the images in that book to be true. Even the term “afterlife” is somewhat misleading, because ancient peoples did not believe that there is a life after death, as Christians and Muslims do today. Instead, there was a sense of a continuing existence after death, but life is spent on earth, and the existence after death is often described as a “shadow” of the existence of one’s former self. With this in mind, I will still refer to “the afterlife” in the context of these cultures for simplicity’s sake.

Also, authors of the texts in the Ancient Near Eastern world were scribes who were often commissioned by the royal courts. The majority of the population was illiterate. Therefore, while it is possible to understand the perceptions of the afterlife of the educated, male scribes, it is impossible to know whether or not women or the common people would have written or told other myths that would have reflected different perceptions of death and afterlife. Also, we are not sure who the audience was for many of these texts. Was it other literate scribes or the royal court itself? Would it have been read to the masses? Presumably, the scribes would not have been completely different in their understanding of the afterlife from the wider cultural views.

In addition, it must be understood that ancient religions were not dogmatic. Therefore, beliefs in and perceptions of the afterlife change and develop over time. Sometimes, within a single culture, texts may seem contradictory or paradoxical in their beliefs regarding the afterlife. Not only does this reflect the complexity of the human psyche, but the ancient people may not

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<sup>2</sup> Dina Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2003), xvi.

have felt that paradoxical images should be reconciled. Also, different beliefs or images may reflect changes in beliefs over a long period of time.

In this paper, I will first attempt to describe and analyze images of the underworld as found in different texts within the four language groups. Secondly, I will attempt to take a psychological angle to evaluate the author's death attitudes by using the images in the literature that reflect his beliefs in the afterlife. In the past, scholars have avoided taking this angle because, as one author expresses, "it does not allow [for] an objective description."<sup>3</sup> While acknowledging that it is impossible to empirically psychologically analyze people through the literature they write, this paper will use a psychological death anxiety model to hypothesize what the author's death anxiety may have reflected in images of the afterlife.

Unfortunately, many modern psychological tests measure death anxiety based on a modern population that largely holds a view of a dualistic form of afterlife. For example, Ochsmann's study finds that "belief in an afterlife (BA) serves the function of helping the individual to deal with the fear of death."<sup>4</sup> Benore and Park define BA (belief in afterlife) as "beliefs in a sustained existence of the deceased after his or her death."<sup>5</sup> However, it is assumed in modern culture that the afterlife will most likely be a rewarding experience, because of Jewish, Christian and Muslim doctrine where good people are rewarded in heaven. In fact, Ochsmann's study uses fifty theology students, as well as fifty students studying other subjects, to measure their findings. However, no one can empirically study the psychological effects of Ancient Near Eastern people's religious beliefs since they are no longer around. Thus, the

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<sup>3</sup> Katz, xvi.

<sup>4</sup> Randolph Ochsmann, "Belief in afterlife as moderator of fear of death?" *European Journal of Social Psychology* 41 (1984), <http://web110epnet.com/> (accessed February 7, 2007), 53.

<sup>5</sup> Ethan R. Benore and Crystal R. Park, "Death-Specific Religious Beliefs and Bereavement: Belief in Afterlife and Continued Attachment," *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 14 (2004), <http://webnet110.epnet.com/> (accessed February 7, 2007), 2.

literature is the only resource that can be used to subjectively hypothesize how these ancient people were affected by their beliefs. The cultures that are analyzed do not see the afterlife as necessarily rewarding. Therefore, just because a person believes in an existence after death does not necessarily prove that it will help that person deal with the fear of death.

At the same time, some psychological studies focus on the acceptance of death. One study by Harding, *et al.* states that “people who have a greater ability to consciously accept the inevitability of death are less afraid of it.”<sup>6</sup> At the same time, this death acceptance was positively correlated with a belief in afterlife, and those being studied were parishioners of an Episcopal church. Harding, *et al.* also states that “one can be afraid of death to some degree and at the same time accept it to some extent.”<sup>7</sup> Some of the attitudes toward death reflected in the ancient literature suggest that some of the authors felt that death was inevitable and take what seems to be a neutral attitude toward conditions in the afterlife. Harding’s statement also reflects the complex human psyche. Humans, and this is reflected in the ancient literature, often can have several, even conflicting feelings toward death.

Tomer and Eliason, both psychologists, developed a comprehensive model of death anxiety (Figure 1) in their paper called “Toward a Comprehensive Model of Death Anxiety.” They have also created a second model (Figure 2) that takes into account both death anxiety and death acceptance. Death anxiety is best defined as a fear of death. Conversely, death acceptance is the absence of the fear of death. Tomer and Eliason define three components of death acceptance. One component, the most prevalent component found in the ancient literature, is

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<sup>6</sup> Stephen R. Harding *et al.*, “The Influence of Religion on Death Anxiety and Death Acceptance,” *Mental Health, Religion and Culture* 8 (2005) [www.web110.epnet.com/](http://www.web110.epnet.com/) (accessed February 7, 2007), 257.

<sup>7</sup> Harding *et al.*, 257.



neutral death acceptance.<sup>8</sup> Linley defines neutral death acceptance as “seeing death as neither good [n]or bad, and as a part of the process of life.”<sup>9</sup> Aspects of these models will be used in my paper to analyze the perceptions of the afterlife in order to determine the death attitudes, or death anxiety and death acceptance, which the various authors may have had.

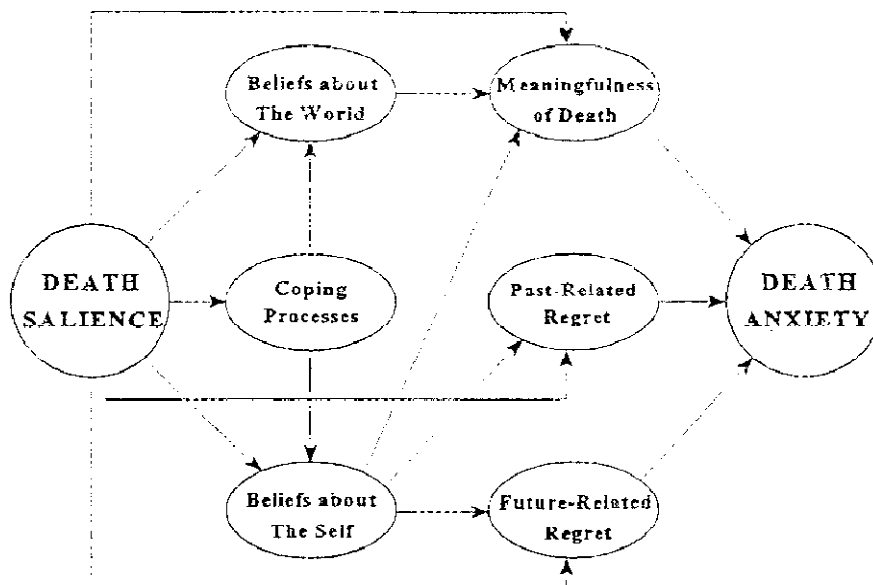
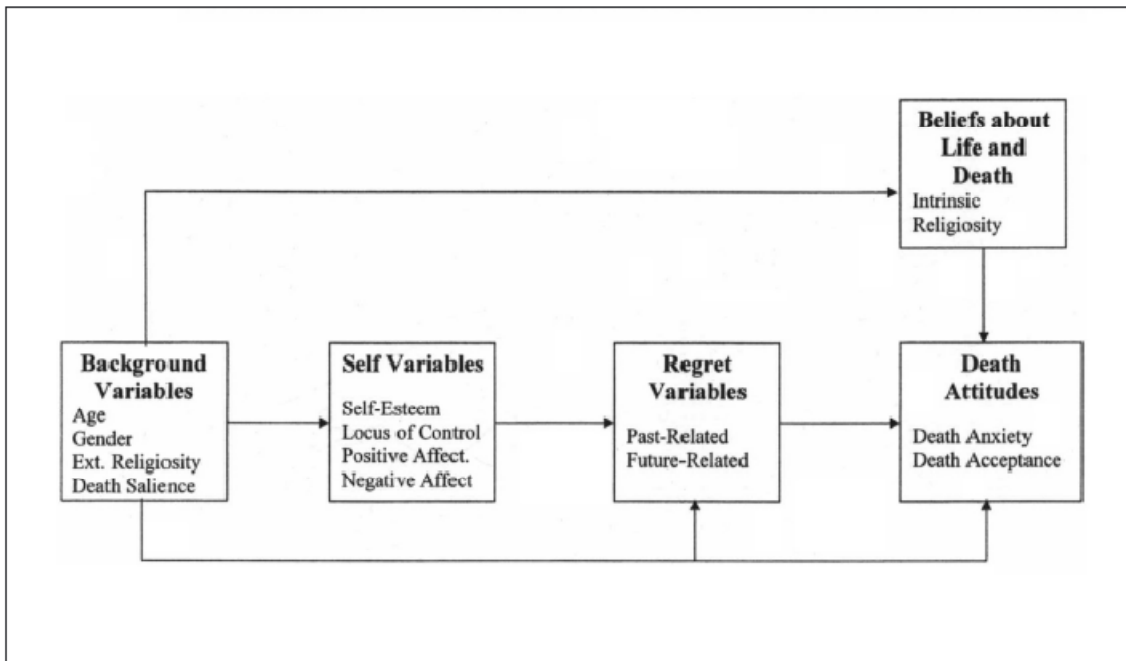


Figure 1<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Adrian Tomer and Grafton Eliason, “Life Regrets and Death Attitudes in College Students,” *Journal of Death and Dying* 51 (2005), [www.web110.epnet.com](http://www.web110.epnet.com), (accessed January 27, 2008), 175.

<sup>9</sup> Alex P. Linley, “Positive and Negative Changes Following Occupational Death Exposure,” *Journal of Traumatic Stress* 18 (2005), [www.web110.epnet.com](http://www.web110.epnet.com), (accessed January 26, 2008), 752.

<sup>10</sup> Adrian Tomer and Grafton Eliason, “Toward a Comprehensive Model of Death Anxiety,” *Death Studies* 20 (1996): [www.web100.epnet.com](http://www.web100.epnet.com) (accessed February 27, 2007), 346.



**Figure 2<sup>11</sup>**

The first step in the model shown in Figure 1 is death salience. Death Salience can be defined as the contemplation of mortality. An individual must have death salience in order to determine if death anxiety is present, and the degree to which it is present. Since the texts that will be analyzed deal with death and the afterlife in one form or another, it is assumed that the author must be at least thinking about these subjects, and thus have death salience. According to the model in Figure 1, there are three “direct determinants of death anxiety: past-related regret, future-related regret, and meaningfulness of death.”<sup>12</sup> Past-related regret is “the perception of not having fulfilled basic aspirations” in one’s life. Future-related regret is the “perceived inability to fulfill basic goals in the future,” or the feeling that one does not have enough time to reach one’s goals before one dies. Meaningfulness of death is “the individual’s conceptualization of death as positive or negative, making sense or senseless, etc.” A negative

<sup>11</sup> Adrian Tomer and Grafton Eliason, “Life Regrets and Death Attitudes in College Students,” *Journal of Death and Dying* 51 (2005), [www.web110.epnet.com](http://www.web110.epnet.com), (accessed January 27, 2008), 177.

<sup>12</sup> Adrian Tomer and Grafton Eliason, “Toward a Comprehensive Model of Death Anxiety,” *Death Studies* 20 (1996): [www.web100.epnet.com](http://www.web100.epnet.com) (accessed February 27, 2007), 345-346.

conceptualization of the meaningfulness of death will cause death anxiety. All or each of these determinants, according to the model, will cause a person to experience death anxiety.<sup>13</sup>

There are also may be negative meaningfulness of death when the authors described the change one experiences from moving from life on earth to life in the underworld. Change is psychologically disruptive. For instance, stress assessment scales, such as the one used at Huntington Hospital in California, measure stress levels based on the presence of major life changes. Changes, such as change in marital status, career, or financial status are assigned more points than minor life changes such as sleeping or eating habits.<sup>14</sup> The anticipated change from life to death that the authors may have had would be a negative meaningfulness of death.

The model in Figure 2 shows that beliefs about life and death affect death anxiety or death acceptance. This part encompasses the meaningfulness of death that is categorized in Figure 1, but the model in Figure 2 acknowledges that beliefs about death can lead to either death anxiety or death acceptance, not just death anxiety. For example, if someone has positive beliefs about death, in other words, the meaning of death for the individual is positive, then this would cause death acceptance. Past-related regret and future-related regret sections of the model will be used for texts that demonstrate the belief that living into old age was desired and dying young was feared. Meaningfulness of death, which I will also refer to as negative, neutral or positive beliefs about death, according to the models, can be determined by images of the underworld found in the literature. To the ancient peoples, the underworld is a part of the cosmic worldview. Therefore, meaningfulness of death is partly determined by perceptions of the afterlife. Thus, the way the authors of the ancient literature describe the underworld is an important determinant of their beliefs about death, which directly affect death attitudes.

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<sup>13</sup> Tomer & Eliason, 346.

<sup>14</sup> Huntington Hospital, "Life Event Stress Scale," *Huntington Hospital*, Pasadena, CA: 2002, <http://www.huntingtonhospital.com/workfiles/lifeeventstressscale.pdf> (accessed January 19, 2008).

Since descriptions of the underworld are given in the ancient texts, Tomer and Eliason's models, therefore, can be used to determine the author's death attitudes. If death is seen as meaningful, that there is reward in the afterlife, then death anxiety would decrease. However, if the afterlife is seen as negative, or as senseless, then death anxiety would increase. In most cases, the finality of death seems to be accepted by the authors, and therefore death is meaningful in that the authors seem to be at peace psychologically with death. Of course, death anxiety and death acceptance are not determined on an either/or scale, but death anxiety falls within a continuum. An individual can experience both death anxiety and death acceptance at the same time and at different times throughout the lifespan. The death attitudes of the author are evaluated; it will be hypothesized as well that an author's death attitudes may reflect the larger society's degree of death anxiety or death acceptance, especially since many of the myths most likely originated in oral transmission and were copied and transmitted in written form.

The literature reveals that both death anxiety and death acceptance are present in all four cultural groups. However, most death anxiety is in regard to a fear of an untimely or tragic death, or future/past related regret due to having no or few progeny. There are many images associated with the underworld that are both gloomy and sometimes frightening; however, most of the images simply reflect the reality of the grave or death itself. Death acceptance is reflected in neutral and positive images of the underworld. The ancient authors also demonstrate a healthy acceptance of the inevitability of death. They, therefore, encourage readers through overall themes to live life to the fullest. By living life to its fullest, people are most able to prevent future and/or past related regret. The texts show that the authors had death anxiety, and yet at other times the authors had a sense of death acceptance, and therefore a decreased sense of death anxiety.

## **Chapter 1: Sumerian Literature**

In the Ancient Near East, some of the oldest texts that have been discovered are from Ancient Sumer. Some of these texts include myths that reveal the religious beliefs and worldview of the ancient Sumerians. Two such texts are “Inanna’s Descent to the Netherworld” and “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld.” This paper uses these two larger myths, as well as relevant passages from other texts, to explore how the Sumerians perceived and felt about the netherworld.

In Sumerian thought, there are different conceptions of the conditions of the netherworld. Both “Inanna’s Descent” and “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld” show that the netherworld was conceived as being similar to, or parallel to, life on earth. “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld” reveals that the conditions of the netherworld varied between individuals, based on the conditions of their own life. These stories, as well as the other texts used, can also reveal how the Sumerian people felt about death and afterlife based on their conceptions of the underworld. There are both positive and negative beliefs about death, which reflect both death anxiety and death acceptance for the authors. Death anxiety is also apparent in the textual evidence that past-related regret is seen in concerns for having no or too few heirs or experiencing an untimely, tragic death. Although there are some frightening images associated with the underworld, most of the imagery reflects the realistic nature of the grave. The imagery, then, demonstrates neutral beliefs about death, which indicate the presence of neutral death acceptance. Thus, both death anxiety, as seen through negative beliefs about death and future and/or past related regret, and death acceptance, as seen through neutral and positive beliefs about death, existed in the Sumerian culture.

The myth, “Inanna’s Descent to the Netherworld,” gives clues about the nature of the netherworld. The story begins with Inanna, a major goddess in the Sumerian pantheon, deciding that she wants to go to “the great below.”<sup>15</sup> The story, however, does not explain why she has decided to go. Before she leaves, she dresses herself with “the divine powers.”<sup>16</sup> These are literally the *me*’s which are “the source of all the properties of civilization and especially of the socio-political order.”<sup>17</sup> She also gives her minister, Ninsubur, instructions on what to do if she does not come out of the netherworld. Inanna tells Ninsubur to first publicly lament for her, and then go to Enlil, Nanna, and Enki to beg them to bring her out of the underworld. Inanna then goes to the gate of the underworld and demands to be let in. The doorman first consults Ereshkigal, the queen of the netherworld and Inanna’s sister. The doorman comes back and brings Inanna through the seven gates of the underworld. At each gate, one of her divine powers is taken away from her. When she questions why they do this, she is answered, “you must not open your mouth against the rites of the underworld.”<sup>18</sup> They eventually pass through all the gates, and Inanna is left before her sister without any of the divine powers. Despite this disadvantage, she seizes Ereshkigal’s throne. The Anunna, or judges, decide that she should be put to death because of this action. As a result, she is confined to the underworld.

After waiting, Inanna’s minister, Ninsubur, carries out her directions. Enlil and Nanna will not help Inanna. Enki, though, creates the *kur-gara* and the *galatura* to save Inanna. These two beings go to the underworld and successfully bring Inanna back to life. Before she can

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<sup>15</sup> J.A. Black, G. Cunningham, E. Fluckiger-Hawker, E. Robson, and G. Zólyomi, “Inanna’s Descent to the Netherworld,” *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://www-etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/>), (Oxford 1998- ), lines 1-5.

<sup>16</sup> Black *et al.*, “Inanna’s Descent,” line 14.

<sup>17</sup> Katz, 177.

<sup>18</sup> Black *et al.* “Inanna’s Descent,” lines 133.

leave, the Anunna declare that she must have a substitute in the underworld. As a result, demon-like creatures escort Inanna back to the real world to find the substitute.

The names of the underworld reveal characteristics and descriptions that demonstrate the nature of the underworld. According to Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, “the Sumerians had quite a number of different names for this other world...[one of which is] the land of no return.”<sup>19</sup> “Inanna’s Descent to the Netherworld” just so happens to use this name for the underworld. Enlil and Nanna, in refusal to help Inanna, say, “Who, having got to that place, could then expect to come up again?”<sup>20</sup> and thus imply that no one returns from the netherworld. Also, when Inanna reaches the gate of the underworld, the gatekeeper asks, “Why have you traveled to the land of no return? How did you set your heart on the road whose traveler never returns.”<sup>21</sup> The author uses ‘the land of no return’ as a proper noun, a definite place, which thus implies that this title for the underworld is relevant for both gods and humans. Therefore, both divine and mortal would not be able to leave the underworld. The meaningfulness of death revealed here includes believing that as a member of the dead one would be separated from the world of the living, including separation from the people the dead person once knew and loved. At the same time, the expression is also a description of the finality of death, a neutral statement in regard to the meaningfulness of death.

