Rethinking Ghosts in World Religions
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Studies in the History of Religions

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The *Epic of Gilgamesh* is the best known work of literature from ancient Iraq, and rightly so. Its 3,000 or so lines relate the story of the legendary king of Uruk and his friendship and adventures with his close companion Enkidu, whose subsequent death initiated the grieving Gilgamesh’s vain quest for immortality. The tale ends where it began, at the city walls of Uruk, where a wiser Gilgamesh has implicitly accepted his mortality and is ready to resume the duties of kingship. The Akkadian epic is loosely based on a group of earlier Sumerian stories about Gilgamesh, but includes as well much that is not known from the Sumerian tradition. The Sumerian stories are relatively short, ranging from just over 100 lines to just over 300, and have been transmitted as independent compositions. The Akkadian epic is a well integrated work of over 3,000 lines in length, framed, as already stated, by nearly identical scenes at the great wall that Gilgamesh had built to protect his city, Uruk. Versions of the Akkadian epic are known from at least 1800 B.C., but it attained its canonical form around 1200. Then, sometime, probably, in the early first millennium B.C., a scribe in a position to make an authoritative change in a canonical work added a twelfth tablet to the end of the eleven tablet epic. This extra tablet was, strangely, a verbatim translation of the second half of one of the Sumerian Gilgamesh stories,

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("Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld. Stranger still, this new ending to the epic opens with Enkidu fully alive, even though he has long been dead according to the preceding Akkadian narrative.

In the Sumerian story, the super-strong Gilgamesh has been forcing his male subjects to play grueling matches of a ballgame, a kind of hockey or lacrosse, and in response to his people’s complaints the gods caused his ball and stick to fall into the netherworld. The Akkadian translation begins with Gilgamesh mourning the loss of his equipment, and his servant Enkidu offering to go to the Netherworld and retrieve the ball and stick (in the Sumerian tradition, Enkidu is a servant of Gilgamesh, though he is in rare instances also called a friend; in the Akkadian tradition, he is never a servant, but the equal of Gilgamesh, his companion and friend. This difference will be important further on.).

Gilgamesh instructs Enkidu in how he must behave to avoid being held captive in the netherworld, but Enkidu proceeds to do the very opposite, offending the ghosts and powers that be in the netherworld, who detain him there. Gilgamesh prays for Enkidu’s release, and the god of wisdom and magic, Ea, instructs the Sun God, also powerful in the netherworld, to open a small hole so that Enkidu can escape. Reunited with his friend, Gilgamesh quizzes him about the condition of the ghosts of people who died in various circumstances, and Enkidu answers, detailing a variety of ghostly conditions, from plush to wretched, and, like its Sumerian original, the story ends abruptly with the last of these ghosts.

For us, the use of this story to end the Akkadian epic destroys the epic’s unity and structure. For the ancients, who accepted the addition, the new information was relevant to the broader theme of the epic—human mortality and what (not) to do about it—and the instruction of Gilgamesh in the ways of the netherworld and its denizens would

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have foreshadowed his role, after his own death, as a netherworld deity. But modern scholars have also had difficulty with the text on its own terms, because the conditions of the ghosts as described by Enkidu seem so very different from the usual portrayal of the netherworld in cuneiform literature, a

gloomy house . . . the house that none leaves who enters . . . whose entrants are bereft of light, where dust is their sustenance and clay their food. They see no light but dwell in darkness, they are clothed like birds in wings for garments, and dust has gathered on the door and bolt.⁵

The usual portrayal of ghosts’ situations is uniformly dreary, but some of the ghosts seen by Enkidu were doing very well indeed, especially those who had had many children. Best off of all were the ghosts of still-born children, who, in the Sumerian version at least, “enjoy syrup and ghee at gold and silver tables.”⁶

To understand what Enkidu found, and reconcile it with the otherwise dreary image of netherworld existence, we must first understand how the ancient Mesopotamians understood ghosts.⁷ According to one Babylonian creation account, man was created from clay that had been mixed with the flesh and blood of a god.⁸ The divine materials were needed, the text tells us, to provide man with consciousness or reason,

⁵ From the Descent of Ishtar to the Netherworld (Benjamin Foster, Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005), p. 499). See also Dina Katz, The Image of the Netherworld in the Sumerian Sources (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2003). C. Barrett, “Was Dust Their Food and Clay Their Bread? Grave Goods, the Mesopotamian Afterlife, and the Liminal Role of Inana/Ishtar,” Journal of Ancient Near Eastern Religion 7 (2007): 7–65, argues that sumptuous grave goods suggest that the Babylonians could not have believed the afterlife to be so dreary. Either the goods were for the use of the deceased themselves in the netherworld, or were gifts to the netherworld gods in order to get favorable treatment there. She also points to what she calls Inana/Ishtar-Dumuzi imagery on the goods in several rich graves, which she thinks suggests the possibility of escape from a dreary afterlife. But her net may be cast too wide here, since the floral and faunal imagery interpreted as having such allusions encompasses most Mesopotamian ornament. Do rosettes always imply Inana/Ishtar, herds and flocks Dumuzi?

