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THE MYTHOLOGY OF AFTERLIFE BELIEFS AND THEIR IMPACT ON
RELIGIOUS CONFLICT

I. INTRODUCTION

The question of whether there is life after death, and what that life might be like, is probably one of religion's oldest questions. Indeed, some conception or another has been in play since the beginning of recorded history, and probably before. Our modern technological and scientific worldview has not deterred a belief in life after death; the Baylor Surveys of Religion, conducted in 2005 and 2007, showed that 82% of Americans believed in the idea of "heaven," and 73% believed in the idea of "hell."¹

Theologians and scholars from all disciplines have presented many possible views on afterlife beliefs and their meaning, and perhaps one of the most interesting is the view of psychoanalysis. In particular, Carl Jung sought to apply scientific observation and methods to religious experiences, psychical phenomena such as the appearance of ghosts and the work of mediums, and the "irrational" workings of the mind. While Jung's theories are controversial to many, they may represent one of the only true attempts in early psychoanalysis to wed scientific views of the mind with experiences that did not easily lend themselves to reasonable testing and measurement.

For Jung, the idea of the underworld was a metaphorical representation of the collective unconscious, the depths that each individual must travel through in order to become a whole, or individuated, person.² The whole person, according to Jung, does not shun so-called "evil," often associated with things "of the Earth" like sexuality, but finds a way to safely and meaningfully integrate these into his life.

Given later religious interpretations of the underworld as a place of punishment, one reflects on the fact that this was not always the case. Jake Stratton-Kent writes in his work on ancient Greek religion and magic, "Geosophia":

The removal of the Underworld into the sky caused massive disruptions in categories of gods, angels, and other immortals, both

¹ Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe: New Findings from the Baylor Surveys of Religion*, (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2008), 73.

² Carl G. Jung, *Collected Works* Trans. Hull, R.F.C. Bollingen, Series. 22 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), 449.

celestial and chthonic. The resultant upheavals indifferently made objects of devotion into demons and restored lustre to those formerly despised. Just as the Gnostic demonisation of God and Angels typifies the one, so the rehabilitation of Typhon-Set, both in solar theology and in magic, typifies the other...The chthonic realm generally was the loser, despite the popularity of some of its major deities: for instance Dionysus and indeed Persephone. This was likely inevitable given the vertical distinctions already explicit in Plato's model, and in the historical process of separating the chief deity from the material universe. This separation, which monotheistic theology occasionally considers its crowning accomplishment, is from another point of view one of the world's greatest doctrinal disasters.³

In the ancient religions of the Near East, the underworld was originally a dreary place for all of the dead, regardless of merit. There were no concepts of eternal reward or punishment, no thoughts of immortality. Various shifts in religious and philosophical thought—as well as in wars, conquests, and the emergence of new religions—all played a role in the eventual separation of the righteous and un-righteous dead, and the belief in personal immortality and a life after death with God.

Afterlife beliefs are tied in with our fear of death, and notions of “heaven” and “hell” with our personal and social ethics, and these certainly represent the beginnings of soteriology in the religions of Western civilization. Not simply a religious phenomenon, this separating of righteous and unrighteous has roots in Western philosophy as well, particularly in Stoic and Platonic traditions.

This paper will look at that “split,” and examine the challenge raised by Jake Stratton-Kent when he calls it a “doctrinal disaster.” This paper has two parts. The first part looks at afterlife beliefs of ancient Near Eastern civilization—the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Greeks, and the Jews, and traces the development of afterlife beliefs from a unified, “under-the-Earth in Hades” model to the later Hellenistic model that placed the afterlife in the sky, and separated the righteous and unrighteous, and will include the role of the shamanistic “goete” in archaic beliefs.

The second part looks at the psychological component of the issue, focusing particularly on Jung's ideas of the collective unconscious and its relationship to afterlife mythology, which includes the idea that the whole person must acknowledge their strong and weak sides, and that a perfect God must represent the worst kind of suffering as well as ultimate bliss. The “split” nature of immortality and of God/Devil, whether it is one of many variables or the main consequence of rational and monotheistic ideas about death, has had a profound impact on the psychological state of modern society.

³ Jake Stratton-Kent, *Geosophia: The Argo of Magic*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. (London: Scarlet Imprint, 2010), 177.

Examining all the relevant material could probably fill a book, or maybe several. In this paper, I am only introducing the question, and just scratching the surface of something that I believe deserves much larger consideration.

II. PART ONE

The oldest source we have on ancient afterlife beliefs is from the Babylonians, the Epic of Gilgamesh, estimated to have been written about 1750 BCE. After Gilgamesh, we don't see writings until the 10th and 9th centuries BCE, with early Biblical literature and the epics of Homer. From these early sources, we see four prevalent themes in afterlife beliefs:

1. The dead continue to exist as they did in human life, but in a much less energized form. Some possessed supernatural powers, like the gift of prophecy or the ability to curse the living.
2. The dead exist under the earth in some kind of dark, cavernous world.
3. These "shades" do not represent personal immortality – the dead are separate from God or the gods. Only kings and extraordinary heroes are potentially afforded a place among the gods.
4. There is no punishment after death, save for the very wicked.
5. One can communicate with the dead, or at least some vestige of the dead person, through the necromantic rituals of what Greeks called the "goete."