Despite the fact that no one returns from the underworld, Inanna is determined to descend into the underworld. Line 73 reads, “When Inanna arrived at the palace *Ganzer*, she pushed aggressively on the door of the underworld.”<sup>22</sup> Thus, the netherworld has a door, and a palace

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<sup>19</sup> Jeremy Black and Anthony Green. *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 180. Other names, for instance, include “earth.”

<sup>20</sup> Black *et al.*, “Inanna’s Descent,” lines 194, 208.

<sup>21</sup> Black *et al.*, “Inanna’s Descent,” lines 78-84.

<sup>22</sup> Black *et al.*, “Inanna’s Descent,” line 73.

called *Ganzer*.<sup>23</sup> Overall, the netherworld has seven gates to reach the palace. Ereshkigal states, “Let the seven gates of the underworld be bolted.”<sup>24</sup> These are the seven gates that Inanna must pass through. At each gate, a divine power is removed from Inanna. When Inanna reacts, the doorkeeper answers, “Be silent Inanna, a divine power of the underworld has been fulfilled. Inanna, you must not open your mouth against the rites of the underworld.”<sup>25</sup> Samuel Kramer translates the same lines, “O Inanna, do not question the rites of the underworld.”<sup>26</sup> Dina Katz suggests that this may refer to a common ritual as people enter the netherworld. It may be symbolic of mortals having to give up their earthly powers and possessions as they become a member of the netherworld.<sup>27</sup> Katz explains, “the gatekeeper generates the impression that the clothes of the dead are removed on the way to the netherworld as a matter of sacred custom.”<sup>28</sup> As mentioned earlier, the word for what is removed is *me* and it is “the source of all the properties of civilization and especially of the socio-political order.”<sup>29</sup> This removal of clothing, then, could be symbolic for removing her heavenly and worldly powers as she enters the netherworld and attempts to take Ereshkigal’s *me*, which are her powers over the underworld. If this is true, the authors may have felt that they would become powerless as they entered the underworld. The way the author may have seen the meaning of death, then, was a loss of “power” which may have been symbolic of a loss of control.

The netherworld, or at least a part of it, is described as a palace. Ereshkigal is considered the queen of the netherworld. Kramer describes her as “the goddess of darkness and gloom and

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<sup>23</sup> The word *ganzir* is somewhat problematic. It may only refer to ‘the front of the netherworld.’ For a more detailed discussion on the word *ganzir* and its meaning see Dina Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources* (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2003), 85-88.

<sup>24</sup> Black *et al.*, “Inanna’s Descent,” lines 114-122.

<sup>25</sup> Black, *et al.*, line 133.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel N. Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology: A Study of Spiritual and Literary Achievement in the Third Millennium B.C.* rev. ed., (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 92.

<sup>27</sup> Dina Katz, *The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources*. (Bethesda, MD: CDL Press, 2003), 178.

<sup>28</sup> Katz, 178.

<sup>29</sup> Katz, 177.



death.”<sup>30</sup> Martha Ann and Dorothy Imel also describe her as “a goddess of death and darkness.”<sup>31</sup> The fact that these scholars would characterize her this way seems to imply that the netherworld, which she rules, would be dark and gloomy. Nowhere in “Inanna’s Descent,” however, does it suggest that the underworld is dark and gloomy. These scholars, therefore, are most likely drawing this characterization of Ereshkigal from other sources.

Furthermore, Ereshkigal has a throne in the palace, which Inanna seizes when she arrives in front of her sister. “Then she made her sister Ereshkigala rise from her throne, and instead she sat on her throne.”<sup>32</sup> Inanna “intended to extend her power”<sup>33</sup> when she “set her mind on the great below.”<sup>34</sup> This bold action does not hold well for Inanna as “The Anuna, the seven judges, rendered their decision against her. They looked at her – it was the look of death.”<sup>35</sup> Katz explains that Inanna’s attempt to usurp Ereshkigal’s throne “is not merely an offense against Ereshkigal, but also a violation of the world order and, therefore, an offense against the great gods who determine the world order.”<sup>36</sup> Not only is there a sense of order in the fact that there is a ruler, but also because there are judges who help maintain control in the netherworld. The netherworld and the world, then, are similar because there is order. This similarity would provide a feeling familiarity for the dead in the underworld. Familiarity, consequently, provides a positive sense of the meaningfulness of death for the authors.

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<sup>30</sup> Kramer, *Sumerian Mythology*, 86.

<sup>31</sup> Ann, Martha and Dorothy Myers Imel. *Goddesses in World Mythology*. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, Inc., 1993), 329.

<sup>32</sup> Black *et al.*, “Inanna’s Descent,” lines 165-166.

<sup>33</sup> Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 109.

<sup>34</sup> Black *et al.*, “Inanna’s Descent,” line 1.

<sup>35</sup> Black *et al.* “Inanna’s Descent,” lines 165-166. At first glance the Anuna judges seem to be judges of the netherworld. Jacobsen specifically refers to them as “the seven judges of Hades.” (57). Katz, however, disagrees. She points out that the text does not specifically state that they are of the netherworld; rather “they are ‘the seven judges’ without further explanation.” (Katz 403). She also points out that in most other Sumerian texts that mention the Anunna, they are in heaven. If this is the case, why would she be condemned by judges that are not located in the netherworld? Therefore, Katz argues, the Anuna are not located in the netherworld specifically, but can still have power to make judgments of events that occur there (403). This theory, however, is highly debated.

<sup>36</sup> Katz, 403.

When Inanna is brought back to life, the Anunna demand that she have a replacement in the netherworld. As a result, Inanna is escorted out of the netherworld by demon-like creatures. The Sumerian word used for these creatures is *galla*. Katz believes that there is evidence that the *galla* may have been an actual Sumerian official, acting as a sort of police force:<sup>37</sup> “since netherworld agents are designated by terms of administrative offices, we may infer that the Sumerians visualized the netherworld in terms of the Sumerian city-state.”<sup>38</sup> If this is true, the Sumerians imagined the underworld to be parallel to their world. Again, this would provide feelings of familiarity for the dead.

The *galla*, however, are described as scary, demon-like creatures in this story. One demon follows in front of Inanna holding a scepter, and another behind her with a mace.<sup>39</sup> Katz explains that these items, “symbolize their authority.”<sup>40</sup> More of these demons surround her on her sides, so she cannot get away. The *galla* are described as having non-human characteristics. They

know no food, know no drink, eat no flour offering and drink no libation. {They accept no pleasant gifts. They never enjoy the pleasure of the marital embrace, never have any sweet children to kiss. They tear away the wife from a man’s embrace. They snatch the son from a man’s knee. They make the bride leave the house of her father-in-law} {...They take the wife away from a man’s embrace. They take away the child hanging on a wet-nurse’s breast}{They crush no bitter garlic. They eat no fish, they eat no leeks...}.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Katz, 127-128. In “Ersemma of Dumuzi and Duttur,” Dumuzi is taken away and killed by the *galla*. Katz states that in this myth the *galla* seem to be human beings that were acting as police (133). If this is true, the *galla* in Sumerian society may have acted as executioners as well as a police force. Therefore, the demonization of the *galla* as creatures of the netherworld in Inanna’s Descent and other myths is not surprising. For further discussion on this see Katz, p.126-162

<sup>38</sup> Katz, 126.

<sup>39</sup> Black *et al.*, “Inanna’s Descent,” lines 292-293.

<sup>40</sup> Katz, 142.

<sup>41</sup> Black *et al.*, “Inanna’s Descent,” lines 295-305. A very similar description, most likely taken from “Inanna’s Descent” of the *galla* is found in “Dumuzi’s Dream.” For more information see Katz, 302.

The *galla* are frightening because they do not consume food, they cannot be appeased with offerings, and they do not understand feelings of love for a spouse or children. They feel no compassion as they bring men, women and children into the netherworld. They are creatures, at the moment of death, who carry people into the underworld. Metaphorically, the *galla* may represent the fear people had about the moment of death. This, therefore, indicates a negative belief about death.

Even if the *galla* in the story reflect a demonized version of the police force in the real world, it does seem that there is a sense of order in the netherworld, with a palace and a queen, judges that have power in the netherworld, and the *galla*. Thus, the netherworld for the Sumerian peoples might have been envisioned as a reflection of, or not too different from, life on the earth. This sense of order and familiarity indicates a positive meaningfulness of death. Therefore, these beliefs may reflect a sense of death acceptance for the author.

This myth provides insight into Sumerian beliefs as to where the netherworld is located, what was located there, such as the palace, and who was there, such as the doorman, the queen, and the *galla*. The Sumerian author may have believed that the living were stripped of their powers in one way or another, just as Inanna's divine powers were taken away. A sense of loss as one enters the underworld is a negative belief about death, and therefore an indicator of death anxiety. This story has limits, however, because Inanna is a goddess, and therefore the story may be more symbolic. Thus, the picture created of the netherworld might not have been taken literally by the audience. Because Inanna is not human, it makes it hard to conjecture what the Sumerians believed would happen to themselves. However, the myth "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld" does give us insight into the experience of a human in the netherworld.

In the story “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld” Gilgamesh makes a ball and mallet<sup>42</sup> from a tree that he used to make furniture for the goddess, Inanna. His ball and mallet end up falling down through a crack in the ground into the netherworld. Enkidu, his servant, volunteers to retrieve his ball and mallet. Gilgamesh first warns him of what he should not do when he goes into the netherworld. Enkidu, however, does the very things Gilgamesh had warned him not to do, and so Enkidu was “seized” by the netherworld. Gilgamesh goes to the god Enki and asks for help. Enki commands that Utu, the sun god, open up a hole for Enkidu to come up. Enkidu then comes up from the netherworld and meets with Gilgamesh, wherein Gilgamesh proceeds to question Enkidu on the conditions of the netherworld.<sup>43</sup>

The opening of the story briefly describes a very early time when the gods were allotting parts of the universe for the gods; in particular, “the netherworld had been given to Ereskigala as a gift.”<sup>44</sup> Therefore, in this story, like in “Inanna’s Descent,” Ereshkigal is head of the netherworld. Since there is a leader of the netherworld, there is order and familiarity. Furthermore, the gods are allotted every part of the universe, and nothing is left ungoverned.

When Enkidu comes up from the netherworld, Gilgamesh questions him about different people’s fates in the netherworld. Kramer explains that using a dead man to explain the underworld to the living was a common literary device.<sup>45</sup> The first time Gilgamesh asks what Enkidu sees in the netherworld, Enkidu answers, “If I tell you the order of the netherworld, sit down and weep!”<sup>46</sup> Katz explains that this statement “indicates gloomy prospects and discloses

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<sup>42</sup> This translation is disputed. Scholars only know that the *pukku* and *meku* are some sort of sporting equipment.

<sup>43</sup> J.A. Black, G. Cunningham, E. Fluckiger-Hawker, E. Robson, and G. Zólyomi, “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” Version A, *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://www-etcsl.orient.ox.ac.uk/>), (Oxford: 2006), lines 150-303.

<sup>44</sup> Black *et al.* “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” lines 1-26.

<sup>45</sup> Samuel N. Kramer, Samuel N. *From The Poetry of Sumer: Creation, Glorification, Adoration.* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 21.

<sup>46</sup> Black *et al.* “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” line 250.

a measure of skepticism concerning survival after death.”<sup>47</sup> It seems, then, that there is a sense of death anxiety reflected in Enkidu’s statement. And if this statement is reflecting a sense of skepticism of existence after death, then the fact that Gilgamesh would weep because of this uncertainty demonstrates that the author has experienced this same doubt. Skepticism would then characterize the meaningfulness of death which would indicate a greater degree of death anxiety.

However, Gilgamesh continues to question Enkidu, and so Enkidu obliges. The conditions, as Enkidu explains, are as follows: a man who had one son “weeps bitterly at the wooden peg which was driven into his wall.”<sup>48</sup> A man with two sons sits on bricks eating bread. A man with three sons drinks water from a waterskin. The heart rejoices of a man who had four sons.<sup>49</sup> Already we can see that as a man has more sons, his conditions in the afterlife greatly improve. A man with five sons is like a “good scribe...[and] enters the palace easily.”<sup>50</sup> A man with six sons is cheerful, and a man with seven is “as a companion of the gods, he sits on a throne and listens to judgments.”<sup>51</sup> A woman without any children is like a “pot, she is thrown away violently, she gives no man joy.”<sup>52</sup> A man or a woman who never had sex with his or her spouse finishes a task and then cries over it.<sup>53</sup> All of these instances demonstrate the importance the authors put on having as many sons as one can and experiencing rites of passage such as marriage and having children. All of these stress the ideal of living long enough to reach adulthood.

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<sup>47</sup> Katz, 199.

<sup>48</sup> Black *et al.* “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” line 255.

<sup>49</sup> Black *et al.* “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” lines 254-267.

<sup>50</sup> Black *et al.* “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” lines 254-267.

<sup>51</sup> Black *et al.* “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” lines 254-267.

<sup>52</sup> Black *et al.* “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” lines 268-285.

<sup>53</sup> Black *et al.* “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” lines 268-285.

Enkidu further describes that a man eaten by a lion still suffers physical pain. A leprous man “twitches like an ox as the worms eat at him,” and a man who dies from a fire, Enkidu reports, is not there, explaining, “His spirit is not about. His smoke went up to the sky.”<sup>54</sup> These instances are examples of tragic death, presumably before old age. This demonstrates that the whole body must be properly interred for the shade of the dead to reside in the underworld. The authors feared dying before old age because therein lies future-related regret, or regret from being denied the opportunity to live a full life.

One positive image in Enkidu’s response is that stillborn children “play at a table of gold and silver, laden with honey and ghee.”<sup>55</sup> This image may reflect the struggle people had with imagining the afterlife for children who never had the chance to live. This image certainly provided the audience with a way to cope with such an innocent, yet tragic and unexplainable death and the associated grief.

Katz explains that Enkidu’s answers reveal a “complex socio-economic hierarchy” in the netherworld because people with more sons experienced better conditions than those who had no sons. She suggests that what Enkidu describes is reflective of real Sumerian socio-economic hierarchies, and therefore “the netherworld was conceived as paralleling the world of the living,”<sup>56</sup> and “conceived as a community resembling a terrestrial city-state.”<sup>57</sup> Most likely in Sumerian culture, those who had many sons were honored and respected in their community. Thus, the way the authors imagined the underworld would parallel the social structure in Sumerian culture. Again, this sense of order and familiarity is a positive belief about death;

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<sup>54</sup> Black *et al.*, “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” lines 254-267.

<sup>55</sup> Black *et al.*, “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” lines 254-267.

<sup>56</sup> Katz, 182.

<sup>57</sup> Katz, 177.

however, a father with no sons would only perceive the order and familiarity as a continuation of the lower status in his life, and order would thus be a negative belief about death

Conditions in the netherworld, according to this myth, vary between individuals, and are dependent upon their circumstances in life or in death. The conditions of the underworld range from miserable conditions such as weeping, sitting on bricks, and being eaten by worms, to good conditions such as rejoicing, sitting at a table of gold and silver, and being a companion to the gods. A Sumerian could feel peaceful about dying and going to the netherworld if they had many sons because they know that they would be remembered. Therefore, they would not have past-related regret. However, the authors fear that the experience of tragic death where the body is not properly interred means the person will not be able to rest in the underworld. This demonstrates a strong death anxiety if the death is tragic or premature. The author's expression of skepticism through Enkidu also expresses a negative belief about death, thus showing that the author experienced death anxiety. However, like "Inanna's Descent," the familiarity associated with the ordered structure of the netherworld is a positive belief about death, possibly contributing to death acceptance. Therefore, "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and Netherworld" brings hope to people with many sons and anxiety to those who do not. The seeming contradiction of both death anxiety and death acceptance in the myth may reflect the psychological complexity of people feeling skeptical about existence after death, but at the same time looking for comfort and hope in order to cope with feelings of death anxiety.

The Lament, a common literary genre in the Ancient Near East, is a poetic piece of literature that expresses some sort of grief or complaint, most often for the loss of a loved one or for one's own sickness. In the "Lament for Damu," a narration of Damu's death, the netherworld is described as "the terrible place of my casting away." The speaker also states that

“I am the lad, to the distant, the netherworld.”<sup>58</sup> When the speaker uses the term “distant” this is partly the answer to why he is referring to the netherworld as a terrible place.<sup>59</sup> Katz expands, stating, “the term [“distant”] is employed to illustrate Damu’s separation from his loved ones and from the world of the living.”<sup>60</sup> This is similar to the idea that the netherworld is a place of no return; both expressions demonstrate the anxieties behind them: separation from the world of the living.

In the lament “In the Desert by the Early Grass” a mother mourns for her dead son. The netherworld is also referred to in this text as “the land of no return.” The road that leads to the netherworld “finishes off the one who walks it,”<sup>61</sup> which is again another reference to not being able to return from the netherworld once having traveled there. The netherworld is also referred to as “dark/frightening,” as Katz translates it.<sup>62</sup> The text goes on to state that the subject of the lament “lies cast in water and blood,” and “knows no purification and healing water.”<sup>63</sup> These images seem to be describing harsh conditions that contribute to negative beliefs about death.

In the myth “Ningiszida’s Journey to the Netherworld,” Ningiszida has died and Ningiszida’s sister wants to join him as he travels to the netherworld because she is mourning for him by commiseration. But Ningiszida warns her that

The river of the netherworld flows no water, its water you should not  
drink, would you sail then?  
The field of the netherworld grows no grain, flour is not milled from it,  
would you sail then?  
The sheep of the netherworld carries no wool, cloth is not woven from  
him, would you sail then?<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Katz, 2.

<sup>59</sup> The netherworld in other sources is also referred to as being far away. In the “The Messenger and the Maiden” the netherworld is referred to as “the far-off land,” Katz, 9.

<sup>60</sup> Katz, 3.

<sup>61</sup> Katz, 24.

<sup>62</sup> Katz, 24.

<sup>63</sup> Katz, 24.

<sup>64</sup> Katz, 219.



Katz points out that Ningiszida is referring to the needs necessary for survival: food, water and clothing, which “indicates that the netherworld is devoid of everything.”<sup>65</sup> She also explains that this passage is demonstrating a “savage nature” of the underworld, as opposed to a civilized nature. As discussed in the other myths, the netherworld may have been an orderly place because of the way it is described as parallel to a city-state. However, this seeming paradox is not meant to be taken literally, but reflects different literary motifs that in this case allude to the tragedy of death from the perspective of a grieving family member. Nonetheless, this passage demonstrates the differences between life on earth and life in the netherworld. The chaotic nature described insinuates a negative belief about death. This passage also shows a grieving person wanting to accompany her loved one to the netherworld, thus dying herself, but this passage contemplates the logic of this emotion because it reminds the reader of the reality of the underworld, which demonstrates a negative belief about death.