⁶ Line y in the ed. of Gadotti; line 299 in the George and ETCSL editions; line r2 in George, The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic.


⁸ The Akkadian story of Atrahasis; see Foster, Before the Muses, p. 235f.
tēmu, and there inhered in man a ghost, etemmu, originating from the flesh of the god, which was a sign of man’s godly components—animals, after all, don’t have ghosts, at least, not in Babylonia. The ghost signaled its presence through the heartbeat while the man lived; implicitly, death released the ghost.\(^9\)

The ancients were very concerned about the ghost that was released after death. The deceased’s family was responsible to see to a proper burial and funerary offerings, both upon interment and at regular intervals throughout the year.\(^10\) Well tended family ghosts were benevolent; it is the ghosts of those who did not receive proper burial, or did not receive the regular offerings (and were left to survive on the dirty food and water of the netherworld) who were dangerous. A supplicant offering a libation to his family ghosts asks them to have his illness removed from him and banished to the netherworld:

O ghosts of my family, progenitors in the grave,
My father, my grandfather, my mother, my grandmother, my brother, my sister
My family, kith and kin, as many as are asleep in the netherworld,
I have made my funerary offering,
I have libated water to you, I have cherished you,
I have glorified you, I have honored you.
Stand this day before the Sun God and Gilgamesh,
Judge my case, render my verdict!
Hand over to Fate, messenger of the netherworld,
The evil(s) present in my body, flesh, and sinews!\(^{11}\)

But ghosts who have not been properly cared for, whether neglected family dead, or others that have not been properly buried and/or ritually provisioned, are a great danger:

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\(^9\) The reason/ghost pun works with the Sumerian equivalents dim-ma/gidim as well, though it is never made explicit in Sumerian texts. The Sumerian is certainly the source of the Akkadian words, but the etymology of gidim is murky, and the solution suggested by G. Selz, ”Was bleibt? [II]. Der sogenannte ‘Totengeist’ und das Leben der Geschlechter,” In Ernst Czerny et al. eds., *Timelines: Studies in Honour of Manfred Bietak* (Leuven: Peeters, 2006), p. 88, seems fanciful. Katz, “Sumerian Funerary Rituals in Context,” p. 172f., postulates an im, which she translates “breath, spirit” (usually zi), which upon death becomes the gidim. The Ur III materials on which she bases her argument are difficult and require further study.


O Sun God, a terrifying ghost has attached itself to my back for many
days, and does not release its hold, It harasses me all day, terrifies me all
night,
Always at hand to hound me, making my hair stand on end,
Pressing my forehead, making me dizzy,
Parching my mouth, paralyzing my flesh, drying out my whole body.
Be it a ghost of my kith or kin,
Be it a ghost of someone killed in battle,
Be it a wandering ghost, . . .
Drive it from my body, cut it off from my body, remove it from my body! . . .
Remove the sickness of my body, that the one who sees me may sound
your praises,
Eradicate the disease of my body!
I turn to you, grant me life!¹²

These malevolent ghosts were the source of a wide array of illnesses,
material and social misfortune, and nightmares;¹³ a whole repertoire
of incantations and rituals existed to exorcise them.¹⁴

As early as 2000 B.C. or so, the ghost was included in the extensive
reperatory of evil demons who can cause harm to humans, but only the
malevolent ghost, and not the other demons, was considered to be the
spirit of a human,¹⁵ one who died in circumstances that made a burial
or funerary cult problematic: the improperly buried, youths who died
before they could reproduce, those who died alone in the desert and
remained unburied, the drowned and unrecovered, and those who died
from animal attacks or accidents, either because such deaths damaged
the integrity of the corpse, or the ghost was angry due to a premature
or violent death.¹⁶ These categories of ghosts are also found in Enkidu’s
description of netherworld denizens, as we will soon see.