The first of these beliefs is best represented by the original Greek idea of "psyche." The original idea does not match our idea of the psyche as the "soul," or "spirit." Instead, the "psyche" seems to refer to life at the moment of death, or, as John Casey writes, "the breath of life":

When a person dies, the psyche is the breath that has left the body. From the moment someone dies, the psyche becomes an eidolon, a phantom image 'like the image in a mirror which can be seen, but not grasped.' The psyche in its apparition as eidolon had special relation to dreams – the dead, through these images, come to the living in dreams.⁴

Casey also notes: "Throughout the Iliad we have warriors who are reduced to nothing as their soul flees to Hades. It is as though human greatness must include the sense of nothingness that awaits us, and that the hero have a clear sense of this nothingness."⁵

In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus encounters his mother, and has this experience:

I bit my lip
rising perplexed, with longing to embrace her,
and tried three times, putting my arms around her,
but she went sifting through my hands, impalpable
as shadows are, and wavering like a dream.
Now this embittered all the pain I bore,

⁴ John Casey, *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 69.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

and I cried in the darkness:

O my mother,
will you not stay, be still, here in my arms,
may we not, in this place of Death, as well,
hold one another, touch with love, and taste
salt tears' relief, the twinge of welling tears?
Or is this all hallucination, sent
against me by the iron queen, Persephone,
to make me groan again?
My noble mother
answered quickly:
O my child—alas
most sorely tried of men—great Zeus's daughter,
Persephone, knits no illusion for you.
All mortals meet this judgment when they die.
No flesh and bone are here, none bound by sinew,
since the bright-hearted pyre consumed them down—
the white bones long exanimate—to ash;
dreamlike the soul flies, insubstantial.⁶

In early Israeli beliefs, there is the idea of “*nefesh met*.” The *nefesh* is the life energy of the person. The living person is referred to as *nefesh hayyah*, and is a “vital, psychophysical entity.”⁷ The dead person is the *nefesh met*, the individual in the world of the dead. Simcha Paul Raphael explains: “After the energy to sustain life dissipated to an extreme, the individual claimed a place in Sheol where existence undeniably continued, but in a weakened, faded condition.”⁸

The beings in Sheol were called *rephaim*, which literally means “weak ones” or “powerless ones.” *Rephaim* also have an association with another biblical myth—they were thought to be a race of giants dwelling in the land of Canaan prior to the Conquest. They may even be equated with the *nephilim*, referred to in Genesis 6:4. Raphael explains,

Ancient Hebrew myth propounds that the original antediluvian race of giants, called at different times nephilim or rephaim, was destroyed by God and banished to the underworld. In the course of time, when this ancient myth had been gradually toned down, the name of rephaim was used as a designation of all the departed in the underworld.⁹

The similarities between this myth and that of Zeus throwing the Titans into the depths of Hades are striking.

⁶ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Trans. Fitzgerald, Robert, (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1963), 191-192, lines 175-199.

⁷ Simcha Paul Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 2nd ed., (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 56.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

In Babylonian beliefs, Casey explains that “Those who go there—all the dead—immediately become terrifying and malevolent ghosts, unless they are appeased by constant offerings at their tombs.”¹⁰ This is similar to the ancient Roman belief in lemures and manes:

Lemures and manes are used only in the plural: these words stand for the vague conceptions formed of the shades of the dead who dwelt beneath the ground. These were a nameless crowd, hardly individualised, not distinguishable from the fleeting phantoms who fluttered about the tombs.¹¹

Not all shades had to be malevolent in all views, but certainly among Babylonians, Greeks, and Romans, the assumption was that the afterlife was miserable, and that the dead were angry about being dead. Many of the cults of the dead revolved around continual offerings to the dead ancestors, to keep them satisfied, and away from the realm of the living. To that end, the shaman, necromancer, or *goete* was employed to guide the dead to the afterlife, and to keep them from coming back and harming the living. More will be said about that later on.

The second of these beliefs refers to the underworld, known as Hades to the Greeks, Inferni to the Romans, Sheol to the Hebrews, Duat to the Egyptians, and Aralu to the Babylonians. Franz Cumont suggests that the idea of the ongoing existence within the tomb extended to the idea that the dead must live in the Earth.¹² The ancient Mesopotamians believed that “the entrance to this netherworld is only a few feet below the surface of the Earth.”¹³ In the Gilgamesh epic, Aralu is described as

the house whose residents are deprived of light, where soil is their sustenance and clay their food, where they are clad like birds in coats of feathers, and see no light, but dwell in darkness. On door and bolt the dust lay thick, on the house of dust was poured a deathly quiet.¹⁴

Alfred Jeremias tells us that the Babylonians also described the underworld as “kigal” meaning a vast underground dwelling, and “irsitum la tarat,” the far-off land. There were also associations with the desert as being the entrance to the underworld, hence the notion of dry, dusty earth.¹⁵

The Egyptians took great care to preserve their dead, who they believed lived on in the tomb, which was a pit or shaft sunk into the earth. The great preparations of food and other day-to-day needs were included in the tomb,

¹⁰ John Casey, *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 45.

¹¹ Franz Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism: Lectures Delivered at Yale University on the Silliman Foundation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), 72.

¹² *Ibid.*, 70.

¹³ John Casey, *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 44.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹⁵ Alfred Jeremias, *The Babylonian Conception of Heaven and Hell*, Trans. J. Hutchinson, (London: David Nutt, 1902), 18-19.

where it was assumed the person continued a corporeal existence.¹⁶ Similarly, the Romans had the idea of the “domus aeternitae,” the house of the dead, which was the tomb. It was expected that food and water be brought to the dead for sustenance, and that regular rituals be performed to appease them.¹⁷

The Jewish concept of Sheol dates back to the 12th century BCE. Just as the tribal family was the center of Jewish life, so it was also the center of death. The dead were buried in ancestral tombs, and it was believed they lived together under the earth, in a much less energized form.

The origins of the term are not clear; Raphael suggests that it could be related to the Hebrew root “shaal,” meaning “to ask,” and may refer to ancient practices of necromancy. Another possibility is the Hebrew word sho’al, meaning “a hollow hand”; “thus, Sheol is a hollow place beneath the ground.”¹⁸ Neither is definitive, but give an idea of the original conception of Sheol as a place under the earth.