In another myth, “Lulil and His Sister,” a dead god tells his sister about the netherworld: “My bed is the dust of the netherworld...My sleep is troubled...”<sup>66</sup> Images of dust reflect the nature of the grave, while sleeping is metaphorical for the nature of death. However, the tone is rather gloomy, indicated by the god’s troubled sleep. These gloomy conditions clearly represent negative beliefs about death.

In the First Elegy of the Pushkin Museum, a son laments for his father and, according to Katz, “expresses wishes for his father’s well-being in the netherworld –wishes that the gods of the netherworld would look after him and wishes for a favorable future for his living relatives.”<sup>67</sup> For example, the speaker states, “May you be adopted by the lady of the *kur*,<sup>68</sup> may she have

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<sup>65</sup> Katz, 219.

<sup>66</sup> Katz, 227.

<sup>67</sup> Katz, 374.

<sup>68</sup> The term *kur* literally translates into “earth,” but is the word used for the underworld, the place of the dead.

compassion for you.”<sup>69</sup> This passage may help explain why in “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld” the more sons one has the better off one’s conditions may be in the netherworld. Sons, like the son in this lament, may have prayed for their fathers in the netherworld, and this then was what may have improved the father’s conditions in the underworld. This demonstrates that having many sons would prevent past-related regret for a father. It is also interesting that the son asks the lady of the netherworld to have compassion for his father. This shows that the netherworld gods were not seen as monstrous, demonic figures, but rather similar to other gods in the ability to offer compassion to its subjects. This lament, therefore, demonstrates that no past-related regret due to having sons would increase death acceptance and that a positive meaningfulness of death is indicated because they believed the netherworld gods show compassionate.

The myth “The Death of Urnammu” is significant because its subject is a mortal, a king rather than a god or goddess as seen in the majority of the myths, who goes to the underworld. This myth describes the road to the underworld as desolate and twisted.<sup>70</sup> A desolate and twisted road may represent the lonely and agonizing experience of the dying process. When Urnammu reaches the underworld he gives gifts to the seven gatekeepers of the underworld. Gates, as discussed earlier in “Inanna’s Descent,” may reflect a sense of order, or conversely, imprisonment.

The myth goes on to say that “The famous kings who had died, . . . announced the coming of the king to the people, [and] a tumult arose in the *kur* [netherworld].”<sup>71</sup> The fact that other dead kings are acknowledged in the underworld demonstrates that they may have experienced better conditions in the underworld. The dead kings also have the role of greeting the newly

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<sup>69</sup> Katz, 375.

<sup>70</sup> Katz, 26.

<sup>71</sup> Katz, 331-332.

deceased king and announcing his arrival to the rest of the underworld. It may be reasoned, then, that Sumerians believed that some kings would have a better place in the afterlife. At the same time, the conditions were still not excellent. The myth continues:

The king slaughtered oxen, many a sheep.  
Urnamma seated them at a huge banquet.  
The food of the *kur* is bitter; the water of the *kur* is brackish.<sup>72</sup>

In this passage, Urnammu prepares a banquet but the food is bitter and the water is salty. Therefore, the conditions in the underworld are still not nearly like the conditions found on earth. The underworld is still not a pleasant place to go to, and this passage seems to highlight the difference between conditions on earth and conditions in the underworld. Katz explains that the low quality of the food “exposes an awareness that provisions spoil in the sealed grave and indicates that the mythological reality was evaluated in terms of actual reality.”<sup>73</sup> Therefore, this can be seen as a realistic attitude that reflects an acceptance of the conditions of the netherworld. Also in this myth, Urnammu compares his life on earth to that of the underworld. For example, he compares sitting on his throne to having to sit in “the dust of the pit that they made me sit.”<sup>74</sup> This too shows that conditions are worse in the underworld than in the real world. Thus, the conditions of spoiled food and dust demonstrate a meaningfulness of death that is quite negative.

In conclusion, the netherworld in both “Inanna’s Descent” and “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld” is reflective of a Sumerian city-state. In “Inanna’s Descent” there are judges who keep order in the netherworld, and the *galla*, who act like a police force. In “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld” there is a socio-economic social order. Therefore, the belief that there is order in the netherworld might have provided feelings of familiarity, a positive belief about the underworld which contributes to death acceptance. Also, some of the myths, such as

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<sup>72</sup> Katz, 332.

<sup>73</sup> Katz, 216.

<sup>74</sup> Katz, 226.

“Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld” and “The First Elegy of the Pushkin Museum,” demonstrate the belief that the more sons a father had, the better conditions he would experience in the afterlife. The fathers with sons would have no past-related regret, and thus would be able to accept death’s approach. Another positive belief about death is that the netherworld gods had the capacity to show compassion, as seen in “The First Elegy of the Pushkin Museum.”

However, some of the images and conditions of the afterlife would not be comforting for the Sumerian people. In “Inanna’s Descent” the *galla* are frightening, demon-like creatures that are found in the netherworld. In “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld” humans are subject to harsh and miserable conditions, as well as good conditions, based upon their life or means of death. If in life a person had no sons, conditions were miserable. Most importantly, conditions were worse if one’s death was tragic or untimely. Some of the other texts, such as “The Death of Urnamma,” “Lulil and His Sister,” “In the Desert by the Early Grass,” and the “Lament for Damu” show gloomy conditions in the netherworld, such as dust and bitter food, or describe it in ways such as “distant,” “terrible,” and “frightening.” However, some of these descriptions simply reflect the observable nature of the grave. Furthermore, descriptions, found in most of the stories, of the underworld as a “land of no return,” while expressing separation from the world of the living, also express the finality of death which is a realistic attitude about the observable nature of death.

Therefore, based on the images of the underworld in the myths from ancient Sumer, the Sumerians may have felt both comforted and anxious about their own existence in the netherworld. Death anxiety is most prevalent when people have future related regret due to not having sons. It is also present because of the fear of experiencing a premature or tragic death. However, there is death acceptance for those who have many sons and for those who die a

natural death. There may also be death acceptance due to positive beliefs about death such as a familiar, orderly structure of the underworld. Although many images of the underworld are gloomy in tone, they often relate to the reality of the conditions in the grave, and thus may represent a realistic belief about death. Realistic beliefs about death most likely reflect neutral death acceptance. Thus, death attitudes for the authors of the Sumerian literature demonstrate that they experienced both death anxiety and death acceptance. Through literature, authors attempt to help decrease death anxiety by focusing on themes such as living a long life, fulfilling life through rites of passage such as marriage and having children, and easing sorrow about the death of unborn children.

## **Chapter 2: Akkadian Literature**

In this chapter, literature is analyzed that has been translated from Akkadian cuneiform script. The main stories used are “The Descent of Ishtar into the Underworld,” *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, “Nergal and Ereshkigal,” and “A Prince’s Vision of the Netherworld.” Selections of other documents that have short references to the netherworld or death are also analyzed. There are a variety of descriptions and images used to characterize the underworld in these documents. The images reveal the death attitudes of the authors through application of Tomer’s and Eliason’s death anxiety model; the images reveal the authors’ death anxiety or death acceptance depending on whether or not the beliefs are negative, neutral or positive. Future and/or past-related regret also leads to death anxiety. For the Mesopotamians, death anxiety is most present when there is a fear of an untimely or tragic death, but death acceptance seems to be a prevalent death attitude as well. The literary theme of death acceptance serves as a way to cope with the death anxiety that is expressed in images associated with the underworld.

“The Descent of Ishtar into the Underworld” is similar to “Inanna’s Descent into the Netherworld” that was analyzed in the last chapter. In fact, the Akkadian literature is most often translations of the Sumerian versions, which most likely occurred because of cultural inheritance as Babylonian culture borrowed Sumerian religion. However, the Akkadian version “The Descent of Ishtar” is much shorter. The Sumerian version’s ending is missing, whereas the Akkadian version has a complete ending. Also, there are important passages that are not found in the Sumerian version, such as Ereshkigal’s comments when Ishtar arrives at the entrance of the underworld. Therefore, the differences warrant analyzing the Akkadian version of the story as well. “The Descent of Ishtar” was found in Ashur and in Ninevah. The tablets are dated to the

end of the second millennium BCE and the seventeenth century BCE.<sup>75</sup> The story begins with Ishtar deciding that she wants to go down to the netherworld. She goes to the gate of the netherworld and demands to be let in. The gatekeeper goes to Queen Ereshkigal and gets permission to let Ishtar in. The gatekeeper then leads Ishtar through the seven doors of the Underworld. Ereshkigal curses Ishtar, giving her diseases. Because Ishtar is stuck in the netherworld, the poem describes, animals and humans on earth stop reproducing because they are mourning for Ishtar. Next, Ea creates “Good-looks” to help Ishtar. “Good-looks” goes to the Underworld to request Ishtar, but Ereshkigal curses him. Ereshkigal then orders that Ishtar have the water of life sprinkled on her. She comes back to life and Namtar lets her out of the four doors. Dumuzi, Ishtar’s husband, is then exchanged for her in the underworld.

The name for the underworld in this story is *Kurnugi*. It is also the name of the palace in the underworld. It is also called “the land of no return,” the “house which those who enter cannot leave,” and the “road where traveling is one-way only,” which describes the finality of dying and entering the afterlife.<sup>76</sup> This is a common way to describe the underworld in Mesopotamia, as we have also seen in Sumerian texts. There is also a description of the underworld in the opening lines that reads, “Over the door and bolt, dust has settled” which suggests that nobody is using the door to leave.<sup>77</sup> These statements may also express the finality of dying, a neutral belief about death. On the other hand the statements could reflect feelings of separation because the dead person would know that they would never experience life ever again.

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<sup>75</sup> Henrietta McCall, *Mesopotamian Myths* (Austin, TX: British Museum Publications and University of Texas Press, 1990), 18-19.

<sup>76</sup> Stephanie Dalley, “Descent of Ishtar” *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh and Others*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 155.

<sup>77</sup> Dalley, “Descent of Ishtar,” 155.

The underworld in this story is also described as a “dark house” where “those who enter are deprived of light.”<sup>78</sup> Foster translates this as the “gloomy house.”<sup>79</sup> Darkness is definitely a negative image in this passage. Assuming that Dalley has been able to keep the connotation of the Akkadian words, the fact that the writer uses “deprived” would suggest that not having light is bad, and therefore darkness reflects a negative belief about death. However, the statement may only reflect the reality that one is truly deprived of light in the grave, thus indicating that the statement is a neutral belief about death.

The inhabitants of the netherworld are described as being “clothed like birds, with feathers.” Dalley explains in her footnote that Akkadian iconography often depicts those in the netherworld as bird-like, or wearing feathers.<sup>80</sup> This image did not have a negative connotation associated with it. In fact, the image may be similar to both ancient and modern images of angels and demons with wings. The image of wings, and thus flight, may have been a way to represent the nature of beings in the underworld such as their ability to move unseen and quickly. Wings also further depict the mysterious nature of the beings in the underworld.

For those in the netherworld, “dust is their food, clay their bread.”<sup>81</sup> Ereshkigal states that she also “eat[s] clay for bread,” and adds that she “drink[s] muddy water for beer.”<sup>82</sup> This is not an appetizing image. The underworld is not described as a place where people will be banqueting and enjoying good food. Instead, the authors write about clay and dust as food, which reflects their observation of people being buried in the clay and dust, or in the ground. Additionally, death, and residing in the underworld, is a change from life on earth where good

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<sup>78</sup> Dalley, “Descent of Ishtar,” 155.

<sup>79</sup> Benjamin R. Foster, trans. *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature*, vol. 1 (Bethesda, Maryland: CDL Press, 1993), 403.

<sup>80</sup> Dalley, 160.

<sup>81</sup> Dalley, “Descent of Ishtar,” 155.

<sup>82</sup> Dalley, “Descent of Ishtar,” 156.



food and water is consumed. The authors are therefore pointing out a change that takes place at death, and change is almost always for humans psychologically disruptive. Change, a major cause of stress, may be anticipated in the afterlife by the authors of the literature.<sup>83</sup> Thus, the authors of the literature, when using images of poor food and water, may be demonstrating a fear of the change that occurs at death.

When Ishtar comes to the gate of the underworld, she demands to be let in. She makes a threat to the gatekeeper to get him to open the gate, stating, “I shall raise up the dead and they shall eat the living: The dead shall outnumber the living!”<sup>84</sup> This could be an idle threat made by Ishtar, but the gatekeeper seems to take her seriously by immediately responding that she should stop, and that he is going to tell Ereshkigal that she is there. This statement reflects a cultural fear of dead people, since if they are let out they could eat the living. In some circumstances the dead “might leave the Land of No Return and affect the world of the living.”<sup>85</sup> There are Akkadian texts, referred to as incantation literature, where the purpose is to exorcise ghosts and demons that are doing harm against a person. This harm the ghosts and demons cause is usually in the form of disease and epidemic, which explains why Ishtar’s threat would be taken seriously by the audience.<sup>86</sup> Ishtar’s statement, then, reveals a fear of the power of the dead, but not necessarily a fear of death.

When the gatekeeper announces to Ereshkigal that Ishtar is at the gate, Ereshkigal becomes worried and exclaims:

What brings her to me? What has incited her against me?  
Surely not because I drink water with the Anunnaki,

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<sup>83</sup> Huntington Hospital, “Life Event Stress Scale,” *Huntington Hospital*, Pasadena, CA: 2002, <http://www.huntingtonhospital.com/workfiles/lifeeventstressscale.pdf> (accessed January 19, 2008).

<sup>84</sup> Dalley, 155.

<sup>85</sup> Sarah Iles Johnston, ed. *Religions of the Ancient World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 330.

<sup>86</sup> For examples of incantation texts, see Campbell R. Thompson. *The Devils and Evil Spirits of Babylonia* (London: Luzac and Co., 1903).

I eat clay for bread, I drink muddy water for beer?  
I have to weep for young men forced to abandon sweethearts.  
I have to weep for girls wrenched from their lovers' laps.  
For the infant child I have to weep, expelled before its time.<sup>87</sup>

Ereshkigal wonders why Ishtar would want to take her place. She first expresses that the food is not of good quality. She also expresses that she grieves for those who suffer an untimely death: young men and women as well as children. This is a further example of the fear of premature death expressed by the author. The fear of a untimely death stems from past and/or future related regret. In the case of young men and young women taken from their sweethearts and lovers, they would regret that they were not able to bear many, if any, children which is a form of future-related regret. However, notice that Ereshkigal, as queen of the underworld, weeps for those who experience an untimely death. She is expressing sympathy for these spirits. This would be a comforting image for the audience because Ereshkigal is not depicted as an evil ruler of the underworld.<sup>88</sup>

Just as in "Inanna's Descent" in the Sumerian literature, "Ishtar's Descent" also contains images that reflect a sense of order in the underworld. For example, Ereshkigal is queen, and there is a palace, a gatekeeper, etc. The gatekeeper gives Ishtar a pleasant greeting as she enters the underworld stating, "Enter, my lady, that Cutha rejoice over you, that the palace of the netherworld be glad at your presence."<sup>89</sup> Because Ishtar is a goddess, she may be receiving a special greeting that is not given to ordinary people entering the underworld.<sup>90</sup> If ordinary people were also welcomed this pleasantly, then this would be a positive belief about death to know that you will be greeted warmly as if you are being welcomed to a new home.

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<sup>87</sup> Dalley, "The Descent of Ishtar," 156.

<sup>88</sup> This is similar to a son's request for compassion for his father from the underworld goddess in the Sumerian literature. See Katz, 375.

<sup>89</sup> Foster, "Ishtar's Descent," *Before the Muses*, line 40.

<sup>90</sup> Dalley, 161, explains that some people have suggested that this is from a ritual of a statue of Ishtar being taken to a city with Nergal (King of the Underworld in other stories) as patron deity. Thus, the greeting in this story would be meant especially for her, and not ordinary people.

There are also “ancient rites” by which Ishtar must abide. At each of the seven doors that she passes through, the gatekeeper removes one of her items of clothing. He takes off her crown, earrings, necklace, toggle-pins, girdle, bracelets and anklets, and her garment. Each time he removes an item, Ishtar asks him “why?” He answers, “Such are the rites of the Mistress of the Earth.”<sup>91</sup> With this statement, the gatekeeper seems to imply that these are the rites that everyone must go through as they enter the underworld. As explained in “Inanna’s Descent,” the loss of the *me* most likely represents a loss of power that possibly everyone experienced as they entered the underworld.<sup>92</sup> If everyone goes through this process as well, it could be symbolic of losing that which made you alive, or the sense of individuality you had as a living person. It could be symbolic of the vulnerability you gain as a member of the underworld. It may reflect the reality of dead in the grave who have no more life. Whatever its symbolism, it does not seem to be a positive experience for Ishtar, and thus we assume that people would not look forward to this change happening to them in the underworld (a negative belief about death). Along with these rites, as well as other aspects, the story also reflects a sense of order. With images of the underworld as an ordered place with a queen to rule over it, complete with a palace and helpers like Namtar, the underworld is then a place that reflects the regular life of the Mesopotamian people. Therefore, order, as opposed to chaos in the netherworld, and its similarity to a city-state, provides a sense of familiarity to life on earth.

“The Descent of Ishtar into the Underworld” contains images of the afterlife that are negative, such as being deprived of light. Descriptions of poor food quality may signify the change the author anticipates when one dies and enters the underworld. Change is often a stressful experience, and thus this image may reflect a negative belief about death. These

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<sup>91</sup> Dalley, “Descent of Ishtar Descent,” 156-157.

<sup>92</sup> Katz, 177.

negative beliefs about death all reflect death anxiety in the author. At the same time, these images of poor food may reflect the nature of the grave. Expressions such as “a land of no return” may reflect a sense of separation one experienced in the underworld, which is a negative belief about death that demonstrates death anxiety. However, it could also simply reflect the finality of death, which is a neutral belief about death that demonstrates a healthy acceptance of its inevitability. Death acceptance is also seen in the positive beliefs about death regarding the orderly structure of society and thus the familiarity of life on earth. There is also evidence for death acceptance when Ereshkigal expresses compassion for the dead. It shows that she is not a demonic creature meant to provide eternal punishment but one whose job is to establish and maintain order in the underworld. Also, if humans experience a similar loss of power like Ishtar as she entered the underworld, then this sense of loss would also reflect death anxiety. However, Ereshkigal’s compassion for those who experience an untimely death demonstrates the fear associated with a tragic or premature death.

In the Sumerian version, “Inanna’s Descent,” demon-like characters escort Inanna out of the underworld. In “Ishtar’s Descent,” we do not find these characters. However, there is a piece of Babylonian incantation literature that describes ghosts/demons in a surprisingly similar manner to the way the demons were described in “Inanna’s Descent.” For instance, one passage reads,

Nor male nor female are they,  
They are as the roaming windblast,  
No wife have they, no son do they beget;  
Knowing neither mercy nor pity,  
They hearken not unto prayer or supplication.<sup>93</sup>

The next two passages describe how the demons cause early deaths:

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<sup>93</sup>Campbell R. Thompson. *The Devils and Evil Spirits of Babylonia*. London: Luzac and Co., 1903, Utukki Limnuti, Tablet V, lines 39-40.

