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Eschatological Intersections: Tracing the Function of Afterlife Beliefs

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15 Eschatological Intersections: Tracing the Function of Afterlife Beliefs

Abstract

Historiographically, evaluating afterlife conceptualizations reveals an intricate matrix of beliefs across civilizations. Preeminent within this schema is Ancient Egypt, whose eschatological paradigms, typified by figures like Osiris and rituals such as the "Opening of the Mouth", experienced diachronic shifts across its dynastic epochs. Such conceptualizations were not insular, with clear intersections manifesting in Germanic spectral reverence and indigenous African ancestral veneration. The Qumranic eschatology, with its Judaic nuances, further enriches this discourse. Intriguingly, these motifs find a salient convergence within the Johannine Gospel, which merges the transcendence of mortality with the divine filiation in its proclamation of Jesus as both the "Logos" and the "Son of God". Notably, this religious tapestry has contemporary political ramifications in Africa, wherein eschatological and Christological constructs are strategically deployed for governance and legitimacy. This analysis underscores the indelible imprint of afterlife doctrines, coupled with the "Son of God" motif, on both theological and socio-political terrains, with a pronounced resonance in the African milieu. Politicians have conscripted both ancestral and divine authority by intertwining the spiritual with the secular to fortify their position amidst the socio-political challenges. This synthesis sheds light on the profound influence of afterlife beliefs and Christological motifs and their pragmatic deployment in the socio-political landscape, notably palpable in African contexts.

Keywords: *Eschatology, Intersections, Beliefs, Afterlife, Function*

1. Prolegomena

The genesis of this chapter stems from a multifaceted exploration at the intersection of several scholarly pursuits and personal connections. As an academic endeavour, it serves as both a reflection of my own scholarly journey and a tribute to the intellectual heritage fostered by Professor Kügler, whose profound impact resonates through his diverse research interests. Professor Kügler's doctoral thesis on the Book of John and Johannine theology, coupled with his Habilitation in Egyptology focusing on the nexus between Pharaoh and Christus, underscores his interdisciplinary approach and scholarly depth. Furthermore, his supervision of my thesis on Jewish Apocalypticism and our collaborative efforts in publishing articles on apocalypticism and eschatology have laid the foundation for this exploration.

At its core, this chapter not only delves into the intersections of afterlife beliefs but also serves as a testament to what could be considered as foundational bricks *to Kueglerism* or *kueglerology*. Beyond academia, Professor Kügler's affection for Africa and his fascination with the utilization of the Bible on the continent provide additional layers of significance to this inquiry. The parallels drawn between similar experiences in Africa and Germany not only highlight the universality of certain human experiences but also underscore the intricate interplay between culture, religion, and politics. By delving into German afterlife beliefs, this chapter also acknowledges Professor Kügler's German heritage and seeks to unravel the historical reverberations that may have implications for African religion and the political sphere. Thus, this chapter embarks on a journey that transcends disciplinary boundaries, weaving together strands of scholarly inquiry, personal connections, and cross-cultural reflections.

2. Introduction

Beliefs about the afterlife, play a crucial role in shaping worldviews and influencing human behaviour across various societal sectors. These beliefs are often influenced by factors such as economic theory memory and identity (Schmidt, 2000; Newman 2010) and the desire for a joining of faculties. They can also serve as a means of enforcing social contracts and

have a significant impact on the cultural and structural makeup of communities. The concept of the afterlife, as a distant reality with its own system of values and rituals, has been a central aspect of ancient mythological systems (Sumchenko, 2022; Assmann, 2011). Furthermore, the afterlife beliefs of different religious traditions, including Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, have been found to influence end-of-life care. These beliefs play a pivotal role in shaping doctrines making them particularly resonant and meaningful for adherents by associating them with eternal consequences (Moreman, 2016). These beliefs are central to the reinforcement of ritual and worship across global religions, prominently featured in funeral rites, memorial services, and rites of passage that often include elements designed to prepare the deceased for the afterlife or to honor their memory. In this chapter, the focus will be primarily on the role of afterlife beliefs in various cultural contexts. The discussion will explore how these beliefs have been strategically employed within the socio-political space, especially, in the quest to consolidate power and legitimize political players.

3. Ancient Afterlife Beliefs

3.1 Psychological Function of Afterlife Beliefs

At the psychological core of identity construction in many cultures are the beliefs pertaining to the afterlife (De Cruz & De Smedt, 2017). These serve as distinguishing religious markers. They act as a thoroughgoing tool to foster a sense of community and belonging among individuals, thereby reinforcing social norms and collective identities (Ellemers, 2017). This integration of afterlife beliefs into community practices and individual identities underscores their significant role in societal cohesion.

Moreover, afterlife beliefs instil moral dimensions that either reward or punish individuals based on their earthly behaviours as encapsulated by the metaphorical expression from the Babylonian context: "thou have been weighed." This moral framework can promote ethical conduct and discourage behaviours that are socially undesirable (Willard et al, 2020).

Additionally, these beliefs provide crucial explanations for what transpires after death, helping to alleviate fears associated with the unknown and

offering individuals a sense of security about their eventual fate. Consequently, beliefs in the afterlife also assist individuals in finding meaning and purpose in life, influencing decisions related to careers, relationships, and personal development, and guiding them through existential uncertainties and the fear of death (Georgiadou & Pnevmatikos, 2019).

3.2 Economic and Political Function of Afterlife Beliefs

In the economic realm, cultural investments into afterlife preparations are substantial, profoundly influencing industries related to funeral services, tomb construction, and religious offerings. Gunda calls this the "death industry" (Gunda, 2001). Such expenditures reflect how afterlife beliefs shape economic behaviours, including charitable giving, ethical business practices, and investments in religious activities that are thought to yield benefits beyond this life (Krügerr, 2008).