The Old Testament characterizes Sheol as “a land of dust” (Daniel 12:2), of disorder (Job 10:22), as having different divisions or chambers (Proverbs 7:27), provided with gates (Psalm 9:14 and 108:18), secured with bars (Job 17:16), and lastly, below the sea (Job 26:5) and without light (Job 10:21).¹⁹

The *Odyssey* describes the descent into Hades, with Hermes leading souls “down dank ways, over grey ocean tides, the snowy rock, past shores of dream and the narrows of the sunset, in swift flight to where the dead inhabit wastes of asphodel at the world’s end.”²⁰

Casey describes the afterlife of Hades:

...there is a naked simplicity of grief that comes simply from these spirits being deprived of ‘honey-sweet life’ (*thumos meliedes*), the loss of which Anticleia, the dead mother of Odysseus, speaks (*Odyssey*, 11, 203) as she talks to her son, using the same word Teiresias employs to prophesy Odysseus’s own return (‘thy honey-sweet return’) to his homeland (*Odyssey*, 11, 100). The chief sorrow of death is expressed as the loss of light – reminiscent of the blankness of the underworld of the Sumerians and Babylonians, and the pit (*Sheol*) of Job – also in the words of Teiresias: ‘Why has thou left the light of the sun and come hither to behold the dead and a region where there is no joy?’ The flitting, gibbering, or faintly shrieking wraiths that Odysseus encounters in Hades enforce the sense that the shadowy survival after death is not an existence worth having. Although a few privileged souls might go to

¹⁶ Mark Smith, *Traversing Eternity: Texts for the Afterlife from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 1.

¹⁷ Franz Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism: Lectures Delivered at Yale University on the Silliman Foundation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), 50-51.

¹⁸ Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 2nd ed., (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁰ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Trans. Fitzgerald, Robert, (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1963), Ch. 24, lines 11-15, Robert Fitzgerald translation.

Elysium, the overwhelming majority will be *eidola* (phantasms).²¹

The third of these beliefs does not include a modern conception of immortality, or reward and punishment.

Thus, Samuel is found in Sheol after his death (1 Samuel 28:3ff), but it is not a realm of torture or punishment; it is simply the domain of the dead. The negative, punitive aspects that later characterized Sheol were almost completely lacking in its original conception. Therefore, rich and poor, kings and sinners (Job 3:11ff) all went to Sheol upon their death.²²

Sheol is a realm of devitalized existence removed from God's control. This conception eventually changed as the Hebrews moved from being a henotheistic tribe with Yahweh as their chief god, to being monotheistic, with Yahweh as their only god.²³

In the Gilgamesh epic, Gilgamesh crosses the waters of death, and meets a female tavern-keeper who denies the possibility of immortality, telling Gilgamesh to cherish his life:

O, Gilgamesh, where are you wandering?
The life you seek you will never find:
when the gods created mankind
death they dispensed to mankind
life they kept for themselves.
But you, Gilgamesh, let your belly be full,
enjoy yourself always by day and by night!²⁴

In the *Odyssey*, Chapter 11, also known as the Nekyia, gives an account of necromancy, of Odysseus pouring the blood of a ram into a pit, that the dead may come forward to drink the blood and speak to him, the drinking of blood an apparent pre-condition for the dead to speak. He is looking for the shade of Tiresias the prophet, but many shades come forward. Odysseus learns not only of his own path home, which was the object of the necromantic divination, but also about the state of souls in the underworld.

Here, like other archaic sources, heroes and ordinary men alike are subject to the same fate. The only punishments specifically mentioned are those of Tityus, Tantalus and Sisyphus, who committed major crimes against the gods, suggesting that only crimes on such a superhuman scale were actually punished. However, the chapter also mentions the fate of Heracles:

Next I saw manifest the power of Heracles
a phantom, this, for he himself has gone

²¹ John Casey, *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 68-69. Emphasis his.

²² Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 2nd ed., (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 53.

²³ *Ibid.*, 57.

²⁴ John Casey, *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 50.

feasting amid the gods, reclining soft
with Hebe of the ravishing pale ankles
daughter of Zeus and Hera, shod in gold.
But, in my vision, all the dead around him
cried like affrighted birds; like Night itself
he loomed with naked bow and nocked arrow
and glances terrible as continual archery.²⁵

This suggests that the true “spirit” of Heracles is now immortal, among the gods, but that a phantom shade, associated with the Greek word “psyche,” still remained in Hades. This suggests that the divine “spirit” of the person was separate from their “psyche,” and that one had the potential to be immortal, the other did not.

However, this did not seem to be a common belief about heroes in the afterlife. Heracles is a unique example, being more like a god than a human being. Common mortals were not united with the gods at death. Lars Albinus writes,

Nothing in the *Nekuia* implies on a general level that a person who might act in a certain way was entitled to look forward to a better fate in the afterlife, let alone that the enterprise of Heracles represented a model for imitation. Quite the contrary: the Homeric mythologem of Heracles represented an exceptional fate as regards the afterlife, an exception which proves the rule, since even as an exception it was represented in a way that only underlined the Olympian and Panhellenic dimension of the epics.²⁶

Cumont writes of the ancient Greeks and Romans:

Originally, no idea of retribution was attached to this descent of the dead into the infernal regions; it was neither their merits nor demerits which determined their condition. On the contrary, the inequalities of human society were perpetuated: a nobleman kept a higher rank than that of his servants; each man in some sort continued his occupations, even preserved his tastes and passions.²⁷

Lars Albinus mentions the distinction between Elusion (the Isles of the Blessed) and Tartarus (the realm of punishment), mentioned in the 4th and 6th chapters of the *Odyssey*.

