

NOTES ON QUIZ 2

1 How did Egyptians think of the physical world around them? How did their world view differ from that of the Sumerians?

The annual flooding of the Nile provided permanent, reliable agricultural fertility to the Egyptians. Unlike the Sumerians, they did not have to struggle against nature simply to achieve sustenance from the land. As such they saw nature, and the gods, as benevolent and nurturing.

In an orderly world of cyclical permanence, a worldview that resulted from and was constantly symbolized by the annual flood of the Nile, the Egyptians saw everything as working unchangingly and forever, according to harmony and balance (*ma'at*). The god with responsibility to guarantee this balance was Horus, whose agent and manifestation in the human world is the pharaoh.

The Sumerians, by contrast, saw the physical world (and the gods deriving from it) as capricious—sometimes benevolent, sometimes hostile, and always acting according their interests, not humanity's. This is symbolized by the Sumerian flood (=death) vs. Egyptian floods (=life).

2 Who was Akhenaten? What does his story tell us about New Kingdom Egypt?

Akhenaten was an Egyptian pharaoh of the New Kingdom (during the 18th Dynasty). He and his queen, Nefertiti, sought to bring about religious reform in Egypt by shifting the focus of worship to Aten, calling him more important than the other gods. This brought about a form of polytheism in which one god is greatly predominant called *henotheism*.

Akhenaten pushed the exclusive worship of Aten by changing his regnal name from Amunhotep IV to Akhenaten, building a new royal city sacred to Aten, and instituting new rituals and priesthoods.

In so doing, Akhenaten sought to undo the shift in religious power from the pharaohs, who had held unquestionable religious authority in the Old Kingdom, to the priests, who now held much greater power in the New Kingdom. The priests emphasized the significance of Amun-Ra, the sun god, in the pharaoh's rule, so by associating the kingship with Aten he sought to wrest power from the priests. It was too late for that, however: the authority of the priests was now too well established, and the pharaoh's power too diminished from the absolute in the New Kingdom. Egyptian religion reverted the control of the priests after the deaths of Akhenaten and Nefertiti, as signified by the regnal name of his son and eventual successor, Tutankhamun.

3 In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*: (a) What is the lesson Gilgamesh learns from his tests? Explain your answer. (b) What do you think is the significance of the very last lines, when Gilgamesh shows the city of Uruk to the boatman?

Gilgamesh first undergoes the sleep trial required by Uta-napishtim, and then seeks the life-giving plant at the bottom of the sea. In both attempts he fails. Mortality is not something to be achieved by humans without losing your humanity. (This connects with the loss of membership in society that was Uta-napishtim's fate for surviving the universal death of the flood; also Gilgamesh's rejected life as a consort of Ishtar.)

In the final scene, on returning home to Uruk he gazes upon its walls and understands that his immortality takes the form of the enduring legacy of his labors on behalf of his city and his people. Mortals can achieve immortality, not by conquering death but by accomplishing the improvement of the lives of endless future generations. What defines mortals is death, which makes possible achievement and the growth and success of the community.

E1 All of the following are true of hieroglyphs EXCEPT:

(b) There was no way to show strange names and foreign words and ideas
[names and foreign words were spelled out using a cartouche]

E2 In your opinion, why do you think unification was achieved in Egypt, but was impossible in Sumer?

The main point here is that the city-states of Sumer were in competition for limited resources, and so remained in rivalry with each other and were often hostile. In Egypt, however, the environment provided plenty for all, so there was no need to compete for resources, and everyone had in common the protection and nurturing of the gods—eventually manifested as a single god-king.