Moreover, afterlife beliefs play a crucial role in the legitimization of authority. Rulers and political institutions often invoke these beliefs to justify their power, asserting divine selection or portraying their laws as consonant with divine or cosmic justice. This alignment of state or cultural laws with perceived divine mandates regarding the afterlife enables leaders to exercise considerable control over their subjects. By leveraging the promise of heavenly rewards or the threat of eternal damnation, they enforce compliance and maintain power dynamics.

3.3 Background and Context

Assmann's assertion that death is central to culture resonates universally, as humans are inherently preoccupied with mortality and what comes after (Assmann, 2010). This fascination with the afterlife is seen in various cultures, such as the Sumerians, Egyptians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Persians, Israelites, Germanic tribes, and the Shona people of Zimbabwe. Each culture has developed unique beliefs about the afterlife that shape their worldview and societal structures. The ancient Sumerians, civilization, spanning circa 4500–1900 BCE, for example, believed in a shadowy afterlife realm called Kur, which later evolved to include divine judgment and a celestial paradise for the righteous. Sumerian funeral rites and burial practices were also important in constructing social identity and rein-

forcing hierarchies. These beliefs and practices demonstrate the intertwined nature of afterlife beliefs and social structures, and how they evolve over time (Crawford, 2004; Kuijt, 2008; Shushan & Flood, 2009).

3.4 Afterlife Beliefs in Babylon and Assyria

Babylonian afterlife beliefs, deeply rooted in antecedent Sumerian traditions, reveal a complex understanding of mortality and the metaphysical journey post-death. These beliefs, encapsulated in significant mythological texts and rituals, highlight a cosmology centred around a somber and inexorable vision of the underworld. The influence of Sumerian cultural and religious practices is evident in the Babylonian conception of the afterlife, often depicted as the "Land of No Return" (De Cruz & De Smedt, 2017; Scurlock, 1995). This portrayal reflects a continuity of the Sumerian depiction of the underworld not as a realm of moral retribution but as a final, immutable state irrespective of one's earthly deeds or status. Central to these cultural narratives is the figure of Nergal, the formidable Babylonian god of the underworld, plague, war, and devastation, who reigns alongside his consort Ereshkigal (Meek & Mehlman, 2023). One of the most poignant reflections of these afterlife beliefs is found in the epic narrative "The Descent of Ishtar into the Underworld". This mythological text illustrates the journey of Ishtar, the goddess of love and war, as she traverses through the seven gates of the underworld, each gate stripping her of her power and identity. The Epic of Gilgamesh, another cornerstone of Babylonian literary heritage, explores themes of immortality and the human confrontation with death. This story, along with elaborate funeral practices that included burial with goods, incantations, and offerings to deities, illustrates the Babylonians' meticulous efforts to equip the deceased for their underworld journey, aiming to secure a more favorable passage. The Assyrians also held complex beliefs about the afterlife, picturing it as a shadowy realm called "Irkalla" or "Kur". This sombre, joyless underworld was believed to be a place where the deceased existed in a bleak, insubstantial state, with their destinies heavily influenced by the gods based on earthly behaviours. Assyrian funerary practices varied by social status, with the elite buried in ornate tombs and commoners often cremated, but all practices emphasized the importance of proper burial rites and elaborate ceremonies to secure a peaceful afterlife. These beliefs

and practices, including the notion that immortality was reserved for monarchs and heroes who could ascend to live among the gods, underscored the Assyrians' view of death and the afterlife as deeply intertwined with divine judgment and providence (Faulkner, 2003; Pritchard, 2011).

3.5 Afterlife Beliefs in Egypt and their Social Function

I have deliberately taken the time not only to honour Professor Kügler with a more extensive coverage of Egyptian afterlife beliefs but also to argue that Egypt's afterlife beliefs merit greater attention in scholarly discourse. This assertion is predicated on the elaborate nature of Egyptian afterlife beliefs, as evidenced by their intricate portrayal in religious texts, rituals, and monumental architecture. In contrast to many other cultures, Egypt boasts a well-documented and material culture pertaining to afterlife beliefs, underpinned by substantial archaeological evidence. Archaeological sites such as the Valley of the Kings and the pyramids serve as repositories of invaluable insights into Egyptian religious practices and cosmological views. Moreover, Egypt's profound influence on African and European perspectives regarding the afterlife is noteworthy, as it has played a significant role in shaping beliefs and rituals across continents. The dissemination of Egyptian religious concepts and iconography has left enduring marks on diverse societies, contributing to the evolution of their understanding of death and the hereafter. Therefore, in discussions of afterlife beliefs, Egypt warrants heightened scrutiny and analysis compared to other cultures. Its rich cultural and religious heritage, coupled with its far-reaching impact, underscore the importance of prioritizing the study of Egyptian afterlife beliefs within academic discourse.

3.5.1 Old Kingdom

The belief in an afterlife held a pivotal place within the cultural and religious landscape of ancient Egypt, evolving significantly from the pre-First Dynasty period through to the New Kingdom. This elaborate system of beliefs and practices underscored the Egyptians' deep-seated concerns with immortality, divine justice, and the moral integrity of the soul, which were thought to determine one's fate in the afterworld (Taylor, 2001; Assmann, 2010; Abbas, 2020; Hornung, 1999). Unlike their contemporaries,

such as the Sumerians, the ancient Egyptians developed a particularly intricate and culturally profound understanding of life after death, which became a core component of their civilization's identity. As with the Sumerians afterlife conceptions were both influenced by and reflective of broader societal changes, indicating a dynamic interplay between evolving cultural norms and religious innovations. The integration of complex rituals, detailed mythological constructs, and a robust pantheon of deities governing the afterlife highlights an elaborate theological notion that was both shaped by, and shaped, the cultural and historical dynamics of ancient Egyptian society.