Elusion is confined to the borders of the world similar to the house of Hades. Thus, the eschatological significance of Elusion is associated, on the one hand, with Hades through its topography as well as through the brotherhood of the Cretan kings, and, on the other hand,

²⁵ Homer, *The Odyssey*, Trans. Fitzgerald, Robert, (Garden City: Anchor Books, 1963), 205, lines 572-580.

²⁶ Lars Albinus, *House of Hades: Studies in Ancient Greek Eschatology*, (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2000), 81-82.

²⁷ Franz Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism: Lectures Delivered at Yale University on the Silliman Foundation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), 72.

with Olympus through the conspicuous and parallel exceptions of Heracles and Menelaus. Yet the intervention of Zeus is at work in these cases of exception. Not the Cretan judges, let alone Cronus, but mighty Zeus is the one in command, and while it appears the distinction between the Olympian sphere and the chthonic sphere equals the distance between Elusion and Tartarus, it is also clear Olympus opposes, at the same time, the distant location of this duality.²⁸

Sarah Iles Johnston notes:

In our earliest Greek narrations about the afterlife, taken from Homer and other epic poems, only the very bad (those who have committed crimes against the gods, such as Tantalus and Tityus) are punished and only the very privileged (those who are related to the gods by birth or marriage, such as Achilles and Menelaus) enjoy bliss. The vast majority of people simply languish away in Hades, neither suffering any particular distress nor enjoying any particular pleasure.²⁹

This is similar to the Egyptian conception of the afterlife. The Egyptians always had a strong concept of an afterlife, and a concept of reward and punishment. However, immortality was reserved only for the pharaoh. Casey explains:

The pyramids themselves and all the funerary rituals, prayers, and spells were intended to assist the god-king of Egypt to ascend into the heavens from whence he will look down and protect his realm. The texts specifically exclude the common people—almost as though the pharaoh needs to have his dignity protected from them: ‘Nut has commanded the King to Atum, he open-armed has commanded the king to Shu, that he may cause yonder doors of the sky to be opened for the King, barring (ordinary) folk who have no name. Grasp the King by his hand and take the King to the sky, that he may not die on earth among men.’³⁰

and similarly:

‘Oh King; receive your head, collect your bones, gather your limbs together, throw off the earth from your flesh...stand at the doors which keep out the plebs’ (utterance 373). It has been suggested that after the tumultuous times of the First Intermediate period in Egyptian history, during which pharaohs were overthrown, belief in their divinity was shaken, and that there was a gradual democratization of hopes for the future life. What the Pyramid Texts

²⁸ Lars Albinus, *House of Hades: Studies in Ancient Greek Eschatology*, (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2000), 89.

²⁹ Fritz Graf, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets*, (London: Routledge, 2007); Sarah Iles Johnston, *Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 106.

³⁰ John Casey, *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 248. (utterance 361).

had done for royalty, the Coffin Texts (coffins contained scrolls of spells and prayers) and then the Book of the Dead began to do for commoners.³¹

Egyptian ideas of immortality are much more developed than their Greek, Sumerian, and Jewish neighbors. The First Intermediate Period referred to by Casey is between the 22nd and 21st century BCE, almost a thousand years before other Near Eastern cultures had developed such a concept.

In general, the Near East believed that the gods were in the sky, the underworld was under the earth or the sea, and the latter was not in control of the former. There is no war between the two factions, there is not an overall concept of divine reward or punishment for the masses. The pharaoh would be judged in the realm of Osiris, his conduct weighed against the standard of righteousness by Osiris himself, and would determine the pharaoh's afterlife state.³²

Mark Smith writes, "The ancient Egyptian conception of the human being was monistic. They did not see in the individual a composite made up of a corruptible body and an immortal soul. For them, any hope for survival after death had to involve the whole entity."³³ This may explain the early belief that only the pharaoh attained immortality, as the pharaoh would represent the people as a whole. This is also similar to Israelite eschatology, which looks at the fate of the nation of Israel rather than the fate of individual souls.

With regards to the fifth belief in necromancy, we find reference to this practice in archaic Greek literature with the term "*goes*." There is some disagreement as to where the term *goes* comes from. It does not appear in Greek literature until the 7th century, though it is likely related to earlier practices. There was a term in ancient Greek, *goos*, which referred to women who lamented at funerals.

However, as Sarah Iles Johnston notes, the term *goes* is a masculine term, which seemed to be associated with a specific person whose job was to deal with the dead. Jake Stratton-Kent believes that there is a relationship between the *goos* and the *goes*, as the art of both involved singing or howling as part of the ritual.

In Greece, the *goes* were originally associated with the Dactyls, a race of metallurgists that were considered to be magical, and might resemble modern conceptions of dwarves. The Dactyls were from Crete, one of the places associated with Dionysus, and like him, were associated with foreigners and foreign things. Goetic and initiatory practices were both associated with the Dactyls, who are also considered to be the inspiration for many of the mystery cults that sprang up in Greece and surrounding areas.

³¹ John Casey, *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 248.

³² Mark Smith, *Traversing Eternity: Texts for the Afterlife from Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 2.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3.

