



Mesopotamian Religion

Intro Guide

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Introduction

What is Mesopotamian religion? Like all religions, at its core, it is a system of beliefs about the divine and their worship. Since various cultures dominated Mesopotamia from the 3rd to 1st millennium BCE, each brought about new forms of religious practices and beliefs while building on the practices of the past. The region of Mesopotamia (the land between the Two Rivers) encompasses the area of modern-day Iraq and some parts of Syria, along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. This guide will focus on the 3rd through 1st millennia (ca. 3000 to 1 BCE), from the Sumerian culture until the Persian invasion in the 1st millennium.

There are two forms of religious practices that Mesopotamians engaged in, the first and more widely known today is that of the **state religion**. This was orchestrated and conducted by the religious institutions (priests) and the state (the king) who promoted and performed various religious practices and policies. These **temples** had a strict social hierarchy that incorporated the king as the head of the religion with priests of various ranks below him. The temples themselves were the homes of the main gods and goddesses of Mesopotamia, and the priests acted as their caregivers. Temples had their own lands and workers, everyone from farmers on their land to priests who dressed, fed, and prayed to the gods. The average Mesopotamian would never be allowed inside the temple, and even those who could enter were restricted to the access designated to their station with very few allowed access to the statue of the divine. The average Mesopotamian person, even

those who worked for the temple, saw the statue of the divine (often hidden behind a veil) only when it was taken out of the temple during festival occasions.

The other form of religion that the Mesopotamians practiced was on a more personal level. This form of religion was integrated into everyday life and impacted the individual on a daily basis. Some aspects of personal religion were similar to activities that took place in the temple but to a smaller degree. The commemoration of one's **ancestors** played a large role in personal religion. Various rituals, such as ***Kispu***, were centered around remembering the deceased and celebrating ancestors. Mesopotamians often had personal gods which they worshiped in the household alongside various protective spirits. These gods played a role in household rituals, divination, magic, and medicine which were all over forms of personal religion.

Religious practice and belief influenced all aspects of Mesopotamian society and everyday life. Various literary records tell stories of gods and goddesses and the interactions between people and the divine. People's names often used prominent deities within them, showing the importance of that deity to the individual and their family. The divine played a role in law and justice, overseeing trials and protecting the innocent. Rituals invoicing deities were used for all aspects of life, from medicine to warding off evil to growing crops. Religious holidays were celebrated bringing people together. Aspects of religion were everywhere and thus the study of Mesopotamian religion offers a unique doorway to explore all aspects of ancient culture.

Reference Timeline

Refer to *A History of the Ancient Near East* by Marc Van De Mieroop, 2016 pages 385-388.

Fundamental Concepts

Rituals:

Ritual refers to any religious practice or ceremony that is physically performed. In Mesopotamia, rituals could be performed by anyone depending on the type of ritual it was. Often, professionals (often referred to as exorcists) would be hired to oversee and lead individuals through these rituals particularly when they involved medicine or protection.

Polytheistic:

The Mesopotamians believed in the existence of multiple gods and goddesses.

Divine:

Divine refers to all gods, goddesses, mythical creatures, spirits, and demons. It also refers to the spaces that these individuals dwelled such as temples or the heavens. This term can also be used to describe any item that was found in these places. For example, a table in the heavens could be considered a divine table.

Cosmical Geography:

There are several realms of existence that the Mesopotamians believed. All spaces were accessible to the divine, animals and plants, but not all were accessible to humans except in very special circumstances. Firstly, there was the Earth where living humans dwelt (occasionally the dead as well in the form of ghosts). This space could be further conceptualized between the steppe (areas uninhabited by people) and civilization (cities, towns and such). Then there was the Netherworld, the place where the dead dwelt. This place was only accessible to the divine or the deceased and is described as miserable. The Apsu/Abzu was the subterranean freshwater ocean believed to exist under the Earth and inaccessible to humans in most cases. Above the world was the heavens/sky which was the home to many of the gods and goddesses and also inaccessible to humans in most cases.

A Glossary of Common Terminology

Absu/Apsu/Abzu: Underground fresh-water ocean that serves as the home of the god Enki/Ea. Occasionally thought to be a deity.

Annunaki: A term used to describe a class of divine beings. These gods and goddesses were the top of the hierarchy.