The conceptualization of the afterlife in ancient Egypt was not static but evolved significantly over time, with each kingdom refining and adding layers to these beliefs. This development is exemplarily traced through the major Egyptian funerary texts which unfolded across various periods, reflecting a deepening, and expanding understanding of the afterlife.

Additionally, the evolution of Egyptian funerary texts, such as the Pyramid Texts, the Coffin Texts, and the Book of the Dead, illustrates the Egyptians' meticulous efforts to secure a favourable afterlife. These texts not only offer profound insights into the Egyptians' visions of the netherworld but also indicate an increasing democratization of the afterlife beliefs.

The transformation of these beliefs was not merely theological but was also influenced by changes in the administrative, social, and political landscapes that shaped religious doctrines.

The journey to the afterlife in ancient Egypt was envisioned as a path fraught with challenges and judgments, culminating in the Hall of Maat. Here, in a ritual that highlights the civilization's commitment to moral integrity, the deceased's heart was weighed against the feather of Maat, symbolizing truth, and justice. This practice underscores the Egyptians' profound linkage between ethical conduct and one's posthumous destiny (Tarlow & Stutz, 2013; Assmann, 2005).

3.5.2 Middle Kingdom

In the Middle Kingdom of Egypt (circa 2055–1650 BCE), the concept of the afterlife held profound significance within both religious and societal contexts. Central to this belief system was the association between the afterlife and the pharaoh, who was considered the earthly manifestation of

the god Horus. As the son of Osiris, the god of the afterlife, and Isis, the goddess of magic and motherhood, the pharaoh was believed to have a unique connection to the afterlife and was responsible for ensuring the well-being of his people beyond death. This divine affiliation bestowed upon the pharaoh immense power and authority, including the ability to intercede on behalf of his subjects in the afterlife (Kügler, 1997; Badawy, 1967). The afterlife not only provided a framework for understanding the transition from earthly existence to the realm of the gods but also motivated individuals to lead virtuous lives and adhere to societal norms, as their actions in life were believed to determine their fate in the afterlife. Additionally, the pharaoh's role as the intermediary between the mortal realm and the divine realm served to ensure the continuity of life after death for both himself and his subjects, thereby playing a pivotal role in maintaining societal order and stability. Throughout the Middle Kingdom period, the relationship between the son of God and the afterlife remained central to Egyptian religious and cultural practices, contributing to the shaping, and sustaining of Egyptian society amidst various periods of change and transition.

1. Divine Kingship and Social Hierarchy

The belief that the Pharaoh was the "Son of God" effectively elevated him above the rest of society, establishing a divine justification for his supreme rule. This notion was intricately linked with the pharaoh's role as the intermediary between the gods and the people. By positioning the pharaoh as a god on earth, the belief system reinforced his top-tier status within the social hierarchy, making him central to both governance and religious worship (Kügler, 1997; Roubekas 2015; Grajetzki, 2024).

2. Afterlife Beliefs and the Justification of Social Order

The elaborate afterlife beliefs, which included detailed depictions of the afterlife in the Pyramid Texts, supported the notion that social and moral orders on earth were mirrored in the afterlife. Since the pharaoh was responsible for maintaining ma'at (cosmic order and truth) during his lifetime, his effective rule impacted not just the earthly realm but also ensured order in the afterlife. This dual responsibility justified the social

stratification seen in Egypt, where the pharaoh's divine role necessitated a support system of various subordinate classes (Richards, 2005).

3. Exclusive Religious Knowledge and Practices

The Pyramid Texts, which were reserved primarily for the pharaohs and inscribed in their tombs, contained spells, rituals, and guidance necessary for navigating the afterlife. This exclusivity of religious knowledge underscored the divine and elevated status of the pharaoh and the royal family, thereby legitimizing their higher place in society. Ordinary Egyptians lacked access to these sacred texts and, by extension, the most direct means of securing a favorable afterlife, which reinforced their lower status.

4. Architectural Symbolism and Eternal Life

The construction of pyramids as monumental tombs for the pharaohs symbolized their continued dominance and divine status beyond death. These structures were not just burial sites but were seen as portals to the afterlife where the pharaohs could continue to exercise their godly duties. This physical representation of the pharaoh's journey to the afterlife served as a constant reminder of his pivotal role in both the earthly and divine realms, further solidifying the social structure.

Rituals and ceremonies in ancient Egypt served as vital mechanisms for reinforcing social bonds and affirming existing hierarchies, particularly centred around the Pharaoh. Participation in these religious activities, largely restricted to the elite and priestly classes, emphasized the social distinctions within Egyptian society, with common folk often excluded from these rites (Kügler, 1997). The integration of the "Son of God" belief with afterlife expectations further facilitated cultural and religious continuity, linking the divine status of the pharaoh with his posthumous existence. This narrative not only solidified the established social order but also made it challenging to challenge the hierarchy without questioning the fundamental religious and cosmic structure (Stevenson, 2016). To conclude, the "Son of God" belief, alongside afterlife beliefs, played a fundamental role in constructing and maintaining the caste system in ancient Egypt, perpetuated through religious doctrines, rituals, and monumental architecture. These beliefs not only justified the prevailing social and political structures but also ensured their longevity and stability (Johnson &

Marsha, 1991). During the Middle Kingdom, these beliefs evolved and became more ethically oriented, reflecting a significant departure from earlier conceptions of the afterlife (Hornung, 1999). Initially exclusive to royalty, access to funerary texts and practices gradually expanded to encompass the broader population, contributing to the legitimization of the social hierarchy. The evolution of funerary texts, such as the Pyramid Texts and the Book of the Dead, illustrates the Egyptians' meticulous efforts to secure a favourable afterlife, while also democratizing access to these beliefs across society (Arnold, 2008).

