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Greco-Roman Attitudes to Death and the Afterlife

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Abstract

From earliest recorded times the ancient world developed beliefs about a life hereafter, but they varied widely from place to place and over time. The earliest known views of the afterlife in Greek thought can best be discerned from the epic poems of Homer which held a pessimistic outlook; as ancient thought and culture developed, however, more optimistic and sophisticated views began to take shape, which saw this life as a preparation for the next. Linked in with this development were questions of morality, which resulted in the belief that the good would one day be rewarded and the evil punished. Nevertheless, there is nothing in the Greco-Roman world which quite compares to a doctrine of physical resurrection, which first takes shape in the latter portions of the Hebrew Scriptures and finds itself more explicitly formulated in the early creeds of the Church. Christianity, though influenced by Neoplatonism, held a substantially different view of the life to come from what had been espoused in the philosophical schools of Greece and Rome. [1]

Did ancient people believe in an afterlife? The British Museum is replete with relics of ancient tombs, sarcophagi, and other types of burial rite which were all, in various ways, connected with an underlying belief in a life beyond the present. Ancient Greece produced immortality cults such as the Eleusinian Mysteries, Judea produced the mystic Essene community at Qum'ran on the Dead Sea whose initiates were promised a place in the hereafter, and at the height of the Roman Empire there began to flourish a mystic religion built on the conviction that its founder, a provincial from Galilee, had been raised to new life three days after execution. It

[1] I am grateful to the editor, Dr Ian StJohn, for the kind invitation to submit a paper for consideration to this journal. As a Classicist and ancient historian I feel comfortable talking about the Greco-Roman world, but not being a theologian I find myself on much rockier ground when writing about Jewish or Christian beliefs, and for that reason have referred to Jewish and Christian doctrines only in passing, in full realisation that there is much scope for disagreement when writing about a subject as compendious as this. All misinterpretations are my own.

has become commonplace to state that belief in life beyond was the common preserve of pre-Enlightened, pre-scientific peoples, which came to be questioned only when humanity emerged from its bawling infancy into the modern age of science and reason; once humanity endeavoured to explain the world by reference to regular physical laws, the need to defer to anything outside physical reality vanished. Perceived irregularities in nature, say humanists, are due to the inadequacy of our understanding, not to supernatural influence. Perhaps the two most famous exponents of the Enlightenment position were David Hume and Albert Einstein, the former of whom asked if it was more likely that a miracle had occurred than that one was labouring under an illusion, the latter of whom declared that the one and only miracle in the universe is that there are no miracles. If miracles do not occur, then miraculous resuscitations of corpses, for example, must be ruled out as primitive nonsense belonging to previous ages whose consciousness had not yet been raised by the Enlightenment, before reason and science had triumphed over religion, mysticism, and superstition.

There are of course objections. Belief in the possibility that miracles can occur, even if they are extremely infrequent, presupposes that the cosmos is governed by regularity. A 'miracle' properly understood is the temporary suspension of the scientific laws which regulate the world. To believe in miracles is, paradoxically, to believe that the cosmos has an ordered structure which can nevertheless periodically be interrupted. Moreover, the view that passing from one life to another should necessarily be understood as a miracle assumes that the afterlife must be understood in terms of the suspension of natural laws. For the majority of the ancient world which did believe in a life hereafter, moving from one conscious state to another was part of a natural process of events which did not need to invoke the miraculous. The idea of a miraculous bodily resurrection is present in the later Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament, but outside Jewish and early Christian culture it is far from clear that the notion that through divine influence this earthly body will one day be renewed was ever articulated or expressed. Importantly, when we speak about 'ancient people' we encompass in that terminology a vast spectrum of culture, geography and history which cannot be reduced to one point on a chronological chart. Egyptians were famous for embalming their dead, a practice which, in good measure, explains why they were probably the first people to develop a sophisticated understanding of the human anatomy.[2] When the second-century A.D. physician Galen of Pergamum was commissioned by Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius to ply his trade in the imperial residence, he realised that in order to perfect his knowledge of how the body worked he needed to spend time at Alexandria in Egypt so that he could see first-hand evidence of the internal mechanisms of the human anatomy. This was possible at Alexandria because, unlike other parts of the ancient Mediterranean where human dissection was strictly taboo, the Egyptians for thousands of years had been dissecting human cadavers and in turn had come to realise that every part of the human body is interconnected.[3] In this particular case burial practice had given rise to a vast and compendious wealth of medical understanding which predominated in Europe until the sixteenth century. But in other parts of the ancient world, belief in the hereafter took many different shapes, and caution must be taken before assuming that all ancients had one belief about the afterlife.