Demon: Beings that were ‘other-worldly’ but thought of as a lower class than gods and goddesses. There were bad demons who personified diseases and illnesses, and good demons that acted as protectors.

Divination: A way to communicate with the divine using various methods to determine the future.

Haruspicy/ Hepatoscopy: Using a liver (usually sheep or goat) for the purpose of divination.

Igigi: A class of deities, usually a lower class than the Annunaki.

Ritual: This term refers to any performative act deemed “religious” in nature.

Shrine: Used to refer to places of worship, either for deities or ancestors. Usually “shrine” is used to describe a place smaller than the temples/ziggurats and could be in private homes, palaces, or even small neighbourhood places of worship.

Ziggurat: A large step-pyramid structure which had a temple built on top.

Primary Sources

How do we go about reconstructing religious practices and beliefs? Scholars can use a variety of sources in an attempt to understand some aspects of religion in Mesopotamia. One primary source that is commonly used and referenced is that of the textual record. Temples usually kept detailed archival records on all aspects of temple operations and the many people involved. From these records we can piece together how the temple operated, the roles of the priests who worked there, as well as the complexity of running the temple. Texts also tell us about the types of rituals and divination that were performed both at home and in temple contexts. These give us insight into the physical practice of religion in the form of rituals and worship. We can also get some sense of what Mesopotamians believed through literary texts as they sometimes refer to people and the divine known from other textual and archaeological evidence. The other main primary source for understanding Mesopotamian religion is from the archaeological record. This includes any material culture related to religious practices such as the temples and temple/shrine structures, art and iconography, tombs and mortuary inclusions (grave goods), statues, and figurines, temple/shrine architecture, and more.

Major Gods and Goddesses

Note: Most deities have multiple names. In some cases these are the Sumerian and Akkadian equivalents (Sumerian on the left/ Akkadian on the right).

Adad: Storm god

An/Anu: God of Heaven/Sky

Assur: Patron god of the city of Assur and head of pantheon for the Assyrians

Enki/Ea: God of wisdom and magic, lives in the abzu

Enlil/Ellil: God of the mountains

Ereshkigal: Ruler goddess of the Netherworld

Inanna/Ishtar: Goddess of love and war

Nanna/Sin: Moon god

Nergal: Netherworld deity

Ninurta: Hero god

Marduk/Bel: Patron god of the city of Babylon

Utu/Shamash: Sun god, overseer of justice

Brief History of Scholarship and Key Debates

The scholarly study of Mesopotamian religion begins during the 1800s with the quest to find archaeological proof for references in the Biblical Old Testament. During the time of European exploration and colonization, there was a desire to ‘discover’ the lost cities mentioned in the Bible in the Middle East. Europeans at the time were fascinated with these ancient cultures and the treasures they held. By the 1900s, archaeology in the Middle East was at an all-time high, funded and backed by European and American universities, governments, and museums. When cuneiform texts were unearthed and ancient Near Eastern languages started to be translated, scholars sought out biblical references from the Mesopotamian literary texts. What they found were stories similar to those in the Bible, and thus scholars began the quest to better understand the religion they perceived as the predecessor to their own.

Currently within the study of Mesopotamian religion, scholars have emphasized a need to move away from biblical studies and separate the two disciplines. Scholars also look at Mesopotamian religion more than they did in the past, acknowledging that while each dominant Mesopotamian culture borrowed from their predecessors and held a strong religious tradition, they also brought new religious ideas and practices that defined them. More work is being done on themes such as: the physicality of religion, the functions of the temple, the roles women played within the religious sphere, gender identity, and private religion.

Annotated List of Relevant Online Resources

<https://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>

Web source for Sumerian literary stories in translation.

<http://oracc.museum.upenn.edu/projectlist.html>

The ORACC project list which gives links to various online Mesopotamian text publications, usually translated in English.

<https://etana.org/home>

ETANA (Electronic Tools and Ancient Near East Archives) hosts digitized archaeological and textual data from the Ancient Near East.

<https://cdli.mpiwg-berlin.mpg.de/>

The CDLI (Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative) contains over 360,000 cataloged artifacts relevant to the study of Assyriology.

<https://ccp.yale.edu/>

The CCP (Cuneiform Commentaries Project) hosts nearly 900 digitized ancient cuneiform commentaries from Mesopotamia.