From the significance of rituals and ceremonies in ancient Egypt, the integration of religious beliefs with political structures underscores their multifaceted role in shaping society. This integration, exemplified by the "Son of God" belief, not only reinforced existing hierarchies. However, during the Middle Kingdom, there was a challenge to this status quo, due to their entwinement with cosmic and religious order. Consequently, these beliefs played a fundamental role in constructing and perpetuating the social and political systems of ancient Egypt.

3.5.3 Middle Kingdom Afterlife Beliefs and Social Cohesion

During the Middle Kingdom of ancient Egypt (circa 2055–1650 BCE), a significant evolution in afterlife beliefs occurred, reflecting broader social and religious transformations within the society. This period is marked by the democratization of religious practices and an increased emphasis on personal morality, both of which played pivotal roles in enhancing social cohesion and reinforcing the social order during a time of political consolidation and cultural shift.

3.5.4 Democratization of Afterlife Beliefs

Previously, the elaborate rituals and knowledge surrounding the afterlife were predominantly reserved for the Pharaohs and the elite (Kügler, 1997). However, with the advent of the Coffin Texts, which emerged in the First Intermediate Period and were expanded in the Middle Kingdom, there was a marked shift. These texts, derived from the earlier Pyramid Texts, were now accessible to the nobility and the burgeoning middle class. By inscribing these texts on coffins intended for non-royal individuals, the

religious practices concerning the afterlife were opened to a broader segment of society.

This broader accessibility not only democratized afterlife preparations but also played a significant role in social cohesion. As more individuals gained access to these protective spells and guidance for the afterlife, there was a collective investment in the cultural and religious systems that underscored Egyptian life. This shared participation in religious practices helped to unify various social classes under a common religious and cultural framework, strengthening societal bonds and reducing disparities in religious knowledge.

The Middle Kingdom also saw a deeper integration of the concept of Ma'at – representing justice and cosmic order – into personal morality. This era emphasized leading a life in accordance with Ma'at as essential for receiving a favourable judgment in the afterlife. Unlike earlier periods where ritual and tomb construction predominated, the Middle Kingdom placed a greater emphasis on ethical living as a prerequisite for afterlife rewards (Karenga 2003; Simpson et al. 2003; Shaw 2003; Grajetzki, 2024).

This shift towards moralistic and ethical dimensions in religious practice suggests that personal virtue became a crucial determinant for securing one's place in the afterlife. Such a shift likely encouraged individuals to adhere more closely to societal norms and ethical behaviours, thereby fostering a more cohesive and stable society. By making moral accountability a key aspect of religious and afterlife beliefs, the Middle Kingdom facilitated a social environment where communal values and personal ethics were deeply intertwined.

The religious innovations of the Middle Kingdom in ancient Egypt, such as the use of Coffin Texts and the emphasis on moral living, aimed to restore social cohesion and state authority. These changes were made after the political fragmentation of the First Intermediate Period. By aligning religious reforms with afterlife preparations and integrating moral virtues into everyday life, Middle Kingdom rulers increased their legitimacy and created a more unified and morally accountable society. The democratization of religious practices and the focus on personal morality contributed to social cohesion and sustained the cultural and political life of ancient Egypt during a time of significant transformation (Grajetzki, 2024).

3.5.5 The New Kingdom

The New Kingdom (circa 1550–1070 BCE) marks a critical epoch in the evolution of religious and cultural practices, particularly with regard to afterlife beliefs and their integration with the political narrative of the time. This period was distinguished by a significant deepening of afterlife doctrines, underpinned by an increasing emphasis on moral integrity and facilitated through the proliferation of detailed funerary texts, such as the "Book of the Dead". These developments illustrate the complex interplay between religious beliefs and the political framework, shaping a highly structured spiritual and societal landscape.

During the New Kingdom, the democratization of religious texts, notably through the dissemination of the "Book of the Dead", represented a shift towards more accessible religious expressions that extended beyond the royal and noble classes to include wealthier members of society. This broader access to religious spells and guidance, previously the privilege of the elite, functioned to unify the social fabric under shared spiritual and moral values. The texts provided detailed instructions for navigating the underworld (Duat), emphasizing that the eternal fate of the soul was contingent upon adherence to the principles of Ma'at—truth and justice. This focus on moral rectitude was pivotal for achieving a favorable outcome in the afterlife, reinforcing societal norms and ethics (Zago 2018; Lévi, 2006).

The religious innovations of the Middle Kingdom in ancient Egypt, such as the use of Coffin Texts, the Son of God motif, and the emphasis on moral living, aimed to restore social cohesion and state authority. These changes were made after the political fragmentation of the First Intermediate Period. By aligning religious reforms with afterlife preparations and integrating moral virtues into everyday life, Middle Kingdom rulers increased their legitimacy and created a more unified and morally accountable society. The democratization of religious practices and the focus on personal morality contributed to social cohesion and sustained the cultural and political life of ancient Egypt during a time of significant transformation.

The historical development of afterlife beliefs in ancient Egypt, from the Pre-First Kingdom Period through the New Kingdom, exemplifies a profound interplay between religious doctrine, political authority, and societal norms. Initially, these beliefs were simple extensions of earthly existence

but evolved into a complex spiritual odyssey governed by divine laws and underscored by moral integrity. Artistic representations in tombs and temples evolved significantly across these periods, reflecting the deepening theological concepts.