From land to land they roam,  
Driving the maiden from her chamber,  
Sending the man forth from his house,  
Expelling the son from the house of his father...<sup>94</sup>

...  
Through the door like a snake they glide  
Through the hinge like the wind they blow,  
Estranging the wife from the embrace of a husband,  
Snatching the child from the loins of a man.<sup>95</sup>

This shows that the Mesopotamians feared a premature death, a type of future related regret in which one's life is unfulfilled. In the case of the wife being taken from the husband, she would have experienced future related regret because she may not have been able to have as many children as she could have if she lived a longer life. Of course, the child taken from the man never even gets to experience life, which is also an example of future related regret.

Thompson describes why some people became like the demons above:

After death, the souls of men and women who died in the ordinary course of nature entered into the Underworld...where they remained trying to eke out a wretched existence by feeding on dust and mud, and receiving the offerings and libations paid to them by their descendants and relations on earth. If for any reason these attentions should cease, and the spirit of the dead man be forgotten, then it was forced by hunger and thirst to come forth from its abode...to seek on earth the food it wants, and, roaming up and down, it sought what it might devour. If it found a luckless man who had wandered far from his fellows into haunted places, it fastened upon him, plaguing and tormenting him until such time as a priest should drive it away with exorcisms.<sup>96</sup>

The ancient author also describes possible situations in a person's life that could make them become a demon like the ones described above. There are robbers and other people that may not have liked the person that is being possessed, but it could also be "a harlot"<sup>97</sup> (that hath died) whose baby is sick, or a woman (that hath died) in travail, or a weeping woman (that hath died)

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<sup>94</sup> Thompson, Utukki Limnuti, Tablet IV, lines 25-30.

<sup>95</sup> Thompson, Utukki Limnuti, Tablet IV, lines 20-25.

<sup>96</sup> Thompson, xxviii.

<sup>97</sup> A better translation for "harlot" is "priestess."

with a babe at the breast.”<sup>98</sup> Again, these are examples of the female experience of untimely death. Women experienced a fear of premature death for reasons unique to men: the fear of dying before they can raise a child old enough to survive on its own. If a woman dies at this time, the author believes that these women may become disruptive in the afterlife.

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* is one of the most famous pieces of literature of the ancient world. Sin-leqi-unnini is credited by scholars as recording the definitive version of the *Epic*. Dates for the *Epic of Gilgamesh* range from 1600 BCE to 1000 BCE, and the main version was found in Ninevah. There are poems about Gilgamesh in early Sumerian literature and there was most likely an older oral tradition in existence before it was written down. The epic itself, while drawn from these early oral and written traditions, is a Babylonian, particularly Sin-leqi-unnini’s, work of art.<sup>99</sup> We do not know the purpose of the epic or who the audience was meant to be, but Dalley suspects that it was most likely for entertainment purposes.<sup>100</sup>

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* is the story of how Gilgamesh and Enkidu become friends and the adventures that they have together. However, Enkidu becomes ill and becomes upset about dying. When Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh fears death himself and goes on a quest to find immortality. He goes to Ut-napishtim, who survived the great flood and was granted immortality by the gods, wanting to know how he can find immortality for himself. Gilgamesh is given the chance for renewed youth with a plant of life, but it is then stolen by a serpent. One of the main themes relevant to this paper, then, is the search for immortality.

In Tablet VI, Ishtar becomes infatuated with Gilgamesh’s good looks. Gilgamesh rejects her advances, and at this Ishtar becomes angry. She goes to her father Anu, demanding that she be given the Bull of Heaven. She tells her father that if she doesn’t get her way, “I shall set my

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<sup>98</sup> Thompson, Utukki Limnuti, Tablet V, lines 51-53.

<sup>99</sup> McCall, 35.

<sup>100</sup> Dalley, 40.

face toward the infernal regions,/ I shall raise up the dead, and they will eat the/ living, I shall make the dead outnumber the living.”<sup>101</sup> This is the same threat made by Ishtar in “Ishtar’s Descent into the Underworld.” Again, this could be an idle threat to her father. In “Ishtar’s Descent into the Underworld,” the gatekeeper seems to take her threat seriously.<sup>102</sup> In the *Epic*, however, her father tells her no.<sup>103</sup> Still, through another argument she receives the Bull of Heaven, and so her threat is never fulfilled. Like the threat in “Ishtar’s Descent into the Underworld,” it reflects a fear of the dead, but not necessarily a fear of death itself.

Later in the story, Enkidu finds out that he is going to die. As a result, he becomes angry and starts cursing the hunter and harlot who brought him to Uruk. Shamash, the sun god, consoles Enkidu by assuring him that Gilgamesh will “lay you to rest on a bed of loving care,” and that people will grieve for him, especially Gilgamesh.<sup>104</sup> This seems to ease Enkidu’s anger, for immediately “his heart became quiet.”<sup>105</sup> When Enkidu is actually dying Gilgamesh also reassures Enkidu he will be properly buried, and that people will mourn for him, especially himself.<sup>106</sup> Enkidu finds out from Enlil that he is going to die because he killed the Bull of Heaven. Shamash explains that Enkidu is innocent and does not deserve to die. Although Shamash’s opinion does not sway Enlil’s decision, it shows the reader that Enkidu becomes angry because his death will be untimely and unjust. So it is not fear of death that is the reason for his anger, but an early and unjust death in which he worries that no one will remember him. Therefore, this is not showing a fear of death itself, but of an early death. This relates to the Sumerian story of “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” where in Tablet XII of the *Epic of*

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<sup>101</sup> Dalley, 155.

<sup>102</sup> Dalley, 155.

<sup>103</sup> He tells her no, explaining that there would be a famine on earth, but Ishtar answers back (these lines are fragmentary) and then is allowed to take the Bull of Heaven.

<sup>104</sup> Dalley, “Epic of Gilgamesh,” Tablet VII, 87-88.

<sup>105</sup> Dalley, “Epic of Gilgamesh,” Tablet VII, 88.

<sup>106</sup> Dalley “Epic of Gilgamesh,” Tablet VIII, 93.

*Gilgamesh* people who have an early, tragic death are often unhappy in the underworld. Also in these stories, the more sons a person has the better their situation in the underworld will be, since more sons meant more people who will remember them. This is especially important for the ancient Mesopotamians because of ritual practices such as making food and drink offerings to the dead, calling out the dead person's name, etc. Therefore, Enkidu is most likely reassured by the fact that he will be remembered after death by Gilgamesh, and therefore his situation in the underworld will be better than if his life was not remembered.

Enkidu has a dream in which he travels to the underworld. In some ways, it is similar to "Ishtar's Descent into the Underworld." Enkidu is visited by what he describes as a young man with an obscured face. Enkidu fights this young man, but then, as Enkidu explains, "He seized me, {and} drove me down"<sup>107</sup> to the underworld, as if against his will. Obviously, in his dream, Enkidu symbolically fights the process of dying itself. Enkidu, therefore, displays death anxiety.

Enkidu goes on to describe what he sees in the underworld. He describes it as a "house which those who enter cannot leave" and as a "road where traveling is one way only." Also, "over the door [and the bolt, dust has settled.]"<sup>108</sup> These exact phrases were in "Ishtar's Descent into the Underworld." As explained earlier, these may be neutral statements about the finality of dying. On the other hand the statement may reflect that the dead person would know that they would never see their family and friends, and never experience life again. In this sense, these images make the underworld seem like a prison.

The underworld is also described as being dark. Enkidu refers to it as "the dark house," as "the house where those who stay are deprived of light," and that people "see no light, and they

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<sup>107</sup> Dalley, "Epic of Gilgamesh," Tablet VII, 89.

<sup>108</sup> Dalley, "Epic of Gilgamesh," Tablet VII, 89.



dwell in darkness.”<sup>109</sup> Again we saw these images in “Ishtar’s Descent Into the Underworld.” The image of darkness is most likely an observation of the darkness in the grave. The author’s emphasis on darkness, however, seems to set a tone of nervousness and dread in Enkidu. This image, while possibly a passive reference to the nature of the grave, may reflect death anxiety based on the tone of the passage.

Enkidu also emphasizes the dust of the underworld. Dust and clay are food, dust settles on the door, and Enkidu even refers to the underworld as “the house of dust.”<sup>110</sup> This may be reflective of the observation that people are buried in the soil, the dust, and therefore carries no negative associations with it. However, being surrounded by dust, and eating dust, is not as pleasant as the conditions of life on earth, which has a varied environment and good food. However, a few lines later Enkidu states that there are beings that “regularly set out cooked meats, set out baked (bread), {and} set out cold water from waterskins.”<sup>111</sup> This seems to be a paradoxical statement to the lines before where Enkidu states that “dust is their food, and clay their bread.” However, it is most likely a reference to *kispu*-offerings. These regular offerings involved “providing [ancestors] with bread, water, clothing and ointment.”<sup>112</sup> Thus, this would reflect a comfort people would receive from knowing that food and water are set out regularly for them. Conversely, then, people who did not receive offerings and libations from their descendants may have been the ones forced to eat dust and clay. This reveals why the authors show having children to be significant for one’s experience in the underworld.

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<sup>109</sup> Dalley, “Epic of Gilgamesh”, Tablet VII, 89.

<sup>110</sup> Dalley, “Epic of Gilgamesh”, Tablet VII, 89.

<sup>111</sup> Dalley, “Epic of Gilgamesh,” Tablet VII, 89.

<sup>112</sup> Katz, 212.

However, Enkidu describes seeing crowns from those who had “ruled the land from time immemorial... heaped up” at the entrance to the netherworld.<sup>113</sup> This signifies the kings’ loss of power in the underworld; their crowns are removed and they have equal status to the other beings in the underworld. This is similar to the author of Isaiah 14 exclaiming that the King of Babylon will lose his status and power once he enters the underworld.<sup>114</sup>

Enkidu then describes different people in the underworld. There are different kinds of priests, Queen Ereshkigal, and a scribe. This illustrates the similarity to the organization of a real city-state, thus suggesting that there is a sense of order, just as is seen in “Ishtar’s Descent into the Underworld.” Order, then, suggests that there is no chaos. Since the ordered structure is similar to the city-state structure, then this would provide familiarity.

After Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh becomes deeply aware of his own mortality. He asks, “Shall I die too, am I not like Enkidu?” and then states, “I am afraid of Death.”<sup>115</sup> This is a turning point in the story. Before, Gilgamesh was not afraid of death. Gilgamesh’s character may reflect a normative emotion in Mesopotamian society. Most likely, some people were not afraid of death because they had little death salience, such as the young who had not yet faced their own mortality or ignored their mortality; others, such as adults who were death salient, and had realized their own mortality, were afraid of death, but through wisdom had learned to accept death’s inevitability. Thus, levels of death anxiety most likely varied during an individual’s lifetime. However, one of the major themes of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is to take a *carpe diem* approach to life, since Gilgamesh’s search for immortality is futile. This theme is expressed in

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<sup>113</sup> Dalley, “Epic of Gilgamesh,” Tablet VII, 89.

<sup>114</sup> Isaiah 14:9-11. *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible*: New Revised Standard Version. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003. See below in the Hebrew chapter for discussion of this passage.

<sup>115</sup> Dalley, “Epic of Gilgamesh,” Tablet IX, 95.

the barmaid's advice to Gilgamesh, which is discussed below.<sup>116</sup> This could represent those adults who had faced their own mortality and reached death acceptance. Thus, this theme may reflect the norm of Mesopotamian society. In that sense, there is not much future or past related regret, but rather an acceptance of the inevitability of death. It most likely, however, reflects the ideal way one should feel about death according to the Mesopotamians, while in reality death anxiety was present.

When Gilgamesh says "I am afraid of Death," he immediately states, "and so I roam open country."<sup>117</sup> This would seem to imply he is just restless and upset, and will soon roam the country to find immortality. Dalley, however, explains that it may be translated "I fear a death (in which) I must roam open country."<sup>118</sup> Mesopotamians believed that people who died an untimely death, or whose bodies were not properly taken care of, would roam about the country as spirits and not be in the underworld.<sup>119</sup> Therefore, Dalley is suggesting that Gilgamesh is not so much afraid of eventual death and life in the underworld, but rather an early death in which his spirit would not go to the underworld! This suggests, then, that people were not afraid of a normal death or of the underworld itself, but were, at times, afraid of a strange or untimely death. This is further supported by Tablet XII and the Sumerian "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld," where people who are eaten by lions spend their time in the netherworld crying out in pain, or people who die by fire are not even in the netherworld.<sup>120</sup> In fact, next in the story Gilgamesh exclaims, "I saw lions and was afraid."<sup>121</sup> Proper internment of the whole body was important to the Mesopotamian culture; if Gilgamesh was eaten by lions or his body was left in

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<sup>116</sup> Dalley, "Gilgamesh (Old Babylonian Version)" Tablet X, 180.

<sup>117</sup> Dalley, "Epic of Gilgamesh," Tablet IX, 95.

<sup>118</sup> Dalley, 131.

<sup>119</sup> Dalley, 131.

<sup>120</sup> J.A. Black, G. Cunningham, E. Flückiger-Hawker, E. Robson and G. Zólyomi, "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld," Version A, *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://www-etcs1.orient.ox.ac.uk/>), Oxford 1998-present, lines 286-303.

<sup>121</sup> Dalley, "Epic of Gilgamesh," Tablet IX, 95.

the countryside it would mean that his spirit would not go to the underworld. This is obviously a big shift from before Enkidu's death when they fought Huwaba without fear.

On his journey to visit Ut-napishtim, Gilgamesh runs into a barmaid who gives him some advice:

When the gods created mankind  
They appointed death for mankind,  
Kept eternal life in their own hands.  
So, Gilgamesh, let your stomach be full,  
Day and night enjoy yourself in every way,  
Every day arrange for pleasures.  
Day and night dance and play,  
Wear fresh clothes.  
Keep your head washed, bathe in water,  
Appreciate the child who holds your hand,  
Let your wife enjoy herself in your lap.<sup>122</sup>

The barmaid's advice to Gilgamesh is the theme of the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. She instructs Gilgamesh to live his life to the fullest because he will not be immortal. She tries to get Gilgamesh to accept that death is inevitable. This approach to living life would not allow for past or future related regret.

The theme is furthered when Gilgamesh reaches Ut-napishtim, and he states that "Death is inevitable at some time, both for Gilgamesh and for a fool."<sup>123</sup> The audience would be agreeing with Ut-napishtim's comments, and would be hoping that Gilgamesh would come to this conclusion too. Ut-napishtim goes on to say, though, that "Nobody sees Death, Nobody sees the face of Death, Nobody hears the voice of Death. Savage Death just cuts mankind down,"<sup>124</sup> and that "Death's picture cannot be drawn."<sup>125</sup> These statements communicate the way the author sees the nature of death as unseen and mysterious and that it can come with little or no

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<sup>122</sup> Dalley, "Gilgamesh (Old Babylonian Version)," Tablet X, 180.

<sup>123</sup> Dalley, "Epic of Gilgamesh," Tablet X, 107.

<sup>124</sup> Dalley, "Epic of Gilgamesh," Tablet XI, 108.

<sup>125</sup> Dalley, "Epic of Gilgamesh," Tablet XI, 109.

warning. He does use the word “savage,” assuming the nuances of the word are translated correctly, as an adjective describing death. Thus, this description of death does not reflect a positive meaningfulness of death, but rather an attitude that acknowledges the mystery of death.

Also, Ut-napishtim states that “the sleeping and the dead are just like each other.”<sup>126</sup> Later in the narrative, Ut-napishtim challenges Gilgamesh that he not sleep. Gilgamesh, however, is tired and falls asleep. Ut-napishtim made the suggestion to show Gilgamesh what immortal life is like, and that it is not such a good thing, whereas sleeping is like being dead. Ut-napishtim’s test is meant to remind Gilgamesh further of his mortality in order that he may accept it. He also tries to prove to Gilgamesh that death is not so bad, so he has his wife bake bread for Gilgamesh each day that he is asleep. The oldest bread, of course, turns moldy. When Gilgamesh awakes he does not believe that he has been asleep for such a long time, until he sees the bread.<sup>127</sup> Thus, Ut-napishtim proves a point by suggesting that death is like sleep, and that you do not even realize you are sleeping when you are asleep.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* demonstrates that both death anxiety and death acceptance were present for the author. The various references to the netherworld as a “land of no return” may be an observation of the finality of death or a statement about the separation from the living that the dead experience in the underworld. Images of darkness and dust may also be observations of the conditions of the grave, although the tone used in association with these passages is often apprehensive and full of dread. So while these images may be gloomy in nature, they most likely reflect neutral beliefs about death, which according to the death anxiety model, lead to death acceptance. However, even though dust and clay are described as the food of the netherworld, there is also mention of good food that is set out. This is the food offerings of the

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<sup>126</sup> Dalley, “Epic of Gilgamesh,” Tablet XI, 109.

<sup>127</sup> Dalley, “Epic of Gilgamesh,” Tablet XI, 116-117.

dead person's descendants. This particular image, then, furthers the idea that more sons meant better conditions in the underworld. Also expressed by the author is the anxiety associated with thoughts of premature death. Enkidu becomes angry because his death will be premature. He is only comforted when he knows his body will be properly buried and that Gilgamesh will remember him. Gilgamesh is afraid of an untimely death when he fears roaming the open country and being eaten by a lion. The barmaid and Ut-napishtim do their best to convince Gilgamesh to accept the inevitability of death and to live his life to the fullest. Therefore, this piece of literature encourages death acceptance since death is inevitable. There is death anxiety, however, in regard to tragic and early death.

The twelfth tablet of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is basically an Akkadian translation of the second part of the Sumerian "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld." However, it is much more detailed than the Sumerian version. The "earth" is used as a synonym for the name of the underworld. The story starts with the *pekku* and *mekku*, names for an unknown type of sporting equipment, having fallen into the underworld and Enkidu volunteers to retrieve them.

Gilgamesh then gives Enkidu instructions on how to act while he is in the netherworld. He warns him not to wear clean clothes or perfume, not to throw stuff or raise a club, not to wear shoes, in order that he doesn't make noise, and not to kiss or hit his wives or sons that are in the underworld. These instructions are given so that Enkidu will not be noticed in the underworld. These are compelling descriptions of existence in the underworld: people are not wearing clean clothes, or good smelling perfume, but rather are dirty and smelly (reflective of the state of a corpse). This also serves to contrast the luxuries of the living and the absence of these luxuries for the dead. It is also quiet. This is not surprising if Ut-napishtam's comment to Gilgamesh that

being dead is like sleeping is reflected in this tablet as well. Therefore, if the spirits are sleeping or in a sleep-like state Enkidu should not make noise in order to go unnoticed.

