

# Babylonia

## Practices

The dead were often buried in simple tombs. The oldest graves seem to be simple mounds of dirt that covered the body. From later fragments of royal burials it is believed that the corpse was preserved by means of milk honey oil and salt and swathed in linen strewn with spices and then laid on a stone bier. The dead body, which was often covered with palm woods, was placed generally on the side—though occasionally on the back—on a board of wood, or wrapped in a mat of reeds or palm fibers, and covered with a tub-shaped clay dish. On the dish there was frequently an ornamental design. The body was frequently pressed together in order to be brought within the compass of the dish. Sometimes a jar was used instead of a coffin. A seal cylinder that acted as the signature of the deceased was often interned with them. Additionally good ranging from ornaments, rings, necklaces and toys were often found. These seemed to be included because it was believed that the deceased would enjoy them (rather than need them). One good that always was included was a water jar. It along with remains of food and text from the Gilgamesh epic seem to reflect that food was required by the dead. Animal sacrifice as well as offerings of food to the dead was another common practice with the son performing the office of pouring out water to the memory of his father.

A bronze tablet has been found that indicates some of the rites that were most likely performed at funerals. The dead were placed on a bier and wrapped in some kind of a cover. Priests were called in to perform rites of purification. One of the priests acting as Ea, the god of the deep, dresses in a fish costume and burns incense and the sprinkles water. This purification was done to protect the dead from evil spirits that were believed to infest the grave.

The formal lament for the dead was another ceremony upon which stress was laid. It lasted from three to seven days. During this time male and female professional wailers were employed to mourn the dead by singing lamentations and playing the flute.<sup>1</sup> It was also common for mourners to rent their garments.

## Deities and Important Concepts

- Enlil (lord wind)  
The god of air, wind and storms. Enlil is the foremost god of the Mesopotamian pantheon.
- Ninlil (queen wind)  
The goddess of heaven, earth, and air and . Consort to Enlil. She shows compassion to the unfortunate.
- Marduk (god the Early Sun and of the Spring Sun)  
The compassionate one whose joy is in raising the dead or the raiser of the dead.
- Aralû  
The land of the dead. A gloomy place situated deep down in the earth. Known as the "Land without return", "land of the dead" and "the far off land".
- Nergal  
Represents the sun of noontime and of the summer solstice that brings destruction, high summer being the dead season in the Mesopotamian annual cycle. Nergal was the netherworld and who stands at the head of the special pantheon assigned to the government of the dead.
- Gilgamesh  
Acted as a ferryman for the souls of the dead.

## Modern Adaptations

- Anoint the body of the deceased with a mixture of honey oil and salt. Wrap the body in linen that has been treated with spices.
- Pour water on the grave to symbolize that the dead shall be remembered. That this remembrance shall be like food and water to keep the dead alive in our memories.

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<sup>1</sup> Jastrow, Morris. "The Tombs and the Burial Customs: Dead, Babylonian, Sheol, Period, Babylonians, Body." "The Tombs and the Burial Customs:." N.p., n.d. Web. 13 Mar. 2013. <http://encyclobooks.com/The-Religion-of-Babylonia-and-Assyria/TOMBS-BURIAL-CUSTOMS-DEAD.htm>

- Hire a flute player to play and ask people to express their sorrow by wailing.
- When speaking of the dead speak of how we sorrow because someone we love is now in “the far off land from which none return” and while we will hold their memory dear in our hearts we will miss their physical presence.
- Pin a ribbon with a slight cut in it to each mourner. During the ritual have people tear the ribbon to represent the sorrow we feel when someone we love dies.
- Invoke Marduk in compassion to allow our loved ones to have another life.
- Place a copy of the signature of the person along with them in the grave.
- Bury a water jar with the deceased.
- Have a torchlight ceremony to honor the deceased.<sup>2</sup>
- Hold wrestling matches as part of a memorial. This might be especially appropriate for someone who was an athlete.<sup>3</sup>

## Sample Readings

*Note: Words shown in parenthesis represent words that have been lost in the original text. The word shown is my suggestion for a word to use.*

### **Death goddess mourning<sup>4</sup>**

Instead of bread earth will I eat instead of wine (tears) will I drink  
 the men will I weep who leave their wives  
 the women will I weep who turn from the loins of their husbands  
 the little children will I weep who before their time make an end.  
 Watchman open to her the gate according to the laws of old.