The evolution of afterlife beliefs across the three kingdoms not only shaped the Egyptian civilization but also left a lasting impact on the global cultural and religious landscape, influencing various doctrines and practices related to life after death in different cultures. This legacy underscores the significance of the Egyptian approach to death and the afterlife, reflecting a civilization intricately engaged with the ethereal journey beyond mortality. The evolution of afterlife beliefs across the three kingdoms not only shaped the Egyptian civilization but also left a lasting impact on the global cultural and religious landscape, influencing various doctrines and practices related to life after death in different cultures. This legacy underscores the significance of the Egyptian approach to death and the afterlife, reflecting a civilization intricately engaged with the ethereal journey beyond mortality. Transitioning to a discussion of afterlife beliefs in Post-Exilic Israel, we observe a similar trend of evolving conceptions that departed from earlier notions of a desolate existence in sheol.

3.6 Afterlife Beliefs in Post-Exilic Israel

Initially, ancient Israelite beliefs about the afterlife were vague, generally conceiving of a shadowy existence in sheol, a place devoid of activity or distinction. However, during and after the exile, these views began to expand and transform significantly. The post-exilic period introduced more elaborate concepts such as the resurrection of the dead, final judgment, and rewards or punishments in the afterlife, marking a shift from the earlier, more uniform, and desolate notion of sheol (Segal, 2010; Setzer, 2004; Wright, 2007).

The development of these beliefs has been a subject of scholarly debate, particularly concerning the influence of Persian religious thought, which was known for its dualistic cosmology and a well-defined eschatology featuring heaven and hell, final judgment, and resurrection. Some Scholars argue that the interaction with Zoroastrianism during and after the Babylonian exile could have introduced new dimensions to Jewish eschatology (Wright, 2007). However, this perspective is not universally accepted, with

scholars arguing that the changes in Jewish afterlife beliefs could equally derive from internal developments and reinterpretations of existing traditions rather than direct borrowing from Persian beliefs (Akbar, 2019; Lusthaus, 2009).

In the Qumran community, afterlife beliefs also held significant political implications. The community had distinct views on eschatology, which included dualistic battles between the forces of good and evil, and a pronounced belief in an imminent apocalyptic resolution. These beliefs likely served to strengthen group identity and cohesion, offering a theological justification for their separation from mainstream Jewish society, which they viewed as corrupt. The afterlife beliefs underscored their self-conception as a community of the elect, predestined to play a pivotal role in the eschatological events (Davis et al. 1997; Collins, 2010).

The afterlife beliefs of the Qumran community served multiple functions, encompassing religious, political, cultural, and eschatological dimensions. Politically, these beliefs facilitated solidarity among community members and provided a rationale for their divergence from mainstream Jewish society, framing their separation as a righteous stance against perceived moral corruption. Religiously, the afterlife beliefs informed the community's understanding of divine judgment and salvation, offering assurance of divine favour and inspiring commitment to religious practices in anticipation of eschatological fulfilment. Culturally, these beliefs contributed to the formation of a distinct communal identity, shaping their rituals, communal practices, and social structures (Aune 1972; Magness, 2016).

Moreover, the Qumran community embraced a concept known as realized eschatology, wherein they actively engaged in the fulfilment of eschatological prophecies in their present reality. This perspective imbued their daily lives with a sense of purpose and urgency, as they perceived themselves as agents of God's transformative work in the world. By aligning their beliefs and actions with their eschatological expectations, the Qumranites sought to manifest the promises of salvation and divine intervention in their communal life. Thus, realized eschatology played a crucial role in shaping the Qumran community's worldview and guiding their communal practices, reinforcing their commitment to their religious and ideological principles (Magness, 2016).

The political function of afterlife beliefs in Qumran also influenced early Christian texts, including the Gospel of John. Scholars such as Charlesworth have noted parallels in the eschatological outlook of the Qumran texts and the Johannine community, particularly the emphasis on light versus darkness and the predestined victory of good over evil. The Gospel of John's portrayal of Jesus as the pre-existent Son of God who brings eternal life to his followers reflects a theological and possibly an eschatological framework that might have been familiar to members of the Qumran community. This portrayal would have served a unifying and legitimizing function, reinforcing the identity and mission of the Johannine community within the broader context of Jewish and emerging Christian thought (Charlesworth et al., 1990; Charlesworth, 2018; Hakola, 2005; Ripley, 2020; Scheffler, 2016; Wróbel, 2020).

The legacy of the Qumran community that spilled into the New Testament is the subject of analysis by Kügler who delves into the legacy of the Qumran community as it pertains to the New Testament, particularly focusing on the centrality of the Son of God in the Gospel of Luke within an Egyptian cultural context. Through a historical examination, Kügler explores how the Christology of the Son of God in Luke's Gospel is intricately intertwined with various cultural and religious influences, including Egyptian royal traditions, biblical theology, Jewish interpretations of scripture, and Hellenistic-Roman ideologies. This investigation sheds light on how Luke, as a Christian author, navigates these diverse cultural and religious landscapes to construct a distinctive Christian framework. Additionally, the analysis scrutinizes how established patterns surrounding the concept of the Son of God are challenged and redefined through the character and actions of Jesus, highlighting the transformative nature of his role within Christian theology (Kügler, 1997).

These interactions and evolutions of afterlife beliefs in post-exilic Israel and their manifestations in communities like Qumran illustrate the complex interplay of cultural, theological, and political factors that shaped Jewish and early Christian eschatological thought. These interactions and evolutions of afterlife beliefs in post-exilic Israel and their manifestations in communities like Qumran illustrate the complex interplay of cultural, theological, and political factors that shaped Jewish and early Christian

eschatological thought. Transitioning to the topic of afterlife beliefs in Germany and their socio-political function, we observe a distinct parallel between the evolution of eschatological beliefs in different cultural contexts.