Unfortunately for Enkidu, he does all the things Gilgamesh tells him not to do, and the underworld “seizes” him. But Enkidu is allowed to come up through a hole that is opened up by the gods so Gilgamesh can see him. Gilgamesh then proceeds to question Enkidu on the conditions of the netherworld. Enkidu refuses at first saying, “you would weep,”<sup>128</sup> which suggests that the conditions are not good. However, Enkidu does go on to explain the conditions. Those with more sons experience good conditions, and those with few sons or no sons experience unpleasant conditions. For example, a father with one son weeps. The father with two sons eats bread while sitting on a brick. The father with four sons drinks water, and a father with five sons is like a scribe. This suggests, then, that those with many sons would not have feared death, because they would not experience future related regret. A corpse that is “abandoned in the open country...does not sleep in the Earth.”<sup>129</sup> A person with no one to “supply it” scavenges for crumbs in the streets.<sup>130</sup> This tablet reflects harsher conditions, and therefore negative beliefs about death, which may reflect a death anxiety held by the culture, especially since Enkidu tells Gilgamesh that he will weep if he were to disclose the conditions of the underworld to him. However, conditions are better with those who have sons, those who will “supply” them in the underworld. Also, conditions are worse if one has an untimely death or if one does not even get to be in the underworld because his or her corpse is not properly buried.

In the myth “Nergal and Ereshkigal,” the gods are having a banquet and Ereshkigal cannot go since she has to stay in the underworld. She sends her servant in her place. Nergal disrespects the servant, and as punishment is sent to the underworld. However, when Nergal

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<sup>128</sup> Dalley, “Epic of Gilgamesh” Tablet XII, 123.

<sup>129</sup> Dalley, “Epic of Gilgamesh” Tablet XII, 124.

<sup>130</sup> Dalley, “Epic of Gilgamesh,” Tablet XII, 125.

goes to the underworld, he sleeps with Ereshkigal. He then leaves and Ereshkigal demands to Anu, a head god in the pantheon, that Nergal be sent back. Eventually, Nergal comes back, seizes Ereshkigal's throne, and becomes king of the underworld. There are actually two versions of this myth. One dates from about the fifteenth or fourteenth century BCE, and the other from the seventh century BCE.<sup>131</sup> Most of the images of the underworld in this myth are very similar, if not exactly the same, to those found in "The Descent of Ishtar" and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*.

A messenger god comes to the "gate of Ereshkigal"<sup>132</sup> to deliver Ereshkigal a message. The gatekeeper lets him in, and greets him with "may the gate bless you" wherein he passes through seven gates.<sup>133</sup> He reaches a courtyard, which is described as "spacious"<sup>134</sup> where he greets Ereshkigal and delivers the message. In this myth, Ereshkigal is queen of the underworld; there are seven gates, and a courtyard, presumably a courtyard to her palace. The gates may signify a prison-like atmosphere of the underworld, and show that the underworld is a place one cannot exit. However, the gatekeeper offers the god a blessing as he enters. Maybe this blessing signifies that because it is a god, and a messenger god, this god has permission to exit the gates (as he does). Thus, it cannot be determined whether or not humans would receive this blessing as they entered the underworld. The courtyard, gates, and queen also reflect the sense of order found in the underworld, similar to the other myths.

When Nergal gets ready to go to the underworld, Ea instructs him as to what he should not do once he arrives. Although some of the specific warnings are different, this is very similar to Gilgamesh warning Enkidu what not to do in the underworld. Nergal is warned not to sit in the chair they bring, and the bread, meat, beer, and foot bath he is also not to accept. He is also

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<sup>131</sup> Dalley, 163-164.

<sup>132</sup> Dalley, "Nergal and Ereshkigal," 165.

<sup>133</sup> Dalley, "Nergal and Ereshkigal," 165.

<sup>134</sup> Dalley, "Nergal and Ereshkigal," 165.



warned not to give in to his desire when he catches a glimpse of Ereshkigal dressing.<sup>135</sup> Why would he be warned not to do these things? We know that Enkidu did do these things, and thus became one of the dead. Nergal resists all of these, except giving in to his desire for Ereshkigal.<sup>136</sup> It seems that participating in any of these activities would cause one to become one of the dead themselves, and in the case of a god, be trapped in the netherworld.

The next part describes the underworld as Nergal enters it. It is described as a “dark house” and that people are “deprived of light.”<sup>137</sup> Darkness most likely reflects the reality of the darkness of the grave. The underworld is also described as “the house which those who enter cannot leave,/ On the road where traveling is one way only.”<sup>138</sup> This again reflects the fact that the underworld is a “land of no return,” which expresses the finality of death. The dead are also “clothed, like birds, with feathers.”<sup>139</sup> This exact description is also found in “Ishtar’s Descent.”

When Ereshkigal finds out that Nergal is not coming back to the underworld, she threatens the gods that she shall “raise up the dead, and they will eat the living. I shall make the dead outnumber the living!”<sup>140</sup> This is the same threat that Ishtar exclaimed in “Ishtar’s Descent.” Yet, Anu acknowledges Ereshkigal’s threat and lets Nergal be taken to the underworld. However, rather than being dragged into the underworld, Nergal takes his strap and bow and demands to be let in. He proceeds to strike down each of the seven doormen. He then goes up to Ereshkigal and seizes her throne by physically pulling her out of it by her hair and, consequently, Nergal is king of the underworld. The story consequently has the two sleeping together again, and then the story as we have it cuts off.<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Dalley, “Nergal and Ereshkigal,” 168.

<sup>136</sup> Dalley, “Nergal and Ereshkigal,” 171.

<sup>137</sup> Dalley, “Nergal and Ereshkigal,” 168.

<sup>138</sup> Dalley, “Nergal and Ereshkigal,” 168.

<sup>139</sup> Dalley, “Nergal and Ereshkigal,” 168.

<sup>140</sup> Dalley, “Nergal and Ereshkigal,” 173. See discussion above for what the threat meant in Ishtar’s case.

<sup>141</sup> Dalley, “Nergal and Ereshkigal,” 175-176.

In the much later Amarna version it is clearer how Nergal goes from violently seizing the throne to becoming her husband. In this version, when he physically seizes the throne, he intends to decapitate Ereshkigal, but she cries out for him to have mercy, and says that she will let him seize the throne and be king over the underworld if they can be husband and wife, and he agrees.<sup>142</sup>

“Nergal and Ereshkigal” has similar images to the other stories in the Akkadian literature. There are gates, a palace, and a queen. This sense of order may provide a meaningfulness of death and therefore a sense of familiarity. The underworld is also described as dark and as a “land of no return.” This describes both the nature of the grave and the finality of death. These are also neutral beliefs about death. Therefore, “Nergal and Ereshkigal” provide evidence of neutral death acceptance.

“A Prince’s Vision of the Underworld” has been dated to the middle of the seventh century BCE. This story is unique and unlike any other myths that have been found in Akkadian literature or literature from surrounding cultures. This is because of the unique images of demonic beings, with no focus on the actual dead in the underworld, and because the main character, the prince, is actually requesting to see the underworld. Therefore, this story is still mysterious for scholars as to its meanings and symbols. In the story, a prince, named Kummaya, desires to see the underworld for an unknown reason, so he sacrifices to the underworld gods and his wish is granted in a dream. In the vision, he sees several creatures that are “terrifying.”<sup>143</sup> Most of these demons have human feet and hands, but the head and body of an animal. For example, there is a “death-god [that] had the head of a serpent-dragon.”<sup>144</sup> The story does not

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<sup>142</sup> Dalley, “Nergal and Ereshkigal (Amarna Version),” 180-181.

<sup>143</sup> Alexander Heidel. *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1949), line 1.

<sup>144</sup> Heidel, line 3.

explain what a death-god is, but maybe it is a grim-reaper type figure. Some of the creatures have lion heads, bird heads, ox heads, and goat heads. Some of the creatures are two-headed. There is also a boatman of the underworld, and he has the head of a creature whose name remains untranslated. These monster-like descriptions of the demons of the underworld are certainly terrifying images. Kummaya also notices a man. His body is black; he wears a red garment and carries a bow and a sword, and his foot is on top of a serpent. Kummaya does not comment further on this man. The fact that the man is holding weapons and controlling a serpent shows the large amount of power attributed to him.<sup>145</sup>

The story continues with Kummaya seeing Nergal, king of the underworld, and his description is just as “terrifying.” He has weapons with two heads and lightning coming from his arms. The speaker exclaims that “the underworld was full of terror; before the prince lay deep silence.”<sup>146</sup> It is obvious that the underworld is thought of as terrifying in this story. Even the silence is intimidating. Nergal almost kills Kummaya, but Ishum, Nergal’s counselor, implores him to spare his life so people on the earth can be told by Kummaya of Nergal’s power. Nergal says he will curse him if Kummaya does not stop imploring the gods to see the underworld.<sup>147</sup>

The prince then comes out of the vision, and he responds by lamenting in the streets. He also praises Nergal and Ereshkigal publically for granting his wish, although at the same time he is described as “grief-stricken.”<sup>148</sup>

The images in the “Prince’s Vision of the Underworld” are certainly terrifying. Being surrounded by demon creatures would also be frightening. Nergal’s description is in sharp

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<sup>145</sup> Heidel, lines 4-10.

<sup>146</sup> Heidel, line 13.

<sup>147</sup> Heidel, lines 20-28.

<sup>148</sup> Heidel, line 32.

contrast to the compassionate side of Ereshkigal found in “Ishtar’s Descent.”<sup>149</sup> Meaningfulness of death is certainly negative for those who believed the underworld was like this. The audience would be left with a sense of anxiety after reading or hearing “The Prince’s Vision of the Underworld.” However, the unique nature of this myth may mean it does not reflect commonly held beliefs about the underworld by the Mesopotamian culture.

In the genre of wisdom literature, “I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom” has a couple of references to the underworld. The speaker of the text is close to dying, but praises the gods and goddesses for healing and saving him. The passage begins with the speaker regretting that he did not do a better job at the duties the gods require of him, such as making offerings and sacrifices. This is an example of past-related regret. The author writes, “He who was living yesterday has died today: Instantly he is made gloomy, suddenly is he crushed. One moment he sings a happy song, And in an instant he will moan like a mourner.”<sup>150</sup> The writer then begins to speak of the underworld. “When they are afflicted they grumble about going down to the underworld./ .../ An evil ghost has come from its abyss, a headache has come out from Ekur [or underworld,]/ The...(demon) has descended from the (underworld) mountain.”<sup>151</sup> Unfortunately, this part is somewhat fragmentary, making it more difficult to understand. This passage shows that the underworld is close at hand, since the speaker is close to death. Notice that people “grumble” about having to go to the underworld.

Line 5 of Tablet IV speaks of the river Hubur of the underworld. Marduk seizes the sick person: “[out of the river] Hubur (in the underworld) he drew me.”<sup>152</sup> Another translation of the

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<sup>149</sup> Dalley, “Ishtar’s Descent,” 156.

<sup>150</sup> Robert H. Pfeiffer, trans. “I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom,” In *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament*, ed. James B. Pritchard, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1955), 435, Tablet II, lines 39-41.

<sup>151</sup> Pfeiffer, Tablet II, lines 47-55.

<sup>152</sup> Pfeiffer, Tablet IV, line 7.

same text states, “The Lord restored me to health,/ He rescued me [from the pit],/ He summoned me [from] destruction,/ [...] he pulled me from the Hubur river.”<sup>153</sup> Therefore, the underworld is used as a metaphor for a serious illness, and the speaker praises Marduk for saving him. Thus it can be inferred that the underworld is a metaphor for death and thus something from which people want to be saved.<sup>154</sup> The speaker is also praising Marduk not just for saving him from the underworld, but from a premature death. Disease was thought to occur because of curses or magic which warrants the idea that death by disease is untimely. Therefore, the text “I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom” highlights the Mesopotamian idea that people did have death anxiety in regard to premature death.

Death anxiety, using Tomer and Eliason’s model, is determined to be present if there are examples of future and/or past related regret and if there are negative beliefs about death. Usually, negative beliefs about death are seen in the form of harsh conditions that are seen in the underworld such as darkness and food as dust and clay and muddy water. The land of no return has an image of imprisonment. Also, Ishtar loses power as she enters the underworld, which may also have symbolism for relevant to what people believed they may lose as they enter the underworld as well. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh admits that he is afraid of death, although it may be an admission of fear of early or tragic death. Ut-napishtim describes death as savage. The ghostly Enkidu tells Gilgamesh that if he knew the conditions of the underworld, he would weep. Examples of the common fear of untimely death can be found in Ereshkigal’s expressions of sympathy over young men and women and children. Other examples include the demons that also snatch away young lovers and children. It is also seen in the incantation

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<sup>153</sup> Lambert, trans. “I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom.” In *The Ancient Near East: Supplementary Texts and Pictures Relating to the Old Testament*. Ed. James B. Pritchard, (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1969), Tablet IV, lines 4-7.

<sup>154</sup> This is similar to Hebrew Bible wisdom literature, see discussion in Hebrew chapter on Psalm 30:3, 2 Samuel 22, Isaiah 38, Psalm 6:5, and Psalm 16:9-10.

literature where people who died an early, tragic death, such as a woman who dies in childbirth, will become a demon in the afterlife. It is also seen in Enkidu's fear of his own untimely death. Also, it was believed that abandoned or forgotten corpses would result in the dead failing to enter the underworld and this contributed greatly to anxiety over death. Although a unique and unusual story, there are many instances of frightening images of the underworld in the "Prince's Vision of the Underworld." The presence of has terrifying creatures in the underworld serves to express great anxiety over death, and the text emphasizes the silence that is found in the underworld as a frightening thought.

Death acceptance is determined by positive and neutral beliefs about death. It is also determined to be present if there is a lack of future and/or past related regret. For example, death acceptance is seen in the various expressions that the underworld is a land of no return, if it is expressing the finality of death. Ereshkigal's sympathy may have led to death acceptance, since she is not seen as an evil, feared ruler. There is some sense of order kept in the underworld as well with having a queen, a palace, a scribe, etc., thus providing a sense of familiarity. The greeting that the gods receive may also be an indicator of death acceptance. Enkidu has more death acceptance when he is assured that he will be remembered and will receive a proper burial after his death. Also, there are better conditions experienced in the underworld if one has more sons, allowing for a lack of future related regret which helps death acceptance. Most importantly, the barmaid's speech to Gilgamesh, the theme of the epic, expresses that he should take a *carpe diem* approach to life, and so she instructs Gilgamesh to not worry about death. Ut-napishtim tries to show Gilgamesh that death is inevitable and that death is similar to sleep. Thus, the literature shows that Mesopotamians did struggle with death anxiety. However, as one grew wise and accepted death's inevitability, then one could be free to live life to its fullest.

Death anxiety most often occurs, then, when fulfillment in life may not occur through either an untimely or tragic death.

### **Chapter 3: Ugaritic Literature**

Many people are aware of the existence of Canaanites in the ancient Near East because of the Hebrew Bible. The religion of the Canaanites in various books of the Tanak is a source of much criticism by the Hebrew authors. Until the 1920s and 1930s, the Hebrew Bible was our only source for Canaanite religion. In 1929, a scribal library was found in the ancient city of Ugarit, modern day Ras Shamra, and suddenly scholars had a direct Canaanite source for studying its religion. The term “Canaanite” is actually a problematic term. Instead, scholars today refer to the literature found at Ugarit as “Ugaritic” because of the use of a cuneiform alphabetic script. Readers must keep in mind that the translation of these works can be problematic because there are several possible translations for many of the lines and words found in the literature. Ugaritic is a consonantal alphabetic script. For the ancient scribes, vowel sounds would have been known by those who needed to read the text. The Hebrew language is similar; however, Jewish scholars in the Middle Ages preserved the Hebrew language for future generations by adding vowel pointings. There are no vowel pointings for the Ugaritic texts such as those found in the Masoretic Hebrew text. The only vowel sound provided are indicated with the Ugaritic *aleph* letter, which has four different signs depending upon which vowel is voice with it – a, i, o, u. This lack of vowels is challenging for the translator because it is much more difficult to determine if a word is a noun or a verb, a subject or the object, as well as many other translation problems. If the translator feels a word is a verb, it is also difficult to determine the tense, the person, number and sometimes gender of the verb. Often, the translator infers grammar rules provided by knowledge of the Hebrew language, because the Ugaritic and Hebrew language are both Semitic, and therefore similar. Still, these assumptions made by the translator cannot be proven, and there are also words with no Hebrew equivalent. Therefore,



translations of the Ugaritic texts are often problematic, yet for purposes of this paper the overall level of scholarship employed by the translators is trusted.

In this chapter, three main sources of Ugaritic literature will be used to examine the authors' understandings of death and the afterlife. The three stories are *The Baal Cycle* and *The Epics of Kirta* and *Aqhat*. By using Tomer and Eliason's death anxiety model, this chapter will examine the meaningfulness of death through conceptions of the underworld, as well as past and future related regret to determine the level of death anxiety or death acceptance the literature reveals about its authors and the culture. Instances that reflect death anxiety and death acceptance in the literature are both present. Death anxiety in the Ugaritic literature is mostly related to past related regret of having no sons, or a fear of an untimely death. However, the literature demonstrates a healthy belief of the authors that death is inevitable, therefore a reflection of death acceptance.

The estimated date for *The Baal Cycle* is 1400-1350 BCE; however, the text was probably developed over a large expanse of time. The epic is about Baal, the storm god, and his rise to kingship. The epic contains three subplots. In the story he defeats the sea god, Yamm, and has a palace built for himself. Then, Baal battles Mot, the personification of death. This third section is most relevant for the subject and is the part of the myth that will be analyzed.

The third section opens with Baal sending messengers to Mot to announce his kingship. Mot responds, as a challenge to his kingship, that Baal must enter into the underworld and succumb to death. Baal agrees and when El and Anat find out they begin to grieve. Anat properly buries Baal's body. Anat then confronts Mot, demanding that he give Baal up. Mot refuses and so she violently attacks him. El has a dream that Baal has come back to life, and

indeed Baal is restored to the throne. After a few years, Mot and Baal battle again, but Mot gives up after being chided by Shapash, the sun goddess. Baal's kingship is secure.

The translator, Mark S. Smith, translates the word for the underworld as "Hell."<sup>155</sup> In his footnote he admits that he renders it this way for the ease of the English reader. The use of the word 'hell,' however, is misleading for the English reader. He does assure his readers that the underworld in Ugaritic thought is "neither [a place of] fire nor devils, but the home of the god of Death." The name for underworld, *ars*, literally means earth, but it is often used in Ugaritic literature, including *The Baal Cycle*, as well as Sumerian and Akkadian literature, as the name for the underworld.<sup>156</sup> The English reader can better understand the meaning 'underworld,' and Smith should have used this word rather than "hell," because its connotation in Western culture automatically invokes images of a place where those who are judged to be evil reside and where they then receive their eternal punishment. Despite Smith's translation, the reader must keep in mind that the underworld for the people of ancient Ugarit was not dualistic, but considered to be the one place where everyone was destined to go after death. Smith's translation of "hell" will remain in direct quotes; however, the reader should remember that the word should be read as "underworld."