It is interesting to note another “foreigner” responsible for creating initiatory rituals, namely Orpheus. The association of the “secret” mysteries that dealt with attaining immortality in the underworld, and the practice of raising the dead and sending them away is also worth noting. Stratton-Kent mentions that the foreignness of the deities is really a non-factor, as they are still inherently Greek. “The demonisation of the chthonic has comparatively little to do with matters of ethnicity; on the contrary, foreign-ness is simply a common attribute of the demonic.”³⁴

Sarah Iles Johnston believes that the *goetes* were an integral part of society, and that their work was needed when individuals, and sometimes governments, were in trouble, supposedly due to the influence of the angry dead. But, she notes, “Whatever he might call himself, there is little reason to think that the *goes* was despised by the general populace: only members of the elite intellectual class like Plato looked down their noses at him.”³⁵

On this idea, Stratton-Kent notes the differences between “Olympian” and “chthonic” rituals:

Celestial deities are invoked in daylight, in a state of purity and cleanliness, often wearing white; the occasion is joyful, the altar is raised up, and the sacrificial victims look towards the heavens at the moment of sacrifice. The dead on the other hand were honoured with lamentations...these ceremonies were generally nocturnal, as were the Hittite equivalents. The garments of the mourners were torn and defiled with dirt, their hair hung loose and in disarray. No altar was erected for the dead, rather a pit was dug, into which the sacrificial beast looked down.³⁶

However, these were not so exclusive—there were sanctuaries and rites that incorporated the elements of both types of deities.

There are many taboos surrounding the dead, and ancient Greece was no exception to this rule. Anyone who dealt directly with the dead, especially with calming the angry dead, was perceived to have a lot of power. It is difficult to say whether they were poverty-stricken, though it’s very likely they lived on the outside of society, as their trade was “foreign,” by definition. While Johnston is skeptical about the link between the *goes* and shamanism, I think it is arguable that the work of the *goes* was an outgrowth of the work of the shaman—both worked with “a foot in both worlds,” and it is likely that they were revered and feared at the same time.

Necromancy and other forms of divination involving the dead were quite common in the archaic period. Even in the Bible, we see many condemning references, as it was one of the practices the ancient Israelites had trouble giving up. The most notable biblical example is Saul’s request of the Witch of

³⁴ Jake Stratton-Kent, *Geosophia: The Argo of Magic*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. (London: Scarlet Imprint, 2010), vii.

³⁵ Sarah Iles Johnston, *Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 120.

³⁶ Jake Stratton-Kent, *Geosophia: The Argo of Magic*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. (London: Scarlet Imprint, 2010), viii.

Endor to bring back the shade of Samuel, in the first book of Samuel, Chapter 28.

It was never explicitly condemned in the Near Eastern world until Christianity gained influence, though the practice still continued throughout European history. The archaic Israelites kept and believed in something called “teraphim,” which roughly translates to household idols. Raphael writes:

There is certainly indication that the teraphim were actual images of the dead ancestors used as oracular devices when consulting the deceased. There is certainly indication that the teraphim were used for some sort of divinatory purposes. According to the medieval biblical commentator Nahmanides, the teraphim were used to gain knowledge of future events. This is inferred in both Judges 17:5 and Hosea 3:4, which mention the teraphim along with the ephod, a known ancient divinatory device...While these activities and ritual objects were not sanctioned by the prophets, they persisted as cultic remnants of early Israelite religion.³⁷

While Egypt’s beliefs about the afterlife changed much earlier, the rest of the Near East saw a transformation in beliefs around the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. The idea of an afterlife with rewards and punishments, and the idea that one’s actions in life could influence the results of their afterlife, began to take shape, and the role of the *goes* went into a steady decline, and eventual demonization. A number of historical variables may have been the catalyst for the change in belief. What follows are some of the potential variables that may have influenced this shift in thinking about the afterlife.

ZOROASTRIANISM

Zoroastrianism is believed to be an outgrowth of an Indo-Iranian religious tradition that dates to the 2nd millennium BCE. However, we do not see it mentioned in Greek writings until about the middle of the 5th century BCE, with Heroditus’ “Histories.”

The main features of Zoroastrianism, or Mazdaism, is the worship of Ahura Mazda, the chief god who represents goodness. Ahura Mazda is opposed to Angra Mainyu, the evil principle, also associated with death and the underworld. Zoroastrians honor Ahura Madza by participating in good thoughts, words, and deeds, and avoiding chaos. It is believed that Ahura Mazda will eventually eliminate Angra Mainyu, and there will be a resurrection of all souls, who will return to Ahura Mazda.

Zoroastrian beliefs are regarded as dualistic rather than monotheistic because the two forces are equally opposed and at battle with one another. This idea is alien to Hellenistic culture previously; however, it is striking how the spread of Zoroastrian ideas influenced the Hellenistic world, and eventually Jewish and Christian thinking about the afterlife.

³⁷ Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 2nd ed., (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 50.

While Christianity in particular is not dualistic, the influence of the Prince of Darkness over the world, and the notion that Yahweh and his son, Jesus, will eventually conquer him and set everyone free at a final judgment is strikingly similar to the Zoroastrian idea. It was, without a doubt, an idea in circulation even in Judaism by the time of Jesus Christ.

In 586 BCE, the Babylonian exile of the Israelites began. Babylon was eventually conquered by Cyrus the Great, who allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem, and to restore the Temple, albeit in an inferior version. However, during the Jews' time in Babylon, the official religion was Zoroastrianism, and the development of their own beliefs about bodily resurrection after death was likely influenced by the Zoroastrians, as this was a part of their doctrine.

The writings of Ezekiel reflect this belief, especially his vision of "a vast plain covered with human bones bleached by the sun," which resembles a Zoroastrian burial ground. Ezekiel focused on the restoration of Israel rather than resurrection of the body, but this likely represents the first time the idea came into Israelite thinking.³⁸

MYSTERY CULTS

The oldest known mystery cults in Ancient Greece were the Cult of Eleusis, the Cult of Dionysus, and the Cult of Orpheus, also known as Orphism. The cults may have been older than the 6th century BCE, but this is the first time they are documented.