4. Contemporary Afterlife Beliefs

4.1 Afterlife Beliefs in Germany and their Socio-Political Function

The traditional German belief about the afterlife finds its roots in ancient Germanic pagan religions. These ancient Germanic tribes, including the Saxons, Franks, and Goths, held a polytheistic worldview, with a belief in multiple gods and spirits. The afterlife, known as "Walhalla" or "Valhalla" was seen as a glorious hall where fallen warriors were welcomed by the god Odin (Davidson, 1943; Schjødt, 2011; Lindow, 2021). The traditional German belief about the afterlife, a result of centuries of evolution, has been shaped by the amalgamation of various cultural, religious, and historical influences, notably through interactions with Rome and Christianity. This synthesis of pagan and Christian ideas not only enriched the German religious and cultural landscape but also impacted its tradition, politics, and economics significantly (Dechesne et al., 2003). Studies reveal that the development of these afterlife beliefs is influenced by a combination of religious instruction and the natural progression of cognitive abilities in children, suggesting both environmental and developmental factors play a role (Krauss et al., 2021) Additionally, the relationship between afterlife beliefs and health suggests that these beliefs contribute to a greater internal locus of control and can positively influence wellbeing (Ewen et al., 2020). Conversely, negative, or uncertain perceptions of the afterlife are associated with increased distress following significant life losses, such as the death of a spouse, underscoring the role of afterlife beliefs in psychological adjustment (Carr & Sharp, 2014). The interweaving of pagan and Christian afterlife beliefs has also been observed in other regions, such as Ireland, where Christianization of political discourse has layered a new Christian worldview atop an older pagan one (O'Brien, 2022). This phenomenon highlights how afterlife beliefs are not only a

reflection of religious and cultural synthesis but also influence broader societal frameworks.

Ancient Germanic tribes, including the Saxons, Franks, and Goths, had complex funeral rituals rooted in their polytheistic beliefs. These rituals focused on preparing for the afterlife, particularly for warriors to enter Valhalla. The deceased were buried with items indicating their social status, such as armour or fine clothing, as well as weapons, jewellery, and household goods. Norse tribes preferred cremation, while the Franks and Saxons practiced inhumation (Dierkens et al., 1997). Distinctive grave markers and communal feasts were used to honour the deceased. The interaction between Germanic tribes and the Roman Empire led to cultural and religious exchanges, with Germanic tribes adopting Roman concepts of the Underworld and moral judgments in the afterlife. This assimilation also introduced Roman burial practices, contributing to hierarchical societal structures. The belief in the afterlife has deeply influenced German society, impacting religion, culture, tradition, politics, economics, and art. It has shaped Germanic mythology and rituals, integrating pagan customs into Christian traditions, and fostering a sense of unity among Germanic tribes. Ultimately, the belief in the afterlife has played a crucial role in shaping German identity and societal norms, perpetuating a reverence for death and the afterlife throughout Germanic cultural heritage.

4.2 Afterlife Beliefs and the Nazi Reign

The role of afterlife beliefs in shaping German identity and national consciousness has undergone significant evolution across historical epochs, particularly during periods of heightened political upheaval such as the rise of German nationalism and the era of Hitler (Baird, 1982; Lemmons, 1994; Smith, 2012). During the Nazi regime, traditional afterlife beliefs underwent a process of reinvention and reinterpretation, aligning with broader religious and mythological motifs to serve the regime's ideological agenda and foster a robust sense of national unity and destiny.

Under Hitler's rule, there was a deliberate endeavour to revive and recontextualize Germanic pagan traditions and symbols, crafting an idealized narrative of ethnic purity and historical grandeur. The concept of Germanicness was accepted by as part of a broader Aryan antiquarian model (Mees, 2004). Central to this narrative was the glorification of heroic death

and martyrdom, reminiscent of ancient Germanic warriors purportedly chosen by Odin to dwell in Valhalla. This glorification served to instil a profound sense of duty and valour among the populace, particularly the youth and military, reinforcing the notion that sacrifices made for the Fatherland would be commemorated in a warrior's afterlife. Symbol and ritual were essential forms of ideological presentation and reinforcement, with the myth of resurrection and return playing a central role (Baird, 1982; Casquete, 2009).

Moreover, institutions like the SS, under the leadership of figures such as Heinrich Himmler, amalgamated pseudo-religious and mystical elements drawn from ancient Germanic beliefs to fashion a racially pure elite embodying the heroic deeds of their forebears. Rituals and symbols steeped in a mystical interpretation of Germanic paganism were utilized to construct a new religious identity, supplanting traditional Christian doctrines with a nationalist and racial creed. Public ceremonies and rituals, replete with references to gods and mythical heroes, further entrenched the association between martial sacrifice and the promise of eternal honour, reinforcing the regime's ideological tenets and fostering a sense of collective destiny among the populace.

The reinterpretation of afterlife beliefs served as a potent tool in the propagation of Nazi ideology, facilitating the fusion of ancient mythical legacies with contemporary political objectives. By harnessing these beliefs, the regime sought to fortify group cohesion, rationalize conquest and warfare, and suppress dissent, thereby consolidating its grip on power and advancing its expansionist agenda. This strategic manipulation of afterlife beliefs underscores the profound influence such beliefs can wield over national consciousness and political actions, particularly in contexts characterized by fervent nationalism and authoritarian rule. However, the usage of afterlife beliefs is not merely a matter relegated to ancient Near Eastern or Egyptian kingdoms; rather, it persists as a significant issue in present-day Zimbabwean politics.