[2] For a thorough discussion of the Egyptian views of the afterlife and the role which mummification took, see David 1997.

[3] On the Roman restrictions on human dissections after 150 A.D., see Aufderheide 2003, 5.

This essay will argue that in the case of the ancient world belief in the afterlife did not dwindle as civilisation became more sophisticated and rational, but instead grew ever more entrenched. To be sure, pre-Socratic philosophy gave rise to the atomistic theories of philosophers like Democritus which in turn influenced the Hellenistic Epicureans, who held that this is the only life about which we know and should therefore really care. But that was one strand of ancient thought which, like most other philosophical schools, had its peaks and nadirs, and eventually gave way to the Stoics whose view of physicality was radically different. If we trace the progression of ancient thought, we will see that, rather than eliminating belief in a life beyond this, its refinement indeed *accentuated* the conviction that the soul is immortal and that the material world which we see, touch, smell, taste and describe in physical language may be a splinter of a much grander reality and need not encompass all existence or consciousness. To recognise this is to call into question the paradigm that science and reason rule out anything beyond physicality. The evidence of Greco-Roman and Jewish antiquity provides just the mirror image. In both cases, the most primitive conceptions of the human condition tended to consign to irrelevance what happens after we die, focusing almost entirely on present life in its mortal frame, and envisaging death as the end of any form of existence which merits serious reflection. However, once those cultures became more developed, subtle and sophisticated in their thinking, they started to expand their concept of existence beyond the boundaries of the sensory world and embraced the possibility that the physical life we at this moment lead is but part of a larger story which at the present time we might not understand precisely, but for which this life is a preparation and a foreshadow.

From an early stage Jewish culture came into contact with outside influences, which from the time of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. included the widely dispersed Greek-speaking peoples and dynasties of the Hellenistic world. Whilst it would be foolhardy to imagine that the two did not influence one another to some degree, too much should not be made of the cultural overlap. The Jewish and subsequently Christian conceptions of afterlife were radically different from that of pagan Greeks in that it spoke of a *physical* resurrection, whereas in the pagan world, though it was widely believed that the soul survived the destruction of the body, there is little evidence of resurrection beliefs matching those of Jews of the Second Temple era or later the early Christians.[4] When pagan Greeks and Romans spoke of life hereafter in almost every instance they meant a spiritual survival after the body had died, not the reversal of physical death itself. Though a number of Near Eastern cults spoke of dying-and-rising gods, these were usually connected with fertility rites whose understanding of time tended to be cyclical rather than linear, and where the process of dying and rising was linked aetiologically to the changing of the seasons rather than to any event which could be pinpointed in linear time.[5] It will simply not do to liken the eschatological beliefs of Jews or Christians to the fertility cults other cultures in the

[4] For a general survey of Jewish and early Christian beliefs about the afterlife, see Wright 2003, 85-479. Among some New Testament scholars there is sharp disagreement as to whether the early Christians literally believed in a physical resurrection, with some claiming that the primitive Church borrowed the language of physicality to describe what was essential a non-physical event; see in particular Lüdemann 1994 and Crossan 1995, 1997. For much more conventional treatments of the subject see Wright 1996; 2003.

[5] For general discussions, with contrasting conclusions, see Smith 1990; Porter 1999; Bremmer 2002. The first of these attempts to locate Christian belief in the context of Near-Eastern cult, but this has been sharply criticised.

Near East, since when Jews of the post-Exilic and Hasmonean periods, with the exception of the Sadducees, spoke of resurrection they looked forward to a definite time in the future when God would raise up Israel and vindicate the righteous. Christians subsequently borrowed the Jewish language of physical resurrection but departed from the more traditional view that God would display his power at the end of time - that was the Pharisaic expectation – claiming instead that this miracle had already taken place. Resurrection beliefs, Jewish and Christian, despite their internal differences could not have been more other than the Greco-Roman view of immortality.