The first two cults were agrarian in nature, but all three were bound up in ideas of the afterlife. This is not surprising, as the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth are often seen as related to agriculture cycles of planting and harvesting. Epitaphs on graves and golden tablets found in Greece with Orphic writings provide instructions for the dead on passing through the underworld. There was a belief that the underworld was divided into two, sometimes three parts. Pindar describes a

tripartite Underworld with different locales for the bad, the good, and the good who arrive with an extra characteristic that sets them apart from the rest: either they have managed to be good even longer than the other good souls, or, like most heroes, have a special relationship with the gods.³⁹

More will be said about the mystery cults in Part Two. What is significant about them is the notion that initiates had control of their fate after death, and that their ritual actions could affect their ultimate, individual destiny.

FROM HADES TO OLYMPUS

³⁸ John Casey, *After Lives: A Guide to Heaven, Hell, and Purgatory*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 256.

³⁹ Fritz Graf, *Ritual Texts for the Afterlife: Orpheus and the Bacchic Gold Tablets*, (London: Routledge, 2007), 100.

Jake Stratton-Kent talks about the movement of chthonic deities from the world under the earth to the sky. He credits this movement to Heraclitus of Pontus, born in the 4th century BCE. He refers to Heraclitus's character, Empedotimus:

This hero's exploits included a vision of just such a celestial Underworld, including a variant on its geography better known in another form. Plato's openings to the realms above and below were developed by this writer and others into veritable gates with definite celestial locations. Empedotimus beheld these gates, and from the surviving fragments we know where Heraclitus situated them. The most important gate in many respects was the Gate of Heracles, which led to the realm of the gods.⁴⁰

These gates corresponded to points in the zodiacal sky. Astrology was not a Greek invention, but likely introduced by the Persians.

Some variants of the myth actually placed Hades in the sky, but the most notable movement was of Dionysus and Persephone to a place among the second generation of the Twelve Olympians. Dionysus was not an underworld deity proper, but his descent into the underworld to rescue his mother Semele and bring her up to Mount Olympus gives him the association.

Traditionally, Dionysus was the son of Zeus and Semele. While he was the god of wine, and hence an agricultural/earth deity, his association with Zeus gave him a "foot in both worlds," so to speak. Dionysus' myth also had him roaming the earth, and he was associated with foreigners and foreign things. This will be important when considering the *goetes*, or magicians who dealt with the dead in the next section.

Persephone's mother was also an earth deity with an Olympian association, Demeter. But, in the Orphic variations of the myths, Dionysus was the son of Zeus and Persephone, and was supposed to succeed Zeus on Mount Olympus, but was torn apart and eaten by the Titans. This led to the punishment of the Titans and, also, of humanity, who were guilty by association. Persephone went down to the underworld, where she mourned for Dionysus.

In this version of the myth, humans paid tribute to Persephone every ten years for her loss as a form of appeasement. This introduces the idea that humanity has some kind of sin that must be paid for to a deity.

Returning to the movement of the underworld, Stratton-Kent writes,

The celestial Hades, with variations, became a very widespread theme in the evolution of beliefs. A creative ferment had taken hold of the initiates of Mystery schools, members of Gnostic sects, on magicians and philosophers. A major theme of these events was

⁴⁰ Jake Stratton-Kent, *Geosophia: The Argo of Magic*. Vol. 1. 2 vols. (London: Scarlet Imprint, 2010), 174-175.

focus on knowledge of the names of astrological guardians, of routes through the celestial underworld, of seals or characters associated with them; these were secrets that assured the initiate a privileged existence after death, and bestowed power on the magician.⁴¹

Franz Cumont also discusses the shift in belief with the movement of the underworld:

The doctrine that the Inferi were in the atmosphere was adopted by Stoicism from the time of Posidonius, and was therefore widely believed from the end of the Roman Republic onwards. Even the mysteries, which first kept alive the belief in a subterranean kingdom of the infernal gods, did not escape the influence of these new ideas and brought to adapt their esoteric teaching to them.⁴²

He goes on to say:

However, the symbolical interpretations of the pagan theologians who respected tradition and the purely negative criticism of the skeptics led finally to a common result, to the destruction, namely, of the ancient beliefs, even when it was claimed they were being saved. Whether the souls were held captive in the other hemisphere, or whether they were condemned to reincarnation in a body, Hades was transformed either to the lower sky, air or the earth, and the early conception of the subterranean world, whither the dead who had been laid in the grave descended, was abolished.⁴³

EGYPTIAN CULTURE

As it was noted earlier, Egypt had a much more developed idea about the afterlife centuries before these ideas penetrated Greece and Rome. There was certainly a greater involvement with Egypt and Egyptian culture by the Hellenistic world around this time, just before the Roman conquest of Egypt. Cults of Isis and Osiris, two deities intimately bound up with Egyptian underworld myths, became prevalent in Greece, and often the two were interchanged for Demeter or Persephone and Dionysus.

MONOTHEISM

The Hebrews were originally a henotheistic people. They worshipped many of the Canaanite deities, but also worshipped Yahweh in Abrahamic times. By about the year 1000 BCE, Yahweh had become their only deity, though many Jews slipped back into habitual pagan practices. At that time, Yahweh was only the god of the Israelites, and was thought to have no control over Sheol, the Hebraic underworld.

However, by the 5th century BCE, Yahweh was thought to be a more universal deity, an idea that carried over into the time of Jesus Christ at the

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 175-176.

⁴² Franz Cumont, *After Life in Roman Paganism: Lectures Delivered at Yale University on the Silliman Foundation*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1922), 82.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 83.

beginning of the common era. As Yahweh's influence as the "only god" increased, so did his influence, and hence Yahweh not only controlled the living and the dead, but judged them as well. Ideas about Satan were initially much different, as Satan simply fulfilled an angelic role as one who stood in the way of humans opposed to god's will, or in Job's case, to test faith. It is likely that Zoroastrian ideas about Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu had some influence in later understandings of the role of Satan.