The Shona belief in the afterlife has evolved over time, initially focusing on the notion that only the spirits of kings would become *mudzimu* (Mudenge, 1988). This parallels the hierarchical structure of Egyptian afterlife beliefs, where certain individuals were afforded special status in the

afterlife. Additionally, the concept of *Nyikadzimu,* akin to the Egyptian underworld, reflects similarities in how different cultures conceptualize the afterlife as a distinct realm. Furthermore, data regarding the state of the dead in Zimbabwe suggests a belief in death as a transition to another realm rather than the cessation of life, mirroring Egyptian beliefs in the continuity of existence beyond death.

4.3 Afterlife Beliefs in Zimbabwe and their Socio-Political Function

The belief in the afterlife holds significant cultural and existential importance within the Shona community, as evidenced by (Mwandayi, 2011). exploration, alongside the scholarly contributions (Shoko, 2016; Bourdillon, 1991; Mbiti, 1990). This belief extends beyond the Shona culture to various African societies, reflecting a broader shared worldview regarding the spiritual realm and its influence on human affairs.

Among the Korekore-Shona ethnic group in Zimbabwe, the afterlife is conceptualized as a realm where deceased ancestors maintain a vigilant presence, actively observing and influencing the lives of the living, shaping social and religious practices. This belief system serves as a foundational framework for understanding life's purpose and provides solace during times of adversity, resonating with similar beliefs among the Akamba ethnic group in Kenya.

In Shona traditional cosmology, death is perceived not as the end of life but as a transition to an alternative spiritual existence, where individuals transcend bodily limitations. This perspective informs various aspects of social, economic, and political life. Socially, afterlife beliefs play a central role in identity construction through elaborate burial rites and communal mourning customs. Economically, they contribute to the development of a distinct sector termed the "death industry", encompassing funeral services and related businesses. Politically, the manipulation of these beliefs serves to legitimize authority and consolidate power, often through appeals to ancestral reverence and spiritual authority.

In Zimbabwean society, afterlife beliefs serve as multifaceted phenomena, influencing identity formation, religious and moral frameworks, and economic activities. Gunda's research supports the notion of the economic impact of these beliefs, while their political exploitation underscores their

diverse influence within Zimbabwe's socio-political landscape (Gunda, 2001). The concept of judgment in the afterlife is integral to many traditional belief systems, serving as a moral guide that encourages adherence to societal norms and values. This belief structure profoundly shapes the social, political, and religious dimensions of these communities, underscoring their enduring significance and complexity. For the Shona, the afterlife is not merely a distant concept but an intrinsic aspect of everyday life, particularly evident in their interactions with ancestral spirits known as *vadzimu*. These spirits are viewed as active agents in shaping daily existence, bestowing blessings that manifest in various forms of material and spiritual prosperity. This syncretic worldview blurs the boundaries between the spiritual and material realms, offering a terrestrial experience of "heaven on earth" that resonates with broader theological concepts within contemporary religious movements, such as the prosperity gospel.

4.3.1 Burial Rituals

Mwandayi's extensive work on burial rituals highlights that "The burial rituals among the Shona are varied and complex, aiming to honour the dead and guide their spirits into the afterlife (Mwandayi, 2011).

The historical influence of the Portuguese on the Shona people has led to the incorporation of Christian beliefs about the afterlife into their traditional beliefs. The Shona have a nuanced understanding of spiritual phenomena, including apparitions. Across various African ethnic groups, there is a progression from basic spiritual practices to complex and syncretic systems, highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity. In Shona beliefs, divine judgment is a central idea, extending into both the afterlife and present existence. Adversities and afflictions are seen as consequences for moral transgressions or neglect of rituals. Death is viewed as a transition into the ancestral realm, where spirits continue to influence and protect their living descendants. However, meeting moral and societal criteria is necessary to enter the esteemed ancestral lineage. Those who fall short may become restless spirits capable of afflicting the living. The Shona also believe in the existence of ghosts, who serve as reminders of unresolved grievances and the need to address societal injustices. These beliefs emphasize the integration of moral, social, and spiritual dimensions in Shona spirituality.

The interaction with Western powers elicited not only a transformation of religious beliefs among the Shona but also posed challenges to indigenous political power structures and influential figures. Indigenous power players engaged with Western political actors through the strategic deployment of religious and social narratives. Nehanda Nyakasikana's manipulation of afterlife beliefs serves as a poignant example of this phenomenon, echoing historical instances such as Christ's strategic manoeuvring of afterlife beliefs during encounters with the Roman Empire.

4.3.2 Nehanda, Christ and Manipulation of Afterlife Beliefs

Nehanda Nyakasikana, a revered spiritual and political figure in Zimbabwe, assumed a pivotal role in the resistance against colonial rule during the late 19th century. Her leadership and subsequent execution by British colonial authorities in 1898 transformed her into a symbol of martyrdom and liberation. In recent years, discussions surrounding her alleged resurrection have ignited considerable debate within Zimbabwe, echoing messianic narratives akin to those surrounding Jesus Christ in Christian theology.

Both Nehanda and Christ hold significant cultural and historical prominence within their respective contexts. Nehanda, a revered spirit medium in Zimbabwean Shona culture, and Jesus Christ from Christian theology, exhibit intriguing parallels and contrasting narratives in their stories and influences. The resurrection narrative of Nehanda, an eminent spiritual leader, has emerged as a focal point of contention within Zimbabwean discourse. Following her execution by British colonial authorities, Nehanda symbolized resistance and liberation, with claims of her resurrection surfacing in contemporary debates. These discussions draw striking parallels with the resurrection narrative of Jesus Christ, as both figures symbolize hope and empowerment for their communities. Moreover, the narratives challenge prevailing power structures and envision a future characterized by justice and liberation.

4.3.3 Political Implications

The intricate relationship between religious beliefs and political power is evident throughout history, particularly in African societies where leaders have strategically utilized these beliefs to reinforce their authority and

suppress dissent. By aligning themselves with divine mandates, rulers legitimize their governance and strengthen their control over the populace. This manipulation often involves the appropriation of religious rituals and symbols to solidify their position.