I approach the problem in two stages: (1) Homer and the tragedians; (2) later antiquity. Much of what I say may invite sharp disagreement but I hope to describe a diversity and spectrum of belief which forbids sweeping categorisations, and to show that the awakening of thought in Greece and Rome opened up the belief that the soul was immortal and survived physical death.

I: Homer and the Tragedians.

It is a commonplace that Greeks had no Bible but relied for their understanding of life and mortality on the two great works attributed to Homer, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.[6] In those two great epic poems we read a great deal about the human condition which, in early Greek thought, was unmistakably bleak. Key was the belief that after death there was nothing, or at best a sort of half-existence where souls flitted about like shadows or ghosts. The clearest example appears in the eleventh book of the *Odyssey* which tells of the necromancy of the great warrior Odysseus and his encounter in hell with the dead soul of Achilles, who warns him that it would be better to be a poor man's slave in the upper world than king of all the dead in the world below (*Od.* 11.488-91). Even for the greatest of heroes, death has little promise of reward. The very best we might hope for is glory and fame in this life, because when we die there will be no pleasure or happiness, just annihilation. One of the most moving scenes from the *Iliad* is in Book XXIII where Achilles, who has just avenged his dead companion Patroclus by slaying his arch-rival and slayer Hector, sees his friend in a vision and tries in vain to embrace him, only to find that the shadow escapes the embrace (*Il.* 23.108-261). The only thing the ghost of Patroclus can ask is that Achilles give him a proper burial; otherwise, there is little expectation of solace or comfort in the gloominess of death. Similarly, when Odysseus is taken by the seer Tiresias on a journey through the Underworld he flings his arms around his dead mother's wraith, only to find that the effort was futile (*Od.* 11.206-8). Death in Homer brings about an end to existence.[7]

What is clear from these accounts is that while early Greek belief did not entirely rule out an afterlife, and indeed later representations even made out that the shades of the dead could bear the marks of the life from which they had departed, as Virgil's later depiction of Dido as she meets Aeneas in the afterlife and other literary depictions show (Vergil *Aeneid.* 6.290-4; also Aeschylus *Eumenides* 103; Ovid *Metamorphoses* 10.48-9), at the same time it did not entail any prospect of existence beyond the grave even though the souls of the wicked might endure a form of punishment, like Sisyphus who was condemned for the rest of eternity to roll a boulder up a cliff, or Tantalus who was tormented by hunger and thirst while

[6] Homer's canonical place in Greek literature and its impact upon later generations is explored thoroughly by Garland 1985, chapter 3.

[7] On Homer's view of death and the hereafter, the classic treatment is Griffin 1983. See also Price 1999, 151.

grapes hung above his head and a pool of water welled up at his feet. Even those who did not have to endure such penalties, with the important exception of Tiresias no soul which departed to the Underworld could entertain hope of anything beyond a pathetic shadow of former human existence. Whether this chimed with the burial practices of the Greeks of the archaic period is open to question: Certainly by the sixth century B.C. there is evidence that the dead were buried with their possessions which would give them some form of comfort in the life to come, a practice which is shared across Europe of that period.[8] Nevertheless, the Homeric view of death does not entail that the departed will have much share in happiness when they meet their final resting place. The moral implications are significant. What the three Abrahamic monotheisms speak of in their various ways is bounty and reward for the just, and punishment for the wicked in the life to come. All three state that human life has a purpose beyond itself: We live to fulfil a purpose which comes from outside ourselves and which will at the end of time come to fruition. The Homeric view, in contrast, states that we live for the moment, that the best we can hope for in this life is contentment, and the only way we survive the grave is on the lips of those who sing our praises.