First, we must examine how the underworld is described in the *Baal Cycle*. Baal sends messengers to Mot, instructing them to go to "The two hills at Earth's edge."<sup>157</sup> Baal orders his messengers to "descend to Hell, the House of 'Freedom.'"<sup>158</sup> In Smith's footnote he states that "freedom" is an "antiphrastic expression for a prison house."<sup>159</sup> Webster's dictionary defines

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<sup>155</sup> Mark S. Smith, trans. "The Baal Cycle" in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon B. Parker (Society of Biblical Literature: Scholars Press, 1997), line 7 Column VIII, for instance.

<sup>156</sup> Smith, 165.

<sup>157</sup> Smith, Column VIII, line 4. Again, earth is the same word for underworld here.

<sup>158</sup> Smith, Column VIII, line 7.

<sup>159</sup> Smith, 172.

antiphrasis as “the use of words in senses opposite to the generally accepted meanings.”<sup>160</sup>

Smith, therefore, is explaining that the title for the underworld that the author of the text is using is sarcastic in tone. This antiphrastic phrase relates to the Mesopotamian notions that the underworld is a place of no return as well as the images of bars and gates used in describing the underworld. Not only does an image of the underworld as a place of imprisonment demonstrate a negative meaningfulness of death, but also the tone that the author of the text uses may reveal the attitude the author holds toward the underworld, and therefore the afterlife. The use of sarcasm may demonstrate a sense of dread and bitterness in the author toward going to an underworld where one feels imprisoned.

Baal then orders his messengers to go to Mot in the underworld calling it, “Filth, the land of his [Mot’s] heritage.”<sup>161</sup> Thus, “filth” is not only a name for the underworld, but is also a description of the underworld. This may relate to images of dust in association with the underworld in Sumerian and Akkadian literature. The underworld is a filthy, dirty place.

Then Baal warns his messengers:

Do not get too close to Divine Mot,<sup>162</sup>  
Do not let him take you like a lamb in his mouth,  
Like a kid crushed in the chasm of his throat.<sup>163</sup>

Furthermore, Mot describes his own appetite:

Is my appetite the appetite of the lion in the wild,  
...  
Or does it go to a pool like a buffalo,  
Or travel to a spring like a hind,  
Or, truly, does my appetite consume like an ass?<sup>164</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> *Webster’s 3<sup>rd</sup> New International Dictionary of the English Language*. Philip B. Gove, Editor. (Merriam-Webster, Inc.: Springfield, Massachusetts), 1993.

<sup>161</sup> Smith, Column VIII, line 14.

<sup>162</sup> This may be related to Mesopotamian literature where people are warned about associating with the dead, which causes them to succumb to death such as Nergal in “Nergal and Ereshkigal” and Enkidu in “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld.”

<sup>163</sup> Smith, Column VIII, lines 17-20.

<sup>164</sup> Smith, Column VIII.

Also, in response to Baal's message, Mot tells Baal's messengers to deliver the following message to Baal:

But let me tear you to pieces,  
Let me eat flanks, innards, forearms.  
Surely you will descend into Divine Mot's throat,  
Into the gullet of El's Beloved, the Hero.<sup>165</sup>

The author demonstrates Mot's large mouth by stating:

[One lip to He]ll, one lip to Heaven,  
[ a to]ngue to the Stars.  
[Ba]al will enter his innards,  
Into his mouth he will descend like a dried olive.<sup>166</sup>

These passages personify Mot by describing his large appetite and ability to swallow the living. This is a frightening image, especially because Baal warns his messengers not to get close to Mot. Words and phrases such as "crushing" and tearing the body into pieces creates a terrifying image because the image leads the audience to imagine death mutilating its victim. These images of death's appetite are similar to Sheol's ability to swallow people in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>167</sup> Furthermore, when hearing Mot's message, Baal becomes frightened. Line 6 reads, "Mightiest Baal is afraid, the Cloudrider is scared."<sup>168</sup> Even Baal is afraid of Mot's large mouth and appetite, reflecting a negative belief about death.

Baal is then commanded, seemingly by the divine council of gods, to go to the underworld. This command is stated similarly to the command Baal gave his messengers when they were to descend to the underworld. But before this, Shapash, the sun goddess, sees to it that when Baal goes to the underworld he will not actually be killed by Mot, but instead she will

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<sup>165</sup> Smith, Fifth Tablet, Column I, lines 4-6.

<sup>166</sup> Smith, Column II, Fifth Tablet, lines 2-6. Gibson translates the last line as "because he has scorched the olives." This translation means that it is not a metaphor for how Baal travels into Mot's throat, but rather a reference to Mot's destructive abilities in regard to agriculture. Therefore, this line does not seem to reveal the author's attitude toward the underworld. See Gibson's translation for further information, Gibson, J. C. L. *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark LTD., 1978), 69.

<sup>167</sup> Numbers 16: 28-34. See Hebrew chapter below for a synopsis and analysis of the story.

<sup>168</sup> Smith, Column II, Fifth Tablet, lines 6-7.

provide a substitute for his body so that everyone will think he is dead.<sup>169</sup> The command of the divine council also includes the following line that Baal “be counted among the inmates of Hell; And you will know, O God, that you are dead.”<sup>170</sup> Again, prison imagery is used here with the term “inmates.” This statement foreshadows that Baal will be killed by Mot.

Next, messengers, simply referred to as “they,” report to the gods that Baal is dead. In this report they state, “We came to the pleasant land of the outback, To the beautiful field of Death’s Realm.”<sup>171</sup> Gibson’s translation reads, “We [two did go round [to the edges of the earth],/ to the limits of the water region./ We two did reach ‘Pleasure’ the land of pasture(s),/ ‘Delight’ the fields by the shore of the realm of death.”<sup>172</sup> This land outside of death’s realm may be referring to the land right outside a river that is the border of the underworld. Therefore, this land in which Baal’s body is found is not actually inside the underworld. The description that the land on the outskirts of the underworld is “beautiful” serves as a stark contrast to the realm of death.

When El, the highest god in the pantheon, hears about Baal’s death he begins to grieve. He exclaims in his grief, “After Baal I will descend to Hell.”<sup>173</sup> Similarly, when Anat hears about Baal’s death she exclaims, “After Baal we will descend to Hell.”<sup>174</sup> This is similar to Jacob’s expression of grief for his son in Genesis 37:35. Lewis suggests that these expressions are talking about a mourning ritual in which the mourner lays on the ground, symbolically descending into the underworld.<sup>175</sup> In fact, the modern Jewish ritual in which people “sit” shiva is a week-long period of mourning in which people literally sit on the ground or on a low stool

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<sup>169</sup> J. C. L. Gibson, *Canaanite Myths and Legends* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark LTD., 1978), 15-16.

<sup>170</sup> Smith, Column V, lines 14-17.

<sup>171</sup> Smith, Column VI, lines 5-7.

<sup>172</sup> Gibson, Column VI, lines 4-8.

<sup>173</sup> Smith, Column VI, line 25.

<sup>174</sup> Smith, Sixth tablet, Column I, line 8.

<sup>175</sup> Theodore, J. Lewis. *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989) 43-44. See this for Lewis’ textual and linguistic arguments that the expression is actually a ritual.

and grieve. This modern ritual derives from this ancient ritual which emphasizes commiseration with the dead in the grave. When people were grieving, they were wishing to join their loved one in the underworld and were not having any past or future related regret. They are also not concerned with the negative aspects associated with the meaningfulness of death that are found in the culture. Therefore, if the story is in fact referencing this ritual, this may show that these expressions demonstrate that the culture did have a sense of death acceptance, at least when an individual experienced the death of someone they were close to and believed that when they died they went to the underworld.

In her grieving for Baal, Anat confronts Mot. She “seizes [him] by the edge of his cloak”<sup>176</sup> and demands that he give back Baal. Mot answers that the reason he killed Baal was because he was hungry: “My appetite was lacking humans, My appetite, the multitudes of the Earth.”<sup>177</sup> This image of Mot swallowing humans is a powerful image of the inevitability of death. Anat seizes Mot again and this time splits him with a sword, defeating him. El then has a dream that Baal is alive. Baal returns to his throne for seven years. Mot comes again to Baal and asks that Baal give up one of his brothers to satisfy his appetite and he promises that if he does he will not be angry with Baal. Baal refuses and Mot declares, “Now I will consu[me humans,] I will consume the multitu[des of Earth.”<sup>178</sup> This threat is similar to Ishtar’s threats in “Ishtar’s Descent to the Underworld.”<sup>179</sup> Baal and Mot begin to fight, but Shapash intervenes, telling Mot that he should stop. Mot concedes and Baal officially secures his kingship.<sup>180</sup> Not only is this myth about Baal’s securing the kingship, but also about the cosmic battle between life and death. As Gibson explains, “Mot is...the personification of death ...humanity’s ultimate

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<sup>176</sup> Smith, Column II, line 11.

<sup>177</sup> Smith, Column II, lines 17-19.

<sup>178</sup> Smith, Column V, lines 24-25.

<sup>179</sup> Dalley, 155.

<sup>180</sup> Gibson, 16-18.

enemy, ...one whom moreover Baal cannot defeat on his own but can only keep in check with the assistance of the distant head of the gods himself.”<sup>181</sup> Thus, the myth itself may demonstrate a theme and a cosmological worldview that death cannot be defeated. If this is true, this shows that the author recognizes the inevitability of death. The fact that Mot, and therefore the metaphorical form of death, is at least kept in check may have relieved some sense of anxiety.

The last part of the myth is a speech, and it is unknown who the speaker is or who the speaker is addressing because many lines are missing. Part of the speech seems to praise Shapash, presumably for intervening throughout the story. One line states that “Shapsh rules the Rephaim.” The Rephaim are the ancestral dead. Another line reads, “Your company are the Divinities, See, the Dead are your company.”<sup>182</sup> The sun was believed to descend into the underworld at night, and Shapash may have been called upon in necromantic rituals.<sup>183</sup> Therefore, this reveals that while Mot is the personification of death, Shapash had some power over the netherworld and the dead in the underworld, as well. This power was most likely held in the form of judgment.

*The Baal Cycle* describes the underworld as a prison house with inmates. It is called a land of filth. The edge outside of the underworld is considered beautiful, an image that serves to contrast the filth of the underworld. Mot is described as having a large appetite with the ability to crush his victims. All of these images are gloomy or even frightening images associated with the underworld. At the same time, images of a prison reflect the nature of death’s finality. Naturally, the grave is also filthy, and so this description may only refer to the nature of the grave. Therefore these images may be associated with negative beliefs about death, but they may simply reflect the reality of death and the grave. Mot’s appetite, too, may demonstrate the

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<sup>181</sup> Gibson, 18.

<sup>182</sup> Smith, lines 48-49.

<sup>183</sup> Lewis, 46.

observable fact that many people die, and thus death seems to have an unending appetite for the living. However, most of the images described in the *Baal Cycle* carry a sarcastic or gloomy tone. The descriptions of Mot's appetite are frightening in nature. Thus, the meaningfulness of death in the *Baal Cycle* is mostly negative. According to Tomer and Eliason's model, then, death anxiety is most likely present for the authors.

The main character in the *Epic of Kirta* is a king by the name in the title. Since the subject of the story is a mortal king, this is beneficial to analyzing how people may have felt about the underworld. The version of the story that is currently accessible was copied in the mid-fourteenth century BCE, although scholars believe that the text originated much earlier, and is probably the earliest of the three texts presented in this chapter.<sup>184</sup>

The epic begins with a childless Kirta. El instructs Kirta on what to do to gain a son, and so Kirta gathers his army to fight for King Pabil of Udm's daughter, Lady Hurraya so he may have a child with her. At the temple of Asherah, Kirta promises that if she helps him defeat King Pabil and win his daughter, then he will give Asherah a donation. Kirta wins and takes King Pabil's daughter as his wife. Kirta has children, but forgets his vow to Asherah. She becomes angry and strikes him with a mortal sickness. Kirta's children grieve during his sickness, but in the meantime one of his eldest sons takes over the kingship. However, Kirta gets better and subsequently curses his son for seizing the throne before he has died. The rest of the text is missing.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>184</sup> Edward L. Greenstein, trans. "Kirta" in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry*, ed. Simon B. Parker (Society of Biblical Literature: Scholars Press, 1997), 9.

<sup>185</sup> Michael D. Coogan, "Canaanite Religion: the Literature" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Lindsay Jones, ed. 3 vol. (New York: MacMillan Reference USA, 2005), 1398-1399.



In lines two through four in Column III of the second tablet, El or a chorus<sup>186</sup> gives Kirta a blessing that he will have many descendants. At the beginning of the blessing, El states,

[May you be much exalted,] O Kirta,  
[Among] the Netherworld's [shades],  
[In the midst] of Ditana's company!

According to Greenstein, in a separate text Ditana is a "deified royal hero, a leader among the shades of the dead."<sup>187</sup> Ditana is an example of special individuals who gain special privileges, mainly divine status, in the underworld. These lines demonstrate the importance of offspring for one's status in the underworld. Similar to "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld," this text suggests that Kirta will have a better status in the underworld because the blessing concerns having many children. The more children one had, the better the person's status would be in the underworld since one would be remembered after death. Since Kirta will be exalted in the netherworld because he has more children, this demonstrates a positive meaningfulness of death for those people who had children.

While Kirta journeys to battle Udm, he makes a vow to Asherah to give her a donation in return for giving him victory in battle. Kirta forgets to keep his vow, and the goddess strikes him with a grave illness. Kirta's sons and daughters grieve for him while he is sick and exclaim: "How can you, father, die like a mortal."<sup>188</sup> They also exclaim, "Gods, after all-do they die?/ The Gentle One's son-won't he live?"<sup>189</sup> His children seem to think that their father is immortal. Greenstein explains that "The divinely blessed Kirta, who is intimate with gods, whose illness impacts upon nature, is nonetheless mortal. How, they [his children] innocently inquire, can that be? Scholars discuss whether kingship was divine and how the king ritually mediated between

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<sup>186</sup> Greenstein, 45.

<sup>187</sup> Greenstein, 45.

<sup>188</sup> Greenstein, Third Tablet, Column I, line 3.

<sup>189</sup> Greenstein, Third Tablet Column I, line 22-23.

the gods and our world.”<sup>190</sup> While this may be true, the text could also be demonstrating the realization of mortality for his children. Despite their father’s mortality, Kirta commands his children not to cry for him. He seems to be reassuring them, and while it is not explicitly stated in his assurance, the tone seems to suggest that he does not fear death.

As the story continues, El creates a creature that cures Kirta’s illness. Because of his extended illness and inability to keep up with his duties, Kirta’s son rebels against his father. The story, as we have it, ends with Kirta cursing his son:

May Horon crack, my son,  
May Horon crack your head,  
Astarte-named-with-Baal, your skull!  
May you fall at the peak of your years,  
Be subdued while you still make a fist...<sup>191</sup>

Horon is a netherworld god. The curse shows that Kirta curses his son to die at a young age. This illustrates the cultural notion that death at a young age was dreaded, while death in old age was preferred over premature death.

The *Epic of Kirta* demonstrates that the more sons one had, the more blessings one would receive in the underworld. In fact, when Kirta is on his death bed he does not seem to be afraid to die, possibly because he knows that he has children that will remember him. He may also be entering into old age, and thus he has already had time to accept death. However, when he gets better and curses his son to die at a young age, this further proves that people feared a premature death. Therefore, death acceptance is most prevalent in this story, while death anxiety is only seen in a fear of untimely death.

In the *Epic of Aqhat*, Daniel wishes for a son. The god El gives him a son, Aqhat. Before Aqhat is conceived, there is a passage in the story where Baal requests on behalf of

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<sup>190</sup> Greenstein, 10.

<sup>191</sup> Greenstein, Column VI, Third Tablet, lines 54-58.

Daniel that he be granted a son, and El agrees and blesses Daniel with a son. Some parts of the epic are missing, and the plot resumes when a god grants Daniel a divinely crafted weapon. The goddess Anat offers to purchase the weapon from Aqhat, even offering him immortality. Aqhat refuses and is killed by Anat. Daniel grieves and Aqhat's sister tries to gain revenge; however, the epic's ending is missing.<sup>192</sup>

In the first passage Baal addresses El, requesting on behalf of Daniel that he be granted a son. In his address he lists the duties of sons to their fathers and illustrates why people wanted to have sons. El repeats the same list when blessing Daniel with the conception of a son and Baal also repeats the list when announcing to Daniel that he will indeed have a son. One particular aspect of this description demonstrates that sons were seen as helping their fathers even in the underworld:

Let him have a son in his house,  
Offspring within his palace,  
...  
To rescue his smoke<sup>193</sup> from the Underworld,  
To protect his steps from the Dust.<sup>194</sup>

This is similar to the Mesopotamian concept that the more sons one had, the better one's condition in the afterlife.

Anat, requesting the divinely made weapon, offers Aqhat immortality in exchange:

Ask for life, Aqhat the Hero,  
Ask for life, and I'll give it,  
Deathlessness-I'll endow you.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>192</sup> Coogan, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 1396-1398.

<sup>193</sup> Smoke is considered that which makes you alive. It exits your body when you die. This is illustrated in the Second Tablet, Column IV, lines 24-26. It reads, "Let his life go off like a breath/His soul like a sneeze/From his nose like smoke,...I shall take his life."

<sup>194</sup> Simon B. Parker, trans. & ed., "Aqhat" in *Ugaritic Narrative Poetry* (Society of Biblical Literature: Scholars Press, 1997), First Tablet, Column I, lines 25-28. Of course a son does not rescue a father from death, but it may refer to helping the conditions in the underworld be more bearable or refer to keeping the memory of his father alive once he is dead; memory would then be a way to immortalize ancestors.

<sup>195</sup> Parker, First Tablet, Column VI, lines 26-28.

Aqhat responds:

Maid don't beguile me:  
To a hero your guile is slime,

In the end a man gets what?  
A man gets what as his fate?

Glaze is poured on the head,  
Lye all over the skull.  
[ ] the death of all I shall die,  
I too shall die and be dead.<sup>196</sup>

Aqhat's response demonstrates that he is fully aware of his mortality. There is no hint of future or past related regret in his response. Unlike Gilgamesh, Aqhat's response shows he has accepted death as certain and unavoidable. Therefore, the *Epic of Aqhat* demonstrates that a person who had more sons was likely to accept death, whereas a person with no sons would likely have anxiety about death. However, Aqhat's acceptance of his mortality reflects the author's view of neutral death acceptance.

In conclusion, death anxiety and death acceptance are both represented in the literature from ancient Ugarit. In regard to death anxiety, the *Baal Cycle* describes the underworld as a place of imprisonment when it uses imagery such as inmates and antiphrastic phrases such as the "House of 'Freedom.'" It also employs imagery of "filth." The destructive power of the underworld is described in the imagery of Mot's mouth and appetite. All of this demonstrates a negative meaningfulness of death which, according to Tomer and Eliason's model, leads to death anxiety. There is one instance of future related regret in *The Epic of Kirta* when Kirta's son is cursed. The curse wishes for him to have an untimely death, thus demonstrating the cultural notion that death at a young age prevented one from fulfilling life's purpose; this is future related regret. In regard to death acceptance, there are examples in the *Baal Cycle* of those who are

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<sup>196</sup> Parker, First Tablet, Column VI, lines 34-38.

performing mourning rituals that show their desire to join a family member in the underworld, thus demonstrating at least a temporary death acceptance. One overall theme of the *Baal Cycle* is that death is inevitable, a perfect example of neutral death acceptance. The *Epic of Kirta* demonstrates that those who had many children and also facing death may have had less past related regret and thus more death acceptance. Similarly, Aqhat shows that the more sons one has the more help one will receive in the underworld, again showing a lack of past related regret and a positive meaningfulness of death. Aqhat's rebuke to the goddess also demonstrates an acceptance of the inevitability of death, and thus neutral death acceptance. These three pieces of literature, therefore, show that the culture most likely experienced both death anxiety and death acceptance.