Ghosts have a now-you-see-’em-now-you-don’t kind of visibility,
appearing and disappearing on their own volition, but capable of ex-
tended interaction with the living mainly in dreams. They are impalpable,
that is, they can touch you but you can’t touch them, and they are able to intervene in human affairs for good or for ill. They consume the food and drink offered to them, and can even be consulted. They must perforce be able to leave the netherworld, whether to receive offerings from their families or to haunt those who have neglected them or are simply unfortunate enough to be the victim of a hungry spirit. The ghosts don’t return as living persons, of course. Death is final, “the bane of mankind… the darkest day… the flood-wave that cannot be breasted… the battle that cannot be matched… the fight that shows no pity.” The netherworld is the place of no return only in the sense that once dead, a person can never return to the living, and should a living person (or a deity who does not belong there) manage to reach the netherworld and be found out, there is no way back. This was the predicament of Enkidu: He disobeyed Gilgamesh’s injunctions, attracted the attention of the denizens of the netherworld, and was detained there.

Gilgamesh instructed Enkidu to enter the netherworld in a drab, affectless manner, in order to blend in and not be found out: No fine clothes or fragrant unguent, no expressions of love or anger. When Enkidu does the opposite, and is held there, Gilgamesh, in his pleas for Enkidu’s release, is very clear that he died neither a natural nor a violent death; he is, rather, a captive in the netherworld, implicitly, an undead captive. And so, when Enkidu escapes from the netherworld, it is the living Enkidu that returns to tell Gilgamesh about the conditions down below. The Sumerian text is clear: “He (the god) opened a chink in the Netherworld; by means of his (the god’s) gust of wind, he sent his (Gilgamesh’s) servant up from the netherworld.” The Akkadian translation, however is different: “He opened a chink in the Netherworld, and the ghost of Enkidu emerged from the netherworld."

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18 George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, p. 203, from the Sumerian story *Death of Gilgamesh*.
as a phantom."²¹ The reasons for the Akkadian mistranslation will be discussed elsewhere,²² but suffice it to say here that the word “ghost” in the Akkadian is a misreading of the Sumerian word “servant,” probably because Enkidu is never a servant of Gilgamesh in the Akkadian tradition.²³ That the Akkadian is erroneous becomes clear from what happens next: “They hugged and kissed each other” (Akkadian) or “He (Gilgamesh) hugged and kissed him (Sumerian).” Mesopotamians might have been able to hug and kiss ghosts in their dreams, but this kind of mutual contact was not possible while awake.²⁴

After their embrace, Gilgamesh interrogates Enkidu about conditions in the netherworld. Enkidu warns Gilgamesh that he won’t like what he hears, and begins his description—in a difficult passage whose meaning is nonetheless clear—by underlining the impossibility of sexual pleasure after death: “The penis is like a rotten beam, termites devour it… The vulva is like a crevice filled with dust.”²⁵ This fits perfectly with everything else we know about the netherworld and the conditions of ghosts, but why should it be the first thing out of Enkidu’s mouth? Perhaps, because the long list of ghosts and their fates that follows begins with the ghosts of men who had one to seven sons, followed by the ghosts of people who, for various reasons, never had children. The best off was the man with seven sons: he sat among the minor gods. The man with only one son was not happy, and those without children were uniformly wretched.²⁶ The moral: for a happy afterlife, have lots of children! The initial description of the atrophy and decay of the sexual organs demonstrates that there is no after-the-fact

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²² Gadotti, “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld and the Sumerian Gilgamesh Cycle.”
²³ Similarly, the Sumerian “gust of wind” becomes “phantom” in Akkadian because of a misapprehension of the semantic range of the Sumerian word.
²⁵ These lines were not completely known in George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. Cf. George, *The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 760, lines 250–53 as interpreted in Gadotti, “Gilgamesh, Enkidu and the Netherworld and the Sumerian Gilgamesh Cycle.”
remedy for the failure to reproduce while alive; there can be no coupling among the dead.

The Akkadian text is broken for most of the rest of the catalogue of shades. The Sumerian text continues by enumerating the unhappy lot of those denied proper burial or killed violently, a list that overlaps considerably with the cast of malevolent ghosts from the incantation cited earlier. The text nears its conclusion with three fates that for the only time in the listing have a moral dimension: the ghosts of the person who was cursed by his parents or took his god’s name in vain roam around or eat and drink bitter bread and water, but the ghost of a person who died in god’s service lies on a divine couch. The main Sumerian recension ends with the following:

Did you see my small still-born who never were aware of themselves?—I saw them.—How do they fare?
They are enjoying syrup and ghee at gold and silver tables.
Did you see the man who was burnt to death?—I saw him—How does he fare?
His ghost is not there, his smoke went up to heaven.27

A strange way to end the story; what happened to Gilgamesh? To Enkidu? One manuscript from Ur continues the narrative after a break: that text ends with Gilgamesh returning to his city, Uruk, and performing proper funerary rites for his parents. This seems rather fitting, since the whole emphasis of the netherworld description has been on the importance of having heirs to perform those rites.