This gives rise to an intriguing moral dilemma: If the best we can do is live for as long as we can, and as happily and bountifully as circumstances can afford, what is the imperative to live justly? In its crudest formulation this question can be answered very simply: Offend the gods at your peril. But as the philosopher Plato some centuries later complained, the gods of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* are silly and capricious, not dissimilar to oversized children, whose motives are often selfish, and who frequently act out of keeping with fairness or justice, as when Aphrodite whimpers and weeps like an indulged brat to her father Zeus in *Iliad* V, or when Athene intervenes in the great standoff between Hector and Achilles in *Iliad* XXII to satisfy an ancient slight to her beauty. Even when the king of heaven Zeus takes charge he is not necessarily in control of the destiny of warriors, as he reveals in the lead-up to the death of Hector when he proclaims that even he cannot control fate. In a fair world it would have been the playboy Paris who died outside the walls of Troy, not his stout-hearted brother Hector. What the Homeric poems do nevertheless recognise is that life is not fair, and because it is not fair we should not therefore be altogether surprised when the least deserving win out, whereas the most deserving often draw the short straw. This insight is perhaps the first we make when we pass from childhood into adulthood. Human experience shows that the world is rough, violent, and uneven. For this reason, the *Iliad* is a remarkable achievement of moral perception, but what it leaves open is the question of why: Why should I suffer if there is no reward? Why defend my country when the only thing that awaits me is a vengeful warrior who will defile my dead body by dragging it around the city walls and leave it unburied as carrion for dogs and birds? In the face of this insurmountable challenge, the greatest of Homer's heroes carry on and do their duty. The nobility of their suffering is perhaps to be witnessed in the fact that they hope for no reward, and indeed there is a certain majesty seen in the suffering of those who face their destiny with resolution and do right in spite of all consequences.

In the end, however, none of this is satisfying. When the righteous get crushed and the wicked get away with their laziness or wrongdoing, something within us rebels. However Stoical, we cannot reconcile conscience to the idea that

[8] Burkett 1985, 192; Garland 1985, 25-8; Davies 1999, 30-33.

there is a complete absence of justice in the universe. If there is no justice, then there can be no reason to be just, and this offends against the very core of our moral sensibility. Another realisation follows: If there is in this life no reckoning for the wicked, there must be some reckoning to come beyond the scope of this mortal life. What unites the Homeric poems and Greek tragedy which followed is the sense that we are all under some sort of moral law, even if the origin or source of that moral law remains opaque.[9] Those who live according to it do not necessarily reap their reward, but there is a guiding moral principle which humans must observe. In the *Odyssey*, which the later Roman literary critic Longinus called a comedy of manners, there is a greater sense of justice in this world than there is in the *Iliad*. Those who meet their destruction in the second of the two Homeric poems often do so because they have offended against some holy law or precept. Odysseus' companions eventually all die because they disobeyed the orders of their leader at the start when they sacrilegiously killed and consumed the sacred cattle belonging to the god Hyperion. The Cyclops Polyphemus is blinded by a hot stake in his eye because he violates the sacred moral law which governs hospitality. Similarly, the suitors who try to woo Penelope on Ithaca in Odysseus' absence run up against the fury of Odysseus' sword when he returns. Odysseus himself, swaggering, headstrong and arrogant at the start, is reduced to a suffering wreck by the time he reaches his beloved homeland ten years after he set sail from the shores of Troy. This is his comeuppance for having failed to sacrifice to Poseidon before setting sail and for taunting the god of the sea on the way. The *Odyssey*, more than the *Iliad*, enshrines the principle that there is a moral law and that we must obey it, but equally there is no eschatological justification for this. The vision of hell in Book XI confines justice to this life.[10]