List of Related Fields

Sumerology: the study of the history and languages of ancient Sumer

Assyriology: the study of the history and languages of ancient Assyria

Comparative Semitics: the study of semitic languages and linguistic comparison between these languages

Bibliography

Overview

Bottéro, Jean. (2001). *Religion in Ancient Mesopotamia*. Trans. Fagan, T.L. The University of Chicago Press. USA

Bottero, Jean. (1992). *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*. Trans. Bahrani, Z., & Van De Mieroop, M. The University of Chicago Press. USA.

Both books are a good introduction to Mesopotamian religion and give the reader a good starting point. Bottero does not assume much prior knowledge of Mesopotamian history or myth.

Jacobsen, Thorkild. (1976). *The Treasures of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*. Yale University. USA

While an older publication, Jacobsen's book is a great resource for anyone studying Mesopotamian religion. He approaches the subject using both archeological and textual sources touching on many aspects of Mesopotamian religion.

Ritual Texts

Abusch, Tzvi. 2015. *The Anti-Witchcraft Series Maqlû: A Student Edition and Selected Commentary*. Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, and the Foundation for Finnish Assyriological Research. USA

Abusch, Tzvi. (2002). *Mesopotamian Witchcraft: Toward a History and Understanding of Babylonian Witchcraft Beliefs and Literature*. Brill. Leiden.

Abusch, Tzvi. (2011). "Witches and Demons in Ancient Mesopotamia" *SMSR* 77 (2011): 342-356

Ambos, Claus. 2014. "Ancient Near Eastern Royal Rituals". *Religion Compass* 8/11. 327-336.

Archi, A., (2013). "Ritualization at Ebla". *Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religions*, 13(2), pp.212-237.

Butler, S.A.L. (1998). *Mesopotamian Conceptions of Dreams and Dream Rituals*. Verlag. Munster. Germany.

Cohen, Andrew. (2005). *Death Rituals, Ideology, and the Development of Early Mesopotamian Kingship. Ancient Magic and Divination VII*. Brill.

Divination Texts

Lambert, W.G. (2007). *Babylonian Oracle Questions*. Eisenbrauns. Indiana.

Literary Texts

Dalley, Stephanie. (2000). *Myths of Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*. Oxford University Press. Great Britain.

Dalley has translated several Akkadian myths and written them in a way that is easy to read and follow along. She offers many notes to aid the reader throughout which gives a more in-depth experience to the myths.

George, Andrew. (1999). *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Penguin Books. London.

Lambert, W.G., & Millard, A.R. (1999). *Atra-ḫasīs: The Babylonian Story of the Flood*. Eisenbrauns. USA.

Ponchia, S., & Luukko, M. (2013). *The Standard Babylonian Myth of Nergal and Ereškigal. State Archives of Assyria Cuneiform Texts Vol. VII*. Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project. Helsinki.

Deities, Spirits, and Demons

Asher-Greeve, J., & Westenholz, J. (2013). *Goddesses in Context: On Divine Powers, Roles, Relationships, and Gender in Mesopotamian Textual and Visual Sources*. Academic Press Fribourg. Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht Göttingen.

Black, Jeremy & Green, Anthony. (1992). *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*. University of Texas Press.

Black and Green's book is a well compiled and detailed catalog of the gods/goddesses, demons, and symbols of Mesopotamia. It is an extremely useful reference guide.

Campbell Thompson, R. (1993). *The Devils and Evil Spirits of Babylonia*. Luzac and Co. London.

Finkel, Irving. 2021. *The First Ghosts: Most Ancient of Legacies*. Great Britain: Hodder & Stoughton.

Hundley, Michael B. (2013). *Gods in Dwellings: Temples and Divine Presence in the Ancient Near East*. Society of Biblical Literature. USA.

A more detailed book about the relationship between gods and the temple. This helps the reader grasp the connection between the physical structure and the divine.

Wiggermann, F. A. M. (1992). *Mesopotamian Protective Spirits the Ritual Texts*. STYX Publications. The Netherlands.

Conceptions of the World

Horowitz, Wayne. (1998). *Mesopotamian Cosmic Geography*. Eisenbrauns. USA.

Temples

Waerzeggers, C. 2010. *The Ezida Temple of Borsippa: Priesthood, Cult, Archives*. Achaemenid History 15. Leiden: NINO, pp. 33–64.

Waerzeggers, C. 2011. The Babylonian Priesthood in the Long Sixth Century BC. *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 54/2: 59–70.