Within Shona culture and broader African societies, beliefs surrounding the afterlife, judgment, and resurrection hold significant cultural, social, and political implications. These elements have frequently been exploited by leaders to maintain dominance, leveraging religious rituals and symbols for political gain. The ongoing debate surrounding Nehanda's resurrection mirrors narratives of messianic figures like Jesus Christ, challenging entrenched power structures while offering hope for a more equitable future.

Critical examination of the intersection between politics and religion is crucial to ensuring that these deeply ingrained beliefs serve as agents of empowerment rather than tools of oppression. Nehanda's iconic status, stemming from her leadership in anti-colonial resistance and subsequent execution, underscores her symbolic importance in the struggle for freedom and justice. Claims of her resurrection not only reaffirm her significance but also reignite aspirations for national guidance and liberation, challenging existing power dynamics and envisioning a future defined by justice and autonomy.

4.3.4 Manipulating the Manipulated

The enduring legacy of Nehanda, a revered spiritual and national icon in Zimbabwe, has been tactically employed by the Zimbabwean government to strengthen political narratives and consolidate authority. Nehanda's pivotal role during the liberation struggle, characterized by her prophetic declaration "My bones will rise again" (Nyambi, 2021) served to galvanize diverse ethnic groups against colonial oppression, lending the independence movement both historical and ethical legitimacy. This symbolic capital has persisted into the post-independence era through various commemorations and representations, resonating deeply with the cultural and spiritual ethos of Zimbabwean society.

Examples of this enduring legacy include the naming of roads and hospitals in Nehanda's honour, integrating her memory into the nation's infra-

structure as a perpetual reminder of her contributions to national sovereignty. More recently, the unveiling of Nehanda's statue in Harare and her depiction on Zimbabwean currency notes have carried significant political implications, signalling the government's alignment with her enduring symbol of sovereignty and resistance. These gestures extend beyond mere homage, strategically invoking a sense of unity and patriotism, particularly during periods of political turbulence or economic hardship, thereby legitimizing prevailing political agendas and countering perceived neocolonial influences.

The discourse surrounding Nehanda's resurrection intersects deeply with both politics and religion, exerting a notable influence on contemporary Zimbabwean society. Political leaders have capitalized on this belief to bolster their legitimacy and reinforce their authority by aligning themselves with Nehanda's legacy as a champion of freedom. While this strategic invocation serves to consolidate political power, it also risks exploiting religious sentiments to suppress dissent and control the populace.

5. Conclusion

The examination of afterlife beliefs across diverse cultures and historical epochs illuminates their profound impact on theological, cultural, and socio-political landscapes. This comprehensive exploration underscores the intricate interplay between religious doctrines, cultural practices, and political authority, revealing the multifaceted nature of afterlife beliefs and their pragmatic deployment in various contexts.

Throughout history, afterlife beliefs have played a central role in shaping worldviews, guiding human conduct, and reinforcing societal norms. These beliefs serve as identifiers of religious identity, fostering communal cohesion and a sense of belonging among adherents. Additionally, they provide ethical frameworks that incentivize virtuous behaviour and deter socially undesirable actions. Economically, afterlife beliefs influence practices related to funerary rites, burial customs, and religious offerings, contributing to the development of industries such as the "death industry". Furthermore, these beliefs serve as instruments for the legitimization of authority, as rulers and political entities invoke them to justify their power and enforce compliance among their populace.

From the Old Kingdom to the New Kingdom, Egyptians developed a sophisticated understanding of the afterlife, incorporating moral dimensions and elevating the pharaoh as the intermediary between mortal existence and the divine realm. These beliefs structured Egyptian society, reinforcing social hierarchies, and providing a framework for understanding life's purpose and continuity beyond death.

In Post-Exilic Israel, afterlife beliefs underwent profound transformations influenced by Persian religious thought and internal reinterpretations of traditional doctrines. Concepts such as resurrection, final judgment, and posthumous rewards or punishments marked departures from earlier notions of an obscure existence in sheol. These beliefs played pivotal roles in shaping Jewish and early Christian eschatological thought, revealing complex intersections between cultural, theological, and political dynamics. In Germany, afterlife beliefs have been shaped by the amalgamation of diverse cultural, religious, and historical influences. The fusion of pagan and Christian ideologies has left indelible imprints on German religion, culture, tradition, politics, economics, and art. Notably, during the Nazi regime, afterlife beliefs were cynically manipulated to advance ideological agendas, reinforcing notions of racial purity, martyrdom, and national destiny. This manipulation underscores the profound impact of afterlife beliefs on national consciousness and political actions. In Zimbabwe, afterlife beliefs carry significant cultural, social, and political implications within the Shona community. These beliefs shape identity formation, religious and moral frameworks, economic activities, and political narratives. The strategic manipulation of afterlife beliefs, exemplified by figures like Nehanda Nyakasikana, serves to legitimize authority, consolidate power, and foster collective unity and national purpose. Nehanda's story illustrates the utilization of afterlife beliefs to reinforce political narratives, challenge existing power structures, and offer aspirations for justice and liberation. The study of afterlife beliefs across civilizations underscores their profound influence on theological, cultural, and socio-political terrains. These beliefs shape worldviews, guide human behaviour, and serve as pivotal instruments for economic and political functions. The exploration of afterlife beliefs in diverse contexts highlights their diverse manifestations and pragmatic applications, shedding light

on the intricate interplay between religion, culture, and politics throughout history. Ultimately, the study of afterlife beliefs provides invaluable insights into the complex dynamics of human societies, revealing the enduring impact of these doctrines on humanity's collective consciousness.

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