## **Chapter 4: Hebrew Literature**

This chapter explores the Hebrew Bible in order to see how the Israelite people perceived the underworld and to see whether these conceptions reveal death anxiety or death acceptance within the culture. The name of the underworld is Sheol, or  $\text{𐤑𐤀𐤁}$  . . . . . While most of this thesis has examined texts completely in translation, this section will occasionally refer to the Hebrew that is relevant in understanding the nuances of the language in order to recognize how Sheol is understood. Unfortunately, there are not many references in the Hebrew Bible to Sheol. There is no journey of YHWH to the underworld like the journeys to the underworld in Sumerian, Akkadian and Ugaritic texts. In fact there is no god of the underworld in the Hebrew Bible. Therefore, smaller passages with references to Sheol are analyzed in order to draw conclusions. The Hebrew Bible shows that the underworld was conceived of as one place where everyone will go at the end of his life. Sometimes the references are neutral regarding Sheol and death, which does not reflect death anxiety, but rather a death acceptance. At other times, Sheol is a gloomy, unpleasant place, which is an example of a negative attitude about the meaningfulness of death which, according to Tomer & Eliason's model, is a cause of death anxiety. Usually these instances, however, are in reference to people who die an early, untimely death. These instances are examples of past and/or future related regret that also causes death anxiety. There are various conditions in the underworld and different ways that the authors of the different books of the Hebrew Bible perceive and feel about the underworld. Therefore, in the Hebrew Bible there are both examples of death acceptance and death anxiety, though the examples of death anxiety are mostly in regard to a fear of untimely death.

Genesis 37:29-35 describes Jacob's grief over finding out that his son Joseph is dead (although the reader knows that Joseph really is not dead). Jacob's children try to comfort him,

but in his grief he states, “I will go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.”<sup>197</sup> Basically, Jacob is stating that he will grieve for his son for the rest of his life, and even up to the afterlife. He is obviously expressing the amount of grief he is feeling. But this passage also reveals how the Hebrew author perceived Sheol. Jacob expects to go to Sheol when he dies. Thus, Sheol is not necessarily a place for the wicked, but for everyone. In fact, the Psalmist states, “Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol?”<sup>198</sup> The canonized Hebrew Bible does not see the afterlife as being dualistic, with a heaven for the righteous and a hell for the wicked. Also, the author adds a suffix to Sheol, making it, הַלְאֵוֹ . . . This *He Directive* denotes movement toward the underworld. Hence, this tells the translator that the word הַלְאֵוֹ, “I will go down,” is referring to going down to Sheol. The word is also used by Jacob in Genesis 42:38, where Jacob states, “...you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol,”<sup>199</sup> and many other times in the Hebrew Bible. It was understood by the Israelites that dead people spent the afterlife in Sheol, which was below the earth, and that God, not humans, dwells in heaven. Both passages are also examples of the sense of acceptance people had when they died in old age. Notice that there is no hint of dread in Jacob’s matter-of-fact statements that he will enter Sheol in old age.

Conversely, dying an untimely death was considered undesirable, 1 Kings 2:6 has King David on his death bed giving Solomon, his successor, some advice. During the conversation, David curses one of his enemies, commanding Solomon that he “not let his [enemy’s] gray head go down to Sheol in peace.” David is commanding Solomon to seek revenge on his enemy, and part of that revenge will be a death at a young age. Since his enemy will not die with any gray

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<sup>197</sup> Genesis 37: 35. *The New Interpreter’s Study Bible: New Revised Standard Version* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003). This same version will be used through the entire chapter.

<sup>198</sup> Psalm 89:48.

<sup>199</sup> Genesis 42:38

hair, or at a young age, according to David his enemy will not go down to Sheol in peace.

Therefore, not only did the ancient people fear death at a young age because of past and/or future related regret, but also because they believed that the conditions in Sheol would be worse for someone who died at a young age.

In Numbers chapter 16, the people are challenging Moses because they are growing impatient for not being delivered into the Promised Land. They are challenging whether Moses is sent by God.<sup>200</sup> The three main people against him are Korah, Dathan, and Abiram. In verses 16 through 35, Moses asks everyone to back away from the tents of these three people, warning that if they do not they “will be swept away for all their sins.”<sup>201</sup> Sin in the ancient world does not necessarily denote being immoral. It refers to not being devout to God by offering sacrifices, obeying purity laws, etc. Thus, these three are getting ready to be swept away because they are defying Moses, the one God has deemed as their leader. Moses goes on to tell the people:

“This is how you shall know that the LORD has sent me to do all these works; it has not been of my own accord: If these people die a natural death, or if a natural fate comes on them, then the Lord has not sent me. But if the LORD creates something new, and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up, with all that belongs to them, and they go down alive into Sheol, then you shall know that these men have despised the Lord.” As soon as he finished speaking all these words, the ground under them was split apart. The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, along with their households...So they with all that belonged to them went down alive into Sheol; the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. All Israel around them fled at their outcry, for they said, ‘The earth will swallow us too!’”<sup>202</sup>

This myth has Sheol swallowing people alive! This image is especially frightening, as can be seen by the reaction of the Israelites in the story. Notice how Moses’ statement that if the three men have a natural death, then he is not sent by God. A natural death at old age in Ancient Israel

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<sup>200</sup> NRSV note: “The conflict over who were the legitimate occupants of the priestly office may reflect disputes among competing priestly parties in ancient Israel,” 214.

<sup>201</sup> Numbers 16:26.

<sup>202</sup> Numbers 16:28-34.



was hoped for and expected. Like the character Jacob in the Genesis passage, this writer believed everyone would die and go to Sheol. Instead, people feared that they would die before their time. The fact that Sheol swallows these three people alive is because they were being sinful. Therefore, if people died in old age and of natural causes they had nothing to fear of the afterlife, whereas people who were sinful could be subject to Sheol's destructive nature, and therefore could suffer an untimely death. The author himself is not necessarily experiencing past-related regret. The story, having a didactic purpose, shows that people who are being sinful should have past-related regret. Therefore, the frightening image of the underworld used by the author could have increased death anxiety for his audience, presumably the Israelite people.

Hannah's prayer in I Samuel 2:6 states, "The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up."<sup>203</sup> This should not be considered a reference to resurrection. At the time that the author wrote this, the concept of resurrection did not exist. Bailey, in *Biblical Perspectives on Death*, explains that "the text deals with Yahweh's total control over the destiny of humans: he has the power to abase and to establish. To 'kill' and to 'give life' are said entirely in relation to this worldly fortunes, with no suggestion that biological cessation or recovery (resurrection) is meant. Sheol, as often in the Old Testament, is likewise a metaphor (common noun) for misfortunes of various sorts."<sup>204</sup> His argument that this statement is referring to "this worldly fortunes" is supported by the next verse: "The Lord makes poor and makes rich, he brings low, he also exalts."<sup>205</sup> Thus, it is true that the author of this text is referring to conditions of this world. In fact, the Psalmist often refers to Sheol as a metaphor for being depressed, sick, etc. For example, in Psalm 30:3 the speaker exclaims, "O LORD, you

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<sup>203</sup> 1 Samuel 2:6.

<sup>204</sup> Lloyd R. Bailey, Sr., *Biblical Perspectives on Death* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), 40.

<sup>205</sup> 1 Samuel 2:7.

brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.”<sup>206</sup>

Sheol is, therefore, being used as a metaphor for death brought about by sickness. Comparing Sheol to this type of death, then, reveals the author’s belief that one’s condition in Sheol was not pleasant; otherwise, the comparison would not have been understood by the readers. Therefore, even though these passages are not describing Sheol literally, they still reveal the attitude the writer held toward Sheol. In general, then, the meaningfulness of death in terms of notions of the afterlife was not particularly positive. The Psalm passage in particular is an example of future-related regret. The speaker praises God for being allotted more time on earth. Presumably, the speaker did not yet want to die. Therefore, this demonstrates death anxiety for those threatened with an untimely or tragic death.

In 2 Samuel 22, David gives God a song of thanksgiving for helping him defeat his enemies. The author writes in verses five and six: “For the waves of death encompassed me, the torrents of perdition assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me, the snares of death confronted me.”<sup>207</sup> David goes on to praise God for delivering him from this confrontation with death. The images used here are also unpleasant. There are cords of Sheol that entangle him, and the snare of death confronts him. This imagery implies that he was afraid of death. Thus, if death was described as a snare, and Sheol as having the power to entangle, this shows a negative view toward the meaning of death, and may reflect the death anxiety of the author. However, this is within the context of a death in battle, which would be a death at a young age, and therefore it is not surprising that the imagery is more frightening than Jacob’s matter of fact statement in Genesis that he will go to Sheol in old age.

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<sup>206</sup> Psalm 30:3.

<sup>207</sup> II Sam 22: 5-6, see also Psalm 18: 4-5.

In Isaiah 38, King Hezekiah is the speaker in this poem. King Hezekiah had become sick, but recovered. Hezekiah, when he was sick, said:

In the noontide of my days  
I must depart;  
I am consigned to the gates of Sheol  
for the rest of my years.  
I said, I shall not see the Lord  
in the land of the living;  
I shall look upon mortals no more  
among the inhabitants of the world.  
...  
but you have held back my life from the pit of destruction,  
for you have cast all my sins  
behind your back.  
For Sheol cannot thank you,  
death cannot praise you;  
those who go down to the Pit cannot hope  
for your faithfulness.  
The living, the living, they thank you,  
as I do this day;  
fathers make known to children  
your faithfulness.<sup>208</sup>

Sheol is described several ways in this passage. There are gates of Sheol, just as there were gates in the underworld of Mesopotamian literature. If Sheol is a gated city like in Mesopotamian imagery, then this would imply a sense of order, and therefore comfort in the fact that it is similar to the structure found during life on earth. However, this belief may not have been held by the Israelites. Yet, the author states that he is “consigned” or, as I translated it, “appointed” to Sheol. Both words connote a sense of permanency to being in Sheol, as a land of no return, and therefore, that is the image the gates would symbolize. Furthermore, the next line states that he shall no longer see people on earth once he is in Sheol, thus meaning he will not return. The tone in this passage seems to be that he doesn’t want to die, and thus he is not looking forward to being permanently put in Sheol, away from all other mortals. The meaningfulness of death

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<sup>208</sup> Isaiah 38:10-19, see also Psalm 30: 9-10.

would encompass a lonely feeling in the afterlife and would contribute to death anxiety. He goes on to say that he will not be able to see the Lord either, since God is in the land of the living. In the second part of the poem he states that in Sheol he would not be able to thank or praise God, rather it is the living who can do this. Thus, there seems to be a sense of death anxiety because there is a negative belief about death; that God's presence will not be found in Sheol.<sup>209</sup> The same thing is stated in Psalm 6:5, "for in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise?"

Isaiah 5:14 reads, "Therefore Sheol has enlarged its appetite and opened its mouth beyond measure; the nobility of Jerusalem and her multitude go down, her throng and all who exult her."<sup>210</sup> In the verses before, the author is addressing those who are partying and drinking excessively instead of "regard[ing] the deeds of the Lord."<sup>211</sup> Note that it is not the feasting and drinking in and of itself that Isaiah is condemning, but rather that they are doing this instead of paying attention to God. In other words, the author is condemning those who have prosperity but are not being pious. Here, Sheol is described as having a mouth without boundary and a large appetite. This is certainly a frightening image for the reader, yet once again it is in the context of those who are being wicked, and the image is unsettling because people are being killed before old age. This demonstrates past related regret in the same way Numbers 16 did above. What we may be seeing in this passage is a development in thought regarding the underworld that will plant the seeds for the introduction and implementation of dualistic thought concerning the afterlife. Yet, Sheol is still the one place where everyone goes. Heaven is where God dwells;

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<sup>209</sup> In other cultures we have looked at, there is a god in the underworld. The god of the underworld, however, is still not a personal god that is praised by the dead. Yahweh's lack of presence in the underworld may be due to the rise of monotheism. Thus, whether or not a culture has or does not have a god of the underworld may or may not reveal a difference between the degree of death anxiety in the different cultures.

<sup>210</sup> Isaiah 5:14.

<sup>211</sup> Isaiah 5:12.

humans do not go there in the afterlife.<sup>212</sup> But there are frightening images associated with Sheol when people die an early death because they were being wicked. Therefore, there may have been a greater death anxiety among the people as reflected in these scary images of the underworld.

In Isaiah chapter 14, the King of Babylon is cursed for the destruction and misery he has caused the people. The writer warns him that despite his attempts to make himself great, he will be brought low when he goes to Sheol:

Sheol beneath is stirred up  
to meet you when you come;  
it rouses the shades to greet you,  
all who were leaders of the earth;  
it raises from their thrones  
all who were kings of the nations.  
All of them will speak  
and say to you:  
“You too have become as weak as we!  
You have become like us!”  
Your pomp<sup>213</sup> is brought down to Sheol  
and the sound of your harps;  
maggots are the bed beneath you,  
and worms are your covering.<sup>214</sup>

In verse 9 the translators of NRSV translate Sheol as being “stirred up.” The word is *h̄zḡ . r* which means “to be agitated” or “to quiver or quake.” This description has Sheol being stirred up to meet the king, but the connotation of the words shows this is not a friendly way to meet him, but rather an intimidating and frightening way to meet him. The agitation and stirring up may also refer to the shades who greet him. The shades, the people in Sheol, are described as shadows, images of the dead, not souls. Every so often, the shades may be stirred, and again this may be a frightening image. However, if the shades can be stirred from rest, then logically, most

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<sup>212</sup> Exception is Elijah; however, he is not dead. See 2 Kings 2.

<sup>213</sup> Literally, “your pride.”

<sup>214</sup> Isaiah 14: 9-11.

of the time, the shades in Sheol are in a restful, sleeping state. If the writer believed that most people were in a sleep-like state while in the underworld, then that image, and therefore the meaning of death, would not be frightening, but rather positive.

The shades of dead kings tell the King of Babylon that he is now weak, just like everyone else. This could be reflecting the loss of individuality that one may experience once one is dead. More importantly, it describes the thinking that glory, wealth, etc. which one can have on earth is no longer there in the underworld. This is certainly a unsettling image: to become weak, especially for someone so powerful on earth. The imagery of maggots and worms as his bed and blanket are especially terrifying. Obviously, this imagery of the underworld reflects the nature of the grave or tomb, with maggots eating at a decaying body. Therefore, if the meaningfulness of death encompassed loss of one's individuality in the afterlife and if people literally felt that they would be sleeping on a bed of maggots and have worms for a blanket, this would be scary and would contribute to death anxiety. However, the readers would be comforted by this image, since the passage is directed toward the King of Babylon and is about the revenge he will receive in the underworld. The author continues in verse 15:

But you are brought down to Sheol,  
to the depths of the Pit.  
Those who see you will stare at you,  
and ponder over you:  
“Is this the man who made the earth tremble,  
who shook kingdoms,  
who made the world like a desert  
and overthrew its cities,  
who would not let his prisoners go home?”  
All the kings of the nations lie in glory,  
each in his own tomb;  
but you are cast out, away from your grave,  
like loathsome carrion,  
clothed with the dead, those pierced by the sword,  
who go down to the stones of the Pit,  
like a corpse trampled underfoot.

You will not be joined with them in burial,  
because you have destroyed your land,  
you have killed your people.<sup>215</sup>

The other kings “lie in glory.” It seems that kings are subject to better conditions than ordinary people in the underworld. However, the King of Babylon will not lie with the other kings in glory, because of the terror he has caused in his lifetime. In fact, the author warns the king that he will not be buried, but rather his corpse will be cast out away from his grave. In Mesopotamian literature, improper or incomplete internment of the body would cause the person’s ghost to roam about and not be able to go to the underworld to rest. This was something that all ancient people shared, and therefore this threat from the author would be seen as frightening. There seems to be a paradox in this passage. The author says that he will be taken down to Sheol, but at the same time, he will be cast from his grave. According to Mesopotamian tradition, then, the king would not be in the underworld. However, the thought may be that his shade still goes to the underworld, but his conditions in the underworld are much worse, which still may demonstrate a shared idea, at least to some extent, between the two cultures. This passage may reflect a sense of justice being imposed once someone has come to the afterlife. While this may be indicative of a transition to the thought of justice coming in the afterlife, it seems that his conditions are a result of what people are doing. The king’s body is cast away, not properly buried by his successor, because of what he did. It is not because of what he did that he goes to Sheol; he is not being punished for his actions. Instead, it is people who are alive that do not take care of his body, and in the next lines, the author curses his descendants: “Prepare slaughter for his sons because of the guilt of his father.” Justice was often thought to be brought upon the descendants of people who had done wrong, not necessarily to the evildoers themselves: they would simply go to Sheol. Here, the author wants his sons killed

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<sup>215</sup> Isaiah 14: 15-20.

for their father's guilt. One main reason for this may be a remnant belief that the son makes ritual offerings and libations for the father and the descendants keep the memory of the dead person alive. This was very important to the ancient people, and even in the Akkadian *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Sumerian "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld," the more sons one had, the more likely one was to receive offerings and libations in the underworld, and therefore the better the conditions one would experience in the underworld. Thus, by killing the descendants of a person, one can erase their memory, and as a result, the King of Babylon would have worse conditions in the underworld. Hence, in this passage, conditions would not necessarily reflect a death anxiety of the Israelite people since this is directed toward a foreign, hated king. However, the author reveals the belief in his curse that improper burial and a lack of proper funerary rituals causes a worse experience in the underworld, a similar Hebrew notion prevalent in Mesopotamian literature. However, some of the images that describe Sheol, such as worms and maggots, although reflective of a decaying corpse, could reflect more common ideas of the underworld as not being a pleasant place, and therefore this may reflect death anxiety.

Similar to the Isaiah 14 passage, in Ezekiel 32, the author is warning Pharaoh that he will be brought down to Sheol like leaders of other nations that have also been brought down low to Sheol, such as Assyria, Elam, Edom, etc. They are brought down to Sheol because they terrorized the Israelites. The NRSV commentary states, "the demise of oppressive military powers is a rhetorical portrait intended to inspire hope in Ezekiel's exilic community."<sup>216</sup> This passage, therefore, does not reveal much about Israelite perceptions of what they anticipated in their own experience of Sheol.