The idea that death is final is felt throughout Greek tragedy, which, like the Homeric poems, wrestled with the question of human action and suffering. From the start the tragedians believed in the existence of divine laws which we must obey, and in disobedience to which we will suffer horribly in this life. Like Homer, punishment for violation of a divinely prescribed law or principle comes about in this life, not in the next. However, like all great works of literature the problem is never simple, and in the great majority of the extant plays the moral dilemmas we are shown are enormously complex. Nowhere is this better demonstrated than in the *Oedipus Cycle*: Written into the law of the universe is that killing one's father followed by incestuous relations is morally obscene. The people of Thebes are dropping like flies because within their walls they are harbouring one who had offended against this most basic moral precept. As the play unfolds, Oedipus the king of Thebes comes to realise that he is the cause of suffering and must be rooted out, as he was the one who unknowingly murdered the former ruler Laius, who happened to be his father, and married his wife Jocasta, who happened to be his mother. Yet what is fascinating about the dilemma is that Oedipus had done all these things unwittingly. Is he really guilty? Sophocles' play ends with the king of Thebes gauging out his own eyes and flinging himself into self-imposed exile. In one sense, justice is done because the crimes of patricide and incest have been vindicated, but in what sense was any of this comeuppance just if the crimes were perpetrated in ignorance? Had Oedipus known of his true identity from the start, the play would have been boring and predictable. What makes this telling of the story

[9] For a recent and very stimulating discussion of moral awareness in Greek tragedy, see now Lawrence 2012.

[10] For a recent discussion of the moral complexities of the character of Oedipus, see Blundell 2002.

morally interesting is that no matter what choices he made, Oedipus was always going to commit the very crime for which he was predestined. As in the *Iliad*, the best of men can be earmarked for death and destruction.[11]

In the *Antigone* Sophocles presents us with another interesting moral conundrum: Is there a moral law which transcends human authority? Thebes has just experienced civil war. The heroine's brother Polyneices, who took sides against his city, lies unburied outside the city walls as a punishment for taking up the sword against his country. Against the express orders of King Creon, she trespasses beyond the city limits to give her dead brother a proper burial. This sets her on a collision course with the human authorities who, in retaliation, have her banished in a rocky prison where in the end she commits suicide. Antigone defies human authority in obedience to divine authority, but the awful truth is that she profits nothing from it. The gods will have their laws obeyed, even if they do not come to the aid of those who uphold them. Similarly, in the plays of Euripides adherence to principle can get men and women into all kinds of trouble. The hero of the *Hippolytus* gets torn apart by a savage sea creature for doing no more than fulfilling his devotion to Artemis goddess of chastity. If a sin is enacted it is by his step-mother Phaedra who falls passionately in love with him but when the love is unrequited orchestrates a plan to pitch her husband Theseus against his son. Hippolytus' crime is precisely his act of devotion to a goddess who in turn rewards him with nothing. In the *Bacchae*, one of the last among the extant canonical tragedies, Euripides presents us with the character of Pentheus who refuses to admit an upstart Dionysiac cult into the city walls. Pentheus' error is the stubborn refusal to recognise that the universe is governed by forces he cannot control and to which he should have submitted when they made their influence known. In the end he is torn to shreds by his own mother who herself has been driven out of her senses by a god to whom she has given her devotion. While all toy with the idea of moral laws, in none of these plays is it obvious that observance brings about salvation. At one level this can be read as a critique of religion, but at a deeper level it entails the recognition that life is unjust, and that fulfilment of the moral law does not always bring bounty.[12]

The upshot is that while traditional Greek belief held no clear view about an afterlife, equally it wrestled with questions of morality and justice which, as we will see, paved the way for later claims about immortality. As with modern debates of this kind, if we believe that this world is all there is, we have to confront the horrible realisation that no matter how fair and clinical our criminal justice system tries to be, the cry for justice of the poor, victimised and downtrodden mostly goes unheeded. If there is no accountability beyond death, then the bullies of this world will get off lightly, but those who stick up for what is right and just and true will invariably find that adherence to principle will do them no good in the end. The usual riposte is that we should always seek to do good even if there is no reward or vindication, because doing good for goodness's sake is the most noble kind of moral goodness. But the question remains: If this life is just a brief vale of tears with no purpose beyond and no balancing of the scales after it is ended, is there any real

[11] As to whether Oedipus is justly punished for his wrongdoing, see Kitto 1958, 58-9; see also Zimmermann 1997

[12] The classical discussion of Greek popular morality is Dover 1994, which seeks to reconstruct the essential moral beliefs of Greeks from Homer to Aristotle. Central to Dover's thesis is that Greeks lacked a coherent moral system or catechism and that therefore moral questions for them were intricate and complex.

