Gods and Afterlife

Compare Egyptian afterlife beliefs with Akhenaten's religious changes.

AWH.C.3.4 "Examine the polytheistic religion of ancient Egypt with respect to beliefs about the afterlife, as well as Akhenaten's attempt to abandon polytheism."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two details showing how multiple gods shaped beliefs about the afterlife, and circle two actions Akhenaten took to change official worship. Use your marks to compare the two approaches.

When a Pharaoh Changed Worship

1 In ancient Egypt, preparing a burial could involve food, amulets, and written spells. These objects reflected a belief that death began a journey, not an end. Egyptians worshipped many gods, whose powers reached into the next world. Anubis, linked to embalming, protected the dead, while Osiris ruled the realm of the dead. Families who could afford them placed spells in tombs to guide a person through dangers. Such preparations connected daily choices, including how to treat others, with hopes for life after death. Burial customs varied by time and wealth, so not every Egyptian had the same tomb.

2 One key hope was to be judged worthy of the afterlife. In scenes from funerary texts, Anubis weighs a dead person's heart against the feather of Ma'at, which stands for truth and right order. Thoth records the result, and Osiris presides over the judgment. A heart judged too heavy could be devoured by Ammit, ending that person's hope of continuing in the afterlife. This scene shows how several divine figures had different roles in one person's fate. It also shows why behavior while alive mattered, not just the objects packed for burial.

3 Centuries later, around 1350 BCE, Pharaoh Akhenaten challenged this religious world. Formerly called Amenhotep IV, he made the Aten, the sun disk, the focus of official worship. He closed temples devoted to other gods and redirected resources to Aten's worship. He founded a new capital, Akhetaten, where images showed the Aten's rays reaching his family. By restricting worship of gods such as Amun and Osiris, his policy threatened traditions built around many divine powers, including those tied to the afterlife. Scholars debate whether he believed only one god existed or demanded worship of only one. After his death, later rulers restored the older gods' temples.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. How do the roles of Anubis, Thoth, and Osiris in the judgment scene show a polytheistic view of the afterlife?

2. How do the weighing scene and the objects placed in tombs suggest two different ways Egyptians prepared for the afterlife?

3. Why might Akhenaten's temple policies have threatened beliefs about the afterlife? Use one god from the passage as an example.

4. What do Akhenaten's actions show about official worship, and what do they not prove about his beliefs?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

A visitor claims, “Akhenaten ended Egyptian belief in the afterlife overnight.” Write a five-sentence historical correction using at least three details from the passage. Distinguish changes to official worship from what Egyptians believed.

ANSWER KEY

Gods and Afterlife

HIGH SCHOOL · AWH.C.3.4

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two details showing how multiple gods shaped beliefs about the afterlife, and circle two actions Akhenaten took to change official worship. Use your marks to compare the two approaches. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	How do the roles of Anubis, Thoth, and Osiris in the judgment scene show a polytheistic view of the afterlife?	**Different gods perform different roles: Anubis weighs the heart, Thoth records the result, and Osiris presides over the judgment.**
2	How do the weighing scene and the objects placed in tombs suggest two different ways Egyptians prepared for the afterlife?	**The weighing scene connects a person's conduct in life to judgment. Food, amulets, and spells were placed in tombs to help the dead on their journey.**
3	Why might Akhenaten's temple policies have threatened beliefs about the afterlife? Use one god from the passage as an example.	**Closing other gods' temples restricted worship of gods with afterlife roles. For example, Osiris ruled the realm of the dead and presided over judgment.**
4	What do Akhenaten's actions show about official worship, and what do they not prove about his beliefs?	**He made the Aten the focus of official worship and restricted worship of other gods. His actions do not prove whether he believed that no other gods existed.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

The claim goes beyond what the evidence shows. Egyptians had long connected the afterlife to several gods, including Anubis, who weighed the heart, and Osiris, who presided over judgment. Akhenaten made the Aten the focus of official worship and closed temples devoted to other gods. Those policies changed public religious practice, but they do not tell us that every Egyptian stopped believing in an afterlife. Later rulers restored the older gods' temples, showing that Akhenaten's changes to official worship did not last.

Accept responses that distinguish Akhenaten's documented policies from uncertain claims about individual beliefs. Students should not claim that his reforms immediately ended afterlife beliefs or prove that he believed no other gods existed.