THE BABYLONIAN CAPTIVITY

Many Jews during the Babylonian captivity period of their history interpreted their captivity as a sign that they were not keeping Yahweh's covenant. Around this time, which is about the 6th century BCE, many prophetic writings appeared, which were either included in the Bible, the Apocrypha, or, later, in rabbinical literature that had an eschatological bent. The assumption was that God would save Israel—initially from their captors—but later, the idea formed that they would be saved in the afterlife as well, pulled from the pit of Sheol.

Raphael notes three stages of evolution of afterlife beliefs among the Israelites. The first came with the strengthening of Yahweh's power.

Once YHVH came to be regarded as the one and only God of the universe, God's power widened and could now save human beings from the clutches of Sheol. Thus Psalm 49:15 states, 'But God will redeem my soul from the power of Sheol, and will receive me.'⁴⁴

By the time of Jeremiah, the notion of individual retribution, and hence individual responsibility, enters Jewish thought.⁴⁵ Finally, the idea of individual immortality is touched upon in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Job.⁴⁶ The development of these ideas was not linear, and the notion of a collective salvation for Israel still persisted even with notions of the individual. But the development of these ideas paved the way for modern monotheistic notions of the immortal soul.

While I would be cautious about drawing too many conclusions from the contemporary nature of many of these events, the increase of trade and various conquests in the Near and Middle East undoubtedly spread ideas that brought about these changes in thought over time. I might also add the rise in influence of philosophy, especially in Greece, where ideas about life after death were thought about along with other big questions.

While many philosophers scorned the idea of Hades as superstitious, they did have ideas about the survival of a "soul" after death that were not part of the original idea of the "psyche" or "nefesh met" of a person. Plato theorized that the soul was made of air and fire, and that the more humans clung to base, "material" ways, the more their soul would be weighted down with earth,

⁴⁴ Simcha Paull Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, 2nd ed., (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 58.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

and therefore not able to rise to the moon or any other planets or heavenly bodies, where he theorized the Isles of the Blessed actually existed

III. PART TWO

When considering the underworld from the Jungian point of view, one must consider the influence of the collective unconscious. Jung identified three levels of consciousness—conscious awareness, which is our normal day-to-day thinking and decision-making state; the personal unconscious, made up of experiences, memories, traumas, and complexes gained throughout our life; and the collective unconscious, which is the unconscious memory and experience we share with all other human beings back to the beginning of the species.

The language of the unconscious consists of images, symbols, and metaphors. It is the language we associate with our dreams, but also the language of myth and religion. Jung suggested that there were fundamental ideas in the collective unconscious known as archetypes. His model suggests that the archetypes are in pairs of opposites, as the total psyche is a balancing act of forces, some with positive effects, some with negative effects.

The underworld itself is a symbol of the collective unconscious in Jungian thought. The qualities are similar—it is “dark” because it is not in the light of consciousness, and its contents are largely unknown, giving it a numinous quality that generates both curiosity and fear. It also has a quality of “foreignness” or “otherness,” because our conscious egos cannot relate to it.

All of these qualities are also part of Western theological speculation about the idea of Hell, which is the realm of the demonic, and consequently, these qualities are also associated with evil, even though none of these qualities is truly “evil” in and of itself. As Jung pointed out, “The demon is one of the lowest and most ancient stages in the conception of God.”⁴⁷

The underworld is described as the “chthonic” realm because it is under the earth. Its association with agrarian deities and mythical figures has also impacted ideas about sexuality and fertility, giving rise to images of whoredom, drunken revelry, orgies, and uncontrolled lust. These things were not coincidentally associated with the rites of mystery cults. However, sexuality, a perfectly natural part of life, ends up with a negative connotation, as it represents something close to the “chthonic,” and governed by “irrational” and therefore chaotic influences.

The most common archetype associated with these negative afterlife associations is the “shadow”; Jung suggests that the image of the Devil, now associated with the underworld, is a variant of the “shadow.”⁴⁸ The “shadow” as an archetype represents all that is weak and repressed in our nature. This may call to mind the rephaim of the Israelites, the weakened souls of the dead in Sheol. Even though they are weak, they still have the power to do harm.

⁴⁷ Carl G. Jung, *Collected Works* Trans. Hull, R.F.C. Bollingen, Series. 22 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), ¶154.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, ¶152.

However, though the “shadow” may represent the weaker and more disturbing side of our psyche, it is still part of our psyche.

This brings us back to the problem of the underworld shift. Moving the underworld to the celestial realm, bringing the underworld gods to Olympus, and demonizing others eventually resulted in the split between good and evil, in an ultimate sense. In the 1st century CE, St. John wrote the Book of Revelation, and outlined the battle between the forces of Satan and the forces of the Lord. This battle, which harkens back to the Zoroastrians, results in the split of consciousness, the sense that we must eliminate “evil” from ourselves and only “good” can remain.

Jung speaks about primordial man or woman, whose whole life consisted of what is now unconscious content. If we consider that beliefs about the afterlife made no distinctions about morality or salvation, one could, without difficulty, see the metaphorical parallel between a common fate of “nothingness” and the mindset of primordial man or woman, who is fully immersed in the archetypes as a matter of daily life.

As our conception of this metaphorical space changed over time, so its impact on our collective psyche changed also. We currently have a situation where the ideal is to pursue good over evil, to the point of denying that we have evil in our nature. In some cases, Satan is responsible for evil, and Satan is externalized and separate, at war with God for control of the soul.