The privileged position of the still-born must lie in the fact that never having achieved consciousness (tēmu), their ghosts (etēmmu) had never entered into the cycle that made them dependent on funerary offerings; perhaps some notion of the innocence or purity of the unborn is also being expressed. The still-born would also not have names, and calling the dead by name was an important part of the funerary cult.28 The man who burns to death has no corpse to bury, but likewise no corpse to remain uncared for. The absence of a corpse implies the absence of a ghost, and hence, for the person concerned, complete exclusion from the rites that integrate ghosts of the departed into the family

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28 van der Toorn, Family Religion in Babylonia, Syria and Israel, p. 52ff.
structure,\(^{29}\) and for the family itself, it implies the lack of a potentially benevolent spirit who could be called on in time of need. Cremation was not practiced in ancient Mesopotamia, and there was some nexus between bones and ghosts: “O dead people, why do you keep appearing to me, people whose cities are ruin heaps, who themselves are just bones?”\(^{30}\) Assyrian kings would punish rebellious vassals by scattering or pulverizing their bones or the bones of their ancestors.\(^{31}\)

The “ghost” of Sumerian and Akkadian sources, then, seems to be something akin to an immortal soul,\(^ {32}\) an integral part of the living person that takes on an independent role only after death. Its salvation seems to have depended less on moral qualities than on reproductive success (very Darwinian!).\(^ {33}\) Consciousness, \(\texttt{ēmu}\), exits upon death together with the ghost, \(\texttt{etemmu}\), and pursues a rather drab, eternal existence in the netherworld,\(^ {34}\) coming out only to accept the occasional funerary offering, or, if none is forthcoming, to haunt the living. The ghost, in its ability to move about invisibly and affect mortal lives, and

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\(^{29}\) Cf. B. Alster, “The Paradigmatic Character of Mesopotamian Heroes,” *Revue d’Assyriologie* 68 (1974): 59, where this “total annihilation of both body and soul in fire” is seen as liberation from the “eternal cycle” in which “men must have children who can provide them with funeral offerings after they death, and they must also have children, and so forth.” See also Bendt Alster, *Wisdom of Ancient Sumer* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005), p. 340f.

\(^{30}\) Foster, *Before the Muses*, p. 991.


\(^{33}\) A person with strong moral qualities would be rewarded with a good reputation that translates into what we might call a “blessed memory” among the living, which was the counterpart of the ghost that perdured in the netherworld. In the words of a funerary inscription: “May the good deed he has done be requited him. Above, may his name be in favor, below, may his ghost drink pure waters!” (Foster, *Before the Muses*, p. 286).

\(^{34}\) The eternal existence of the ghosts of anyone who had ever lived lies behind the threat of Ishtar and Ereshkigal to bodily resurrect somehow all of those ghosts so that “the dead outnumber the living.” (Foster, *Before the Muses*, pp. 499, 420.) The threats worked; the gods could do the math. Cf. Bernstein’s discussion of the ghostly hosts in this volume.
in its dependence on offerings from the living, is very much like a god, though deprived of most divine pleasures. Gilgamesh, according to the Sumerian story of his death, and agreeing with his position in the Mesopotamian pantheon, becomes a divine judge in the netherworld, as does the prematurely dead king Urnammu of the Third Dynasty of Ur (ca. 2100 B.C.). So Gilgamesh did find a kind of immortality after all, and so might we, if we don’t go up in smoke.

35 Note that when Shukaletuda first sights the goddess Inana in the sky, he is said to see “a solitary god-ghost,” referring to the appearance of the god, not wholly visible, as well, perhaps, to the return of Inana from the netherworld (note the different interpretation of Selz, “Was bleibt? [II]. Der sogenannte ‘Totengeist’ und das Leben der Geschlechter,” p. 88. See Jeremy A. Black et al., The Literature of Ancient Sumer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 200. The Sumerian writes the sign gidim “ghost” here preceded by the determinative for god; the determinative appears nowhere else with gidim in Sumerian texts of this period. Interestingly, the divine determinative is used with gidim in one Ur III text (MVN 10 172) where the ghost in question is the ghost of a recently deceased deified king, but not used otherwise in that period.