Proverbs 9:1-18 uses the image of a wise woman teaching people. This passage reveals the author's notion that wise people will live a long life, stating, "your days will be multiplied

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<sup>216</sup> NRSV note, 1204.



and years will be added to your life.”<sup>217</sup> There is also an image of a foolish woman who tries to teach people, but “her guests are in the depths of Sheol.”<sup>218</sup> In this passage the wise live to old age and the foolish die young.<sup>219</sup> Again, this reflects the fear of dying young among the ancient Israelites most likely because of the prospect of future related regret if you die at a young age. Often the purpose of wisdom literature in the Hebrew Bible was to gain wisdom as a way to make sure one knew how to act to not get in trouble or do something that would cause an early death. This passage again demonstrates that people feared premature death.

In Proverbs 15:11 there is another, less common name for the underworld. It is Abaddon, or אַבְדּוֹן and it is simply a synonym for Sheol.<sup>220</sup> The verse reads, “Sheol and Abaddon lie open before the Lord, how much more human hearts!”<sup>221</sup> The last phrase literally reads, “Just like the hearts of the sons of man.” This passage reflects a view that God knows of Sheol just like he knows humans. This is a different view from when God was described as not being able to be praised in Sheol, and as being a god of the living, not a god of the dead. So, in Wisdom Literature, God is depicted as being more omniscient. This viewpoint could be more comforting to the people, since God will know what is going on in Sheol. However, it could be less of a comfort since the sentence seems to be a warning that God knows what is in your heart, just like he knows the depths of Sheol.<sup>222</sup> The main point of the passage is the metaphor for the vast

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<sup>217</sup> Proverbs 9:11.

<sup>218</sup> Proverbs 9:18.

<sup>219</sup> This thought is also found in Proverbs 23:13-14. It reads, “Do not withhold discipline from your children; if you beat them with a rod, they will not die. If you beat them with the rod, you will save their lives from Sheol.” Of course this does not mean that they will become immortal if you beat them, rather it means that they will learn to be obedient so they don’t do something stupid to get themselves killed.

<sup>220</sup> Literally Abaddon means “Place of Destruction or Ruin.” Francis Brown, S. R. Driver and Charles A. Briggs. *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*. (Peabody, MA: Hedrickson Publishers, 2006), 2.

<sup>221</sup> Proverbs 15:11.

<sup>222</sup> There is an argument among scholars as to whether or not wisdom literature originated from the common people or from the royal courts. For further information on wisdom literature see Barry L. Bandstra. *Reading the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Toronto: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2004), 411.

knowledge of God, and the monotheistic authors do not have the one God in the place of the dead.

Proverbs 15:24 states, “For the wise the path of life leads upward, in order to avoid Sheol below.” The word translated as “avoid” in Hebrew is  $\text{רָשָׁע}$ , or “to turn aside.” Sheol was to be avoided, and therefore, in terms of the meaningfulness of death, Sheol was not a desirable place. However, as seen in the wise woman’s advice in Proverbs 9:11, wisdom would most likely help you live a longer life. Therefore “avoiding” Sheol may not mean that one would be able to avoid death entirely, but instead be able to avoid dying early and live to a ripe old age. Therefore, this may be similar advice to that of the wise woman: that wisdom will allow you to live longer. If wisdom secured one a longer life, then one need not fear a premature death.

In Ecclesiastes 9:7-10, the author takes a *carpe diem* approach to life. The author instructs the reader to eat and drink, wear nice clothes and put on nice oils, love your wife, work hard, and basically enjoy life because “there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going.”<sup>223</sup> This does not necessarily convey a fear of death and going to the underworld. In fact, there seems to be a neutral attitude toward Sheol since the author simply states that this is where everyone will go. This passage is strikingly similar to the theme of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as told in the advice of the barmaid to Gilgamesh.<sup>224</sup> The author of Ecclesiastes, however, would not agree with the author of Proverbs’ understanding that gaining wisdom will help you avoid going to Sheol. The author of Ecclesiastes encourages his readers to live life to the fullest, which would prevent someone to feel past or future related regret. This writer seems to accept the fact that he will go to Sheol eventually; therefore, he should enjoy life while he can since trying to gain wisdom and knowledge is futile because there is no wisdom in

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<sup>223</sup> Ecclesiastes 9:10.

<sup>224</sup> Dalley, “Gilgamesh (Old Babylonian Version),” Tablet X, 180.

Sheol. The fact that he says that there is no work, thought, knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol does not seem to be bad. At the same time, life is the only opportunity to eat, drink and be merry. So, this passage seems to neither reflect a fearful nor anticipatory expectation of the afterlife, and therefore reflects no death anxiety, but rather an acceptance of death as long as life is fulfilled so there is no past or future related regret.

Job 7: 9-10 reads, “As the cloud fades and vanishes, so those who go down to Sheol do not come up; they return no more to their houses, nor do their places know them any more.” This is referring to Sheol as being a land of no return. The tone of the Book of Job is sad, and it is obvious that when Job speaks, he is depressed. However, Job is so depressed that he would rather die than live, so whether the “land of no return” description is simply a common idiom, or whether it would evoke a similar emotional response for the audience is indeterminable.

Another passage in Job expresses his loss of hope and depression:

If I look for Sheol as my house,  
if I spread my couch in the darkness,  
if I say to the Pit, ‘You are my father,’  
and to the worm, ‘My mother,’ or ‘My sister,’  
where then is my hope?  
Who will see my hope?  
Will it go down to the bars of Sheol?  
Shall we descend together in dust.<sup>225</sup>

Sheol is described as having worms, bars and dust. The image of bars expresses the idea that Sheol is a place of no return. Worms and dust reflect the conditions of the grave. All of these are unpleasant images that could reflect death anxiety in the culture in regards to expectations of the conditions of the underworld. His remarks about accepting Sheol as his house seems to be sarcastic in tone.

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<sup>225</sup> Job 17:13-16.

The Psalmist makes it obvious that he wants to avoid Sheol. In fact, he praises God: “Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also rests secure. For you do not give me up to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit.”<sup>226</sup> The writer is praising God for protecting him. But often, the Psalmist (or Psalmists) says that the wicked, their enemies, shall be sent to Sheol. Usually, this is within the context of enemy nations, and the Psalmist hopes that the people of the nation will be sent to Sheol, or die, before old age. For example, Psalm 9:17 states, “The wicked shall depart to Sheol, all the nations that forget God.” Psalm 31:17 reads, “let the wicked be put to shame; let them go dumbfounded to Sheol.” Also in reference to his enemies, the Psalmist states in Psalm 55:15, “Let death come upon them; let them go down alive to Sheol.” A few verses later in Psalm 55:22 he explains, “the bloodthirsty and treacherous shall not live out half their days.” These statements, then, suggest that the Israelites hoped that enemies would die an early death.

In conclusion, there are a variety of ways that the underworld in the Hebrew Bible is perceived. Images include cords, snares, maggots, worms, bars, dust, and even being swallowed alive by Sheol’s large mouth. Sheol is used as a metaphor for sickness. It is described as a land of no return. These images are not pleasant, yet often they are associated with people who have been wicked, and who will die an untimely death. In fact, much of the literature reflects a fear of premature death. Yet some of these images reflect a realistic attitude toward death. The images of worms and maggots reflect the conditions of a corpse, and not being able to return reflects the finality of death. Therefore, there are different perceptions and feelings the various authors express regarding Sheol and the afterlife. For some authors Sheol is a place they wish to avoid, while others seem to hold a neutral attitude about dying and going to Sheol, suggesting to their readers that they focus on fulfillment in life rather than worry about dying. Therefore, some of

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<sup>226</sup> Psalm 16: 9-10.

these perceptions reflect a death anxiety, especially in regard to an untimely death, while other perceptions reflect a neutral attitude toward death and the afterlife. All the authors demonstrate their belief that Sheol is the one place that everyone goes after they die. There is no dualistic perception that the afterlife is two places of either paradise or complete torment. Thus, the ancient Israelites did not share the later belief in paradise and hell.

## **Conclusion**

The main purpose of this paper was to find out if the people in the Ancient Near East had death anxiety or death acceptance based on their beliefs about death and the underworld. This was accomplished by analyzing literature from four language groups of the Ancient Near East: Sumerian, Akkadian, Ugaritic and Hebrew.

Death anxiety can be defined as the fear of death. Death acceptance can be defined as the absence of fear of death. Neutral death acceptance, the type of death acceptance most often seen in the ancient literature, sees death as neither negative nor positive. Furthermore, a person with neutral death acceptance believes that death is inevitable, and the person is not afraid of death. To measure death anxiety and death acceptance, Tomer and Eliason's Death Anxiety models were used. According to the models, presence of future and/or past related regret leads to death anxiety. These regrets can be defined as sadness over unfulfilled goals in life, either in the past or future. If there is no past or future related regret, then death acceptance is most likely present. Meaningfulness of death, or beliefs about death, can lead to either death anxiety or death acceptance. If the beliefs about death are negative, then death anxiety is present; if the beliefs about death are neutral or positive, then death acceptance is present.

The first chapter analyzed Sumerian attitudes toward death. "Inanna's Descent to the Underworld" is about the goddess Inanna who travels to the netherworld to seize the throne of her sister Ereshkigal, queen of the netherworld. Inanna is unsuccessful, and is condemned in the underworld. However, she is saved by Enki, but is forced to find a replacement in the underworld. She is escorted by the *galla* from the underworld, in which Dumuzi becomes her replacement. In this myth, there is sense of order in the underworld. Inanna is stripped of her powers as she entered the underworld, which may be symbolic of the powers even people lose as

they enter the underworld. There are also frightening images associated with the *galla* in the underworld.

In “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld,” Gilgamesh loses his ball and mallet in the underworld. Enkidu offers to retrieve them, but in his efforts he is captured by the underworld. Enkidu appears to Gilgamesh as a ghost, and tells him about the conditions of the underworld. People with more sons experienced better conditions, while people who had no children or experienced a tragic, untimely death faced harsh conditions in the underworld. One exception is stillborn children, who are able to sit at a nice table eating sweet honey and ghee. The man with many sons, and who therefore lived the most ideal, fulfilled life possible, sits among the gods.

Other literature in the Sumerian chapter included the “Lament for Damu” where the netherworld is described as “distant” and as “terrible.” This lament especially pointed out the separation from life one experiences in the underworld. In the story “In the Desert by the Early Grass” the netherworld is described specifically as a land of no return and as “frightening.” “Ningiszida’s Journey to the Netherworld” emphasizes the lack of sustaining elements in the underworld, such as food, water and clothing. “Lulil and His Sister” shows the troubled sleep the character experiences in the underworld. The First Elegy of the Pushkin Museum demonstrates how sons may help their father’s circumstance in the netherworld by praying for them. The myth also demonstrates that the underworld gods may show compassion for the dead. “The Death of Urnammu” shows that some kings may have experienced better conditions in the underworld; however, they still experienced common conditions such as poor food and water quality, most likely reflecting the reality of the grave.

In the Akkadian Chapter, some of the myths are very similar to the Sumerian myths. “The Descent of Ishtar into the Underworld” is much the same story as “Inanna’s Descent into

the Netherworld.” Ishtar travels to the underworld, but is cursed by Ereshkigal once she enters, confining Ishtar in the underworld. Ea helps save Ishtar, and when the water of life is sprinkled on her, she comes back to life. Dumuzi is exchanged for her place in the underworld. Common images of the underworld are found in this myth, such as its description of a land of no return, a sense of order, bolted doors, darkness, and poor food quality such as dust. Also, Ereshkigal makes a statement that shows her compassion toward those who face an untimely death.

“Ishtar’s Descent” does not have the *galla* creatures that escorted Inanna out of the underworld in the Sumerian literature. However, Babylonian incantation literature has descriptions of demons that almost exactly match the descriptions of those found of the *galla* in “Inanna’s Descent.” The incantation literature also shows that people who died a tragic death could become unrestful and even demonic in the afterlife.

*The Epic of Gilgamesh* is a story about Gilgamesh’s search for immortality, as well his relationship and friendship with Enkidu. When Enkidu finds out that he is going to die he becomes frightened, but is later reassured by Gilgamesh’s promises that he will remember Enkidu and make sure he is properly buried. Enkidu’s vision shows common images associated with the underworld such as a land of no return, darkness, dust, and clay for food. Once Enkidu dies, Gilgamesh becomes aware of his own mortality. He seeks out Ut-napishtim, the only human who has gained immortality. On his way, he meets a barmaid who tells him that since everyone will face death, he must live his life to the fullest instead of fearing the inevitable. When he reaches Ut-napishtim, the immortal hero does his best to convince Gilgamesh that he must accept his mortality, emphasizing that death is inevitable and that death is similar to sleep.

The twelfth tablet of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* is similar to “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld.” This part of the *Epic* also emphasizes that the more sons one has the better the



conditions will be in the underworld; however, harsher conditions are experienced by those who have no sons or die a tragic, untimely death.

“Nergal and Ereshkigal” is a story about Nergal’s seizure of Ereshkigal’s throne. The images found in this story are almost exactly the same as those found in “Ishtar’s Descent” and *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It is described as a place of order with a gate, a palace and a queen, and as a place of darkness. “A Prince’s Vision of the Underworld” is a very unusual piece of literature. The vision of the prince shows the underworld with frightening creatures. In the wisdom text, “I Will Praise the Lord of Wisdom,” the speaker is thanking the gods for saving him from death. In his praises he also expresses regret that he did not do a better job of making sacrifices and offerings. This text further demonstrates people’s fear of an untimely death.

The Ugaritic chapter examined the *The Baal Cycle*, *The Epic of Kirta*, and *The Epic of Aqhat*. In the Baal Cycle, the underworld is described as a prison. There are images of Mot’s large mouth and appetite. Baal then goes to the underworld. When El and Anat find out about Baal’s death they grieve for him, possibly ritually descending into the underworld with him. Anat battles Mot, then Baal and Mot fight each other and Mot finally gives up after being prompted by Shapash. In the *Epic of Kirta*, there is evidence that Kirta will be given a higher status in the underworld. In the story, Kirta becomes ill and his children grieve, wondering how their powerful father can be mortal. Another son, however, takes over the kingship, and when Kirta gets better he curses the son to experience an untimely death. In *Aqhat*, there are directions for what the duties of a son entail. One such duty is to help his father while his father’s shade is in the underworld. This further demonstrates the importance of having many sons to the ancient people. Also in the story, Aqhat expresses that he is aware of the inevitability of death despite a goddess’s offer of immortality.

The Hebrew section uses many passages from the Hebrew Bible. In Genesis, Jacob expresses his grief for his son Joseph in much the same way that El and Anat express their grief for Baal in the *Baal Cycle*. Fear of untimely death is present in the Hebrew Bible. For example, Jacob expects to go to the underworld with gray hair, meaning he fears not an untimely death. David, in 1 Kings, commands his son to kill his enemies before they have gray hair. The underworld is also described as having a large mouth and appetite, similar to Mot's in the Ugaritic literature. For example, in Numbers, Sheol swallows people alive who are questioning Moses's authority. YHWH is often praised in the Hebrew Bible for saving people from Sheol when they were extremely sick. In these praises, as seen in Isaiah 38, it can be noted that the Israelites do not believe YHWH is present in the underworld. These praises thank YHWH for not letting them have an untimely death. There is also imagery in the Hebrew Bible that is similar to Mesopotamian imagery. There are gates mentioned in Isaiah, for example, possibly signifying the finality of death. While in other passages, kings were sometimes seen as having better conditions in the underworld, this too is the case in the Hebrew bible. The King of Babylon, in Isaiah 14, is described as being brought low in the underworld. However, this enemy king will not sit with the other rulers. It is not surprising that he would face worse conditions in the underworld for the writer despises his aggression since he was responsible for the fall of Judah and Jerusalem and the Temple of YHWH. There is also fear of untimely death when in Proverbs the author insinuates that foolish people are more likely to die at a young age, whereas wise people will live longer. Ecclesiastes shows similarity to *Epic of Gilgamesh* in the themes of fulfillment of life, living to old age, and accepting the inevitability of death. The author of Ecclesiastes acknowledges that there is no activity in the underworld, so the author encourages his audience to enjoy life. There are also images of Sheol in Job that are similar to

images in the other areas of literature. There are bars and dust, and it is described as a land of no return.

All four literature groups share common images and themes regarding the underworld and death. One of the most common beliefs is that the underworld is one place in which every person expects to go after he or she dies. Heavens are the abode of the gods, and humans are not present. There are also common images associated with the underworld. Dust and darkness are some of the most common. Many times, dust, clay and muddy water are described as the sustenance of the dead. This most likely reflects the authors' observation of the nature of grave. Also, silence seems to be a common theme. Sleeping often occurs in the underworld, and visitors, such as Enkidu and Nergal, are encouraged not to disturb the dead since they are most likely sleeping. Ut-napishtim compares death to sleep in *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. The Hebrew Bible, in Isaiah 14, states that the shades can be "roused," as if from sleep. Some of the stories emphasize the separation from the living and from one's former life on earth once one enters the underworld. However, the underworld gods, at least in the Sumerian and Akkadian literature, are seen as compassionate. One of the most common themes is that the more sons one has, the better conditions he or she will experience in the underworld. This can be found in both "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld" as well as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. It is also seen in the *Epic of Kirta* and in the Hebrew Bible. However, no sons or a tragic death could mean experiencing harsher conditions in the underworld.

Overall, death anxiety is very much a part of the Ancient Near Eastern attitude toward death. However, the majority of these instances in literature are in regard to a fear of an untimely or tragic death. This is seen in "Inanna's Descent," "Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld," *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, *The Epic of Kirta*, and in several passages throughout the

Hebrew Bible. Most often, death anxiety associated with an untimely or tragic death is caused from future and/or past related regret. These regrets are seen through the desire to marry, have children and avoid tragedy by pleasing the divinities. While many of the other images, such as darkness, dust, and the land of no return, are sometimes demonstrating a negative meaningfulness of death, they are most likely expressing the reality of the grave and the finality of death. This, then, leads to a neutral death acceptance based on neutral or positive meaningfulness of death. There are also instances where, because of the belief of the inevitability of death, people are encouraged to approach life with a *carpe diem* attitude, allowing themselves to accept the inevitability of death, rather than being anxious about death. In fact, living life to its fullest, by enjoying marriage, having many children, eating, drinking, and generally trying to be happy, seems to be an ideal that authors of the literature want to express. This is especially true for the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Ecclesiastes. Furthermore, gaining wisdom is encouraged by the authors as a way to accept death in order to achieve the *carpe diem* ideal.

Analyzing the individual myths, epics and other genres reveal the authors' death attitudes. While authors, and the individuals within the culture, all experienced different death attitudes, analyzing the common themes found in the literature of the Ancient Near East reveals the death attitudes of the Ancient Near Eastern culture as a whole. The common themes show that overall there is a sense of death anxiety in regard to an untimely or tragic death; death acceptance was also part of the cultural attitude toward death and afterlife, especially when people accepted death's inevitability and embraced living life to its fullest. So while many of the images in regard to death and the underworld are sometimes somber and gloomy, it seems that people in the ancient Near East truly only feared a death that came before their destinies could be fulfilled.

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