In the individual, the person consciously believes that they are “good” and only “doing good,” and negatives are only seen through projection onto others, and are attributed to others. In the individual, repression of our “shadow” side can lead to “a one-sided development if not to stagnation, and eventually to neurotic dissociation.”⁴⁹

Consider Jung’s discussion of the rituals of Dionysus and their later equivalents, abolished by the Church:

The medieval carnivals and jeux de paume in the Church were abolished relatively early; consequently, the carnival became secularized, and with it divine intoxication vanished from the sacred precincts. Mourning, earnestness, severity, and well-tempered spiritual joy remained. But intoxication, that most direct and dangerous form of possession, turned away from the gods and enveloped the human world with its exuberance and pathos. The pagan religions met this danger by giving drunken ecstasy a place within their cult...Our solution, however, has served to throw the gates of hell wide open.⁵⁰

While speaking of the devil may seem excessive, it should be noted that the same process by which we project our “shadow” onto individuals can also happen in large groups. The result is what Erik Erikson terms

⁴⁹ Ibid., ¶452.

⁵⁰ Ibid., ¶182.

“pseudospeciation,” the false creation of categories of greater and lesser human beings.

When such a hierarchy is created, one of these supposedly “inferior” groups always loses – they may suffer economically, they may have curtailed rights, they may be ignored and forgotten by supposedly “superior” groups. The process of demonization leads to justification for wars, and in extreme cases, genocide. One only has to look at the Nazi profiling of the Jews – even going as far as to suggest that some of their darker physical features were part of their inferior attributes.

The question then becomes: how does one deal with the “shadow?” Espousing reason over mythical belief does not eliminate the “shadow” – according to Jung, “rationalism and superstition are complementary. It is a psychological rule that the brighter the light, the blacker the shadow; in other words, the more rationalistic our conscious minds, the more alive becomes the spectral world of the unconscious.”⁵¹

Reason and rationality become another means of repressing “shadow” content. In a recent essay for *Psychology Today* on “possession syndrome,” or what is otherwise known as “demonic possession,” forensic psychologist Stephen Diamond writes,

For some bedeviled individuals, the traditional ritual of exorcism or myth of ‘demonic possession’ serve to make more sense of their suffering than the scientific, secular, biochemical explanations and cognitive-behavioral theories proffered these days by mainstream psychiatry and psychology.⁵²

There is still a need for these mythical and symbolic interpretations, as this is the language spoken by the unconscious.

One might wonder if completely embracing the “shadow” is the implied answer. In an article on the Jungian Shadow and occult practices, a writer who only goes by the name “Detoxorcist” addresses the issue of “Left-Hand Pathers,” or Satanists, and their notion that their total embracing of the destructive “shadow” actually frees their mind and reconciles the “self” to the “shadow.” He points out that this experience often does not work:

In some sense one is simply going from one extreme to another, trading places with the Destructive Shadow through the fetishization and glamorization of ‘darkness’, the ego-Self becoming as much of the Destructive Shadow as it can be while leaving its former self to the side, i.e., suppressing those softer emotions or need for love, that becomes the new shadow self that comes to torment the person in

⁵¹ Carl G. Jung, “Foreword to Moser: ‘Spuk: Irrglaube Oder Wahrglaube?’” Trans. Hull, R.F.C. *Psychology and the Occult*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 144.

⁵² Stephen Diamond, “The Devil Inside: Psychotherapy, Exorcism and Demonic Possession,” (2012. *Psychology Today*. February 20, 2012. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/evil-deeds/201201/the-devil-inside-psychotherapy-exorcism-and-demonic-possession>), 3.

new ways...The whole purpose of understanding the shadow is to reduce it in size, to become more whole, not to increase its size or merely shift what it is, by denying who you are...In such a scenario one would simply be replacing one shadow with another.⁵³

For Jung and the Jungian therapist, dealing with the “shadow” involves successfully integrating its contents into the conscious ego. This does not mean being swallowed up by the “shadow,” as total possession by an archetype is an overwhelming psychotic condition that destroys the ego. Schizophrenia is a condition characterized by no barriers between the conscious mind and the archetypes. As Jung notes:

Recognizing the Shadow is the reason for humility, for genuine fear of the abysmal depths of man. This caution is most expedient, since the man without a shadow thinks himself harmless precisely because he is ignorant of his Shadow. The man who recognizes his Shadow knows very well that he is not harmless...the advantage of the situation, despite all its dangers, is that once the naked truth has been revealed, the discussion can get down to essentials; Ego and Shadow are no longer divided, but are brought together in an – admittedly precarious – unity.⁵⁴

IV. CONCLUSION

There appears to be a meaningful relationship between attitudes towards otherness and cultural conceptions of the afterlife. By looking back to archaic times in our civilization, and examining the beliefs about the dead and the underworld, it seems apparent that there was a shift in attitudes around the 6th century BCE that gradually lead to our modern “split” between reward and punishment, good and evil. This split is collective as well as individual, as it is ingrained in Western religious ideas, which influence the believer and the atheist alike.

It is not possible nor desirable to imply that this change in belief is somehow the “cause” of our current psychological state, but it is worth reflecting on this historical development, which may provide another clue to our endless struggle with the forces in our lives and the lives of others. We are left with the idea that the weaker “shadow” part of ourselves, our own internal “underworld,” is something evil, and to be avoided, repressed, or simply exorcised from our being.

Psychology even beyond Jung recognizes that repression leads to projection, and in the worst cases, we project our “shadow” sides onto entire cultures or groups, which can lead to oppression, prejudice, and even genocide. As human beings, it is important that we take responsibility for our own “shadow” sides, and learn compassion and empathy for others, as we all share the same kinds of human weaknesses and errors.

⁵³ Detoxorcist. “The Jungian Shadow,” Collection of blog posts on the Church of Satan and psychological and occult topics, (February 26, 2012. <http://www.detoxorcist.com/jungian-shadow-and-the-occult.html>), 2.

⁵⁴ Carl G. Jung, *Collected Works* Trans. Hull, R.F.C. Bollingen, Series. 22 vols. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1953), ¶452.