### **Gilgamesh ferries the souls into the underworld<sup>5</sup>**

O Gilgames, who dwells in Hades,  
 the ferryman of Hubur, who travels  
 the traveller to Hades you (ferry across)  
 he that descends to the Netherworld is under your control  
 you receive the (soul) at the ferry crossing

### **HYMNS TO NINISINA AND NERGAL (Segment B)<sup>6</sup>**

Lord Nergal was given the underworld, the E-meslam ..... by Enlil and Ninlil. They made him the great lord of the netherworld ...

To see that the netherworld where the sun sets, where there is no light, is entrusted to Biti, to prolong the life of the black-headed people of Sumer where the divine powers are utterly cleansed, to fill their life with happiness, to make them reach an old age, to see that after their death they gather to the place where one is called by his personal god (i.e., to the place of death), to the netherworld, and to see that the precious and lasting cultic ordinances are performed befitting the netherworld, Nergal, the king of sunset, was entrusted by Enlil and Ninlil. Because of this they gave him the underworld where the numerous perished people ..... as a dwelling place.

August Nibru, no god excels like your lord and lady! In your midst they have bestowed the divine powers on lord Nergal. I, I me-Dagan, have put this (composition) in everyone’s mouth for all time. Young woman Inana, Suen’s daughter, who achieves everything, even the great divine powers which exceed all other divine powers.

<sup>2</sup> George, A. R. “The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic:.” Google Books. N.p., n.d. Web. 06 May 2013. p. 127  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=21xxZ\\_qUy\\_wC](http://books.google.com/books?id=21xxZ_qUy_wC)

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p. 126

<sup>4</sup> Jreemias, Alfred. “The Babylonian Conception of Heaven and Hell.” Google Books. N.p., n.d. Web. 19 Mar. 2013. p. 7  
<http://books.google.com/books?id=MGkLAQAAIAAJ>

<sup>5</sup> “The Babylonian Gilgamesh Epic:.” Google Books. N.p., n.d. Web. 18 Apr. 2013 p. 131  
[http://books.google.com/books?id=21xxZ\\_qUy\\_wC](http://books.google.com/books?id=21xxZ_qUy_wC)

<sup>6</sup> “The Hymns to Ninisina and Nergal on the Tablets Ash 1911.235 and Ni 9672” Web. 14 Mar. 2013  
[http://www.academia.edu/618207/Hymns\\_to\\_Ninisina\\_and\\_Nergal\\_on\\_the\\_Tablets\\_Ash\\_1911.235\\_and\\_Ni\\_9672](http://www.academia.edu/618207/Hymns_to_Ninisina_and_Nergal_on_the_Tablets_Ash_1911.235_and_Ni_9672)

## ***A Hymn to Nergal***<sup>7</sup>

the mighty one, what is he?  
the mighty one, what is he?  
the ancient one, he who is mighty.  
the ancient one, he who is mighty.

Lord of the decree of Erech; the ancient one, he who is mighty.  
The mighty one, the dust divider; the net he fashioneth;  
As a double garment (a garment for his city, etc.) the net he setteth.

What is like unto thee? What is like unto thee?  
O my lord of glory! He is the one who overthroweth.

....

Truly mighty with judgment he goeth; a father (?) who goeth forth.  
The mighty one, the strong lord, when he overthroweth,  
what is it that he saith?

For weeping he is clothed; with evil fire for weeping he is clothed.  
For weeping, for lamentation he is clothed; for weeping he is clothed.  
The leader who shineth; with justice he is clothed; for weeping he is clothed.

Verily he is mighty; a strong god, with a fiery surrounding he is enveloped; for weeping he is clothed.  
Powerful one who verily is a prince of wisdom; leader who has wrought wisely.  
Verily he is mighty; a strong god, surrounded by fire; a prince of wisdom; leader who hath wrought wisely.

## **Resources**

The Babylonian Conception of Heaven and Hell

<https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=MGkLAQAIAAJ&printsec=frontcover&output=reader&authuser=0&hl=en&pg=GBS.PP1>

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<sup>7</sup> Prince, Dyneley J. "A Hymn to Nergal." JSTOR, n.d. Web. 14 Mar. 2013. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/592769?seq=7>