reason to take it seriously? The Epicureans, who in many ways resemble very many modern humanists, answered the question simply: If there is a world beyond this one we know nothing of it and should not worry about it; therefore, focus your attention on being happy in this life and minimising pain and distress. Many serious thinkers like Cicero followed this, but unfortunately it always cashes out as a recipe for selfishness. If the only purpose to life is to make the best of the here-and-now, why put oneself in harm's way or think about the longer-term consequences? If the Epicurean principle were to be enshrined in human thinking we should not care, for example, about whether we ruin the earth's environment for later generations unless of course we link human solidarity to our own sense of happiness and welfare. But the fact that we can and do think altruistically means that our own immediate pleasure and satisfaction is not all that counts. Even at considerable cost to ourselves we must fight for what is noble and proper, and that means that as rational creatures we are imbued with an internal conviction in a realm beyond the immediate. The exploration of that realm, and the ever deepening belief and conviction in its existence, is the result not of primitive irrationalism as many modern authors assert but of the clarity of philosophical reason.

II: Later Greek views

Because the Greeks had no Bible it is perhaps misleading to liken the rise of the philosophical schools in fifth- and fourth-century Athens to the Enlightenment. When the great fervour of humanism took Europe in the second half of the fifteenth century, it was driven by the rediscovery of the Classical world which for most of the Middle Ages had only very partially been known about, and as a result its great exponents, such as Erasmus of Rotterdam, spearheaded a movement which drew attention to the non-Biblical literature of the Greek and Roman worlds which hitherto had been squirrelled away in monasteries, or in the imperial libraries of Constantinople. The demise of the Eastern Roman Empire in 1453 resulted in a flood of learning which inundated the West and enriched its cultural and artistic heritage. The result was a fresh strand of scholarly enquiry and understanding which did not defer to the authority of the Church or Holy Scripture. The case of Greece is quite different. While it is fair to speak of an intellectual awakening which accompanied the rise of democracy, it is not the case that any of this implied the rejection of a 'Biblical' view of the world as there was no Bible to speak of. As the fourth-century philosopher and pupil of Socrates, Plato, attests it became fashionable among some circles to hold a rather contemptuous attitude towards Homer which certainly at that time most educated and literate people would probably as part of their basic education have had to memorise by heart. But unlike the rise of humanism some two thousand years later, this did not necessarily lead to the doctrine that this world is the only one which we can know or which is worthy of study. To be sure, the gods of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* were exposed as absurd fictions of a more primitive age, but Socrates and Plato were not keen to advance a 'humanist' conception of the universe. Quite the contrary, their philosophical speculations led them to the conviction that beyond this world there is a greater reality of which this world is a mere shadow. As dialogues like the *Phaedo* show, this belief for Socrates entailed the mortification of the flesh and the view that the physical world is unimportant.

Here we see a difference between modern humanism on one side and the ancient intellectual awakening on the other. Humanism entails an optimistic view of humanity and of this life in particular. This life, for all its many irregularities and

imperfections, is to be embraced and lived to the full. The Enlightenment which followed took this principle further by focusing on physical and material reality, in place of the metaphysical world of the medieval scholastics. This is almost the mirror image of the movement begun by Socrates at the end of the fifth century B.C and continued by Plato into the fourth. In their case, what they tried to subvert was the claim that all moral and ethical truths were wrapped up in this one life which we lead right now. In one sense, we can perhaps sympathise with their efforts. As Homer and the tragedians showed to their dismay, this life is too short to fathom the world in all of its moral complexities. However much we might like to think that there is justice in this life and that the unrighteous get their comeuppance, it is never that simple. The *Odyssey* has a pleasing 'happily-ever-after' about it when Odysseus and his wife Penelope are finally re-united, but even then we are left with the disquieting notion that Odysseus, a man who has lied, cheated and deceived his own wife gets rewarded with an old age of quiet and contentment while others far more deserving have either perished on the fields of Troy or drowned in the sea on their way back to their homelands. Collectively what Homer and the tragic poets fail to demonstrate is that there is such a thing as justice in the world which we see and sense and breathe. Perhaps this is not failure, so much as the great moral insight which led to the great philosophical movements which followed chronologically in history. For if this life is the beginning and end of all existence, then it is difficult to see how justice can, in any meaningful sense, exist. What the Greek philosophers developed was the sense that Goodness, Courage, Justice, Temperance, and Wisdom exist autonomously of this world and that the only way we can ever access them is through reflection upon their true nature. This entails the belief that beyond this world is a dimension of reality which is far purer, cleaner and less trammelled. The task of the philosopher is to devote himself to understanding that reality unencumbered by present material concerns.[13]

Plato developed a dualist conception which divided human existence between the body and the soul. This duality did not begin with Plato. It is there in Homer, who regularly describes souls of dead heroes leaving their bodies to be escorted down to Hades. The key difference, however, is that for Plato the soul was the greater part and was more worthy of cultivation than the body. This was a radical departure from traditional thinking which envisaged the soul as a relatively insignificant part of the human makeup, as vase paintings from c. 500 BC, which envisage the soul as a little man hovering over the body of a dead warrior, illustrate.[14] The notion of that the soul was immortal was not original to Plato, as the writings of the archaic epinician poet Pindar (*Olynthian Ode* 2 lines 56-80) and his rough contemporary Pythagoras reveal. But it was not until Plato that the sense of the soul as self was brought to fruition in Greek thought. This meant a complete recalibration of the view of death. If, as Socrates and Plato argued, the soul was the greater part of human existence and the body a kind of prison in this life from which the soul at death gloriously emancipated itself, death is not the end of human existence but perhaps the start (see Plato *Phaedo* 80-82; *Phaedrus* 245c-247c; *Meno* 81a-e). The joyful hope of the philosopher who devotes this life to the pursuit of wisdom is that in the next life s/he will be able to access wisdom without the distractions of the material world (see *Apology* 41c; *Cratylus* 403f; *Crito* 48c). In this sense, contrary to popular opinion, death is not something to be dreaded but

[13] For a general discussions of Plato and his contribution to Greek thought see Rowe 2003.
[14] Bremmer 2002, chapter 3.

rather a liberation of the soul from the body which all sensible people should welcome (see *Phaedo* 64c; 67d; 106e; 107de; *Gorgias* 524b). Souls do not return from Hades not because they are prohibited from returning but because the joys that await them in Hades are too pleasurable (see *Cratylus* 403d). In addition to this, whereas the Homeric conception saw no differentiation in Hades between those who had lived good lives and those who had not, Plato reveals a clear conviction in divine judgment meted out in the afterlife: Those who had lived morally and virtuously would be transported to the Isles of the Blessed, while those who had not would end up in Tartarus (see *Phaedo* 63b, 69de, 113d-114c; *Gorgias* 522d-526d; *Republic* 363c-e). The idea of a paradise in the hereafter for the virtuous in fact goes back to Hesiod in the seventh century B.C. (see *Works and Days* lines 166-73), but whereas in earlier culture it was part of a wealth of mythology surrounding the afterlife, Plato rationalised it so that the righteous would in the end be vindicated and the wicked punished.

While Plato developed the theory of the immortality of the soul, outside the philosophical schools, mystery cults were starting to take shape. Orphism had long existed and held out hope of afterlife only to initiates.[15] The existence of Orphic cults and rituals is known both from its writing and from other literary references by authors who sought to lampoon and ridicule them (see Plato *Phaedo* 69bc; Aristophanes *Frogs* 353-71; Juvenal *Saturnalia* 6.524-41). The Eleusinian Mysteries had been celebrated at Eleusis in western Attica since probably the seventh century B.C. and grew massively in popularity and appeal in the heyday of the Roman Empire. Like Orphism, this was a mystery religion which offered immortality to the initiated, and was not finally abolished until the conversion of the Emperor Constantine at the start of the fourth century A.D. Plato's pupil Aristotle adhered to the idea that the soul was the basis of life but did not quite in the same way as Plato think that it could exist independently of the body (see *De Animalibus* passim). However, it is also clear that Aristotle saw the soul as the central component of human existence and in this sense departed from the Homeric views of the past.[16] The influence of Plato was felt later in antiquity. The first-century A.D. philosopher and teacher Epictetus viewed death with disdain regarding it as the separation of the soul from the body, whereupon physical matter returned to its source (see Epictetus *Discourses* 1.11.31; 4.10.31; 3.10.13-16; 4.7.15). Epictetus was indebted to the Stoic view that one should not complain about one's lot in this world even if it appeared to be harsh. When we are young we are taught to care for the body, but as we grow older we become ever more aware of the reality of impending death, which when it comes will be more like a release than a burden. Similar views were held by the Roman Stoic Seneca living and writing at around the same period. The popular view which still obtains today that the soul exists among the stars and will return to the stars at the point of death is amply attested in many of Seneca's writings (see *Epistulae Moraliae* 71.16; 79.12; 102.21-3; 120.17-19). Death is not to be feared as it represents the return to one's birthplace. In both the writings of Seneca and Epictetus the view of death is calm and resigned. A good Stoic should embrace fate whatever that might happen to be. Though indebted to the Platonic idea of the immortality of the soul, the Stoics did not adhere to quite the same eschatology, in that in Stoicism we do not encounter clearly

[15] The classic treatment of and commentary upon the various known Orphic writings is West 1983. On Orphism in general see Parker 1995; Bremmer 2002; Burkett 2004.
[16] On Aristotle's theories of the soul see the collection of essays edited by Nussbaum and Rorty 1992.

articulated beliefs that the just will be rewarded and the wicked punished. Stoicism was less concerned with reward and retribution than with the cool acceptance that we cannot change our destiny and that the best way to live is to devote oneself to a life of virtue, modesty and self-restraint so that we do not become too addicted to the pleasures of the flesh, thereby making it less easy to leave this body when the time comes.[17]

By the time we get to the later Roman period, we start to encounter the phenomenon of apotheosis, which literally means 'becoming a god'. This honour was usually reserved for the emperors though not all emperors received the honour.[18] One humorous vignette preserved in the writings of the Flavian biographer Suetonius pictures the emperor Vespasian on his death-bed muttering the sardonic words 'Oh dear, I think I am becoming a god!' (Suetonius *Life of Divine Vespasian* 23). The notion of the divine ruler goes back far into antiquity and can be traced back to the Pharaohs. The fifth-century historian from Halicarnassus in Asia Minor, Herodotus, was fully aware of this belief system when he described in Book V of the *Histories* the accession of Pharaoh Amasis in the sixth century B.C., shortly before the end of Egypt's independence and capitulation to the might of Persia under the Great King Cambyses. Herodotus was especially concerned to describe Amasis in very Greek terms, as a mere man who through political circumstances took hold of a throne which propelled him to the level of divinity. Noteworthy is how many times Herodotus uses the noun *anthrôpos* (human being) in reference to Amasis. This is perhaps deliberate, as in traditional Greek understanding rulers were merely rulers, not gods. All this began to change from the second half of the fourth century B.C., when Alexander the Great led his campaign into Persia to conquer the mightiest empire the world had yet known. In the process he met the great oracle at Siwa in Egypt, which persuaded him that he was not in fact Philip's son but the son of a god.[19] This paved the way for the divine self-understanding of the Hellenistic monarchs who came after Alexander and who held views about their own godlike status, resulting in a cultic status which those kings and rulers jealously preserved.[20] This primarily is what led to the Maccabean Revolt in Judea in 167 BC, when the more traditional Jewish believers found that they could not tolerate the idea of an earthly ruler who claimed to be divine, largely also in reaction to the crazed religious insults inflicted upon their temple culture by the mad Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes.[21] In Egypt, the last of the Ptolemaic rulers was Queen Cleopatra who had adulterous affairs both with Julius Caesar and subsequently with Mark Antony, which led to the third of Rome's civil wars and the rise of Augustus. Julius Caesar, Rome's first dictator for life, was deified after his assassination; Antony shortly thereafter as triumvir ruling the Eastern Mediterranean was able to attain a divine status because by that stage the Greek speakers of the East were accustomed to describing their rulers in the language of divinity. However, when Octavian beat the last of his foes and acceded to the title of Augustus, he was careful not to be worshipped at Rome as he knew only too well

[17] On Stoicism in general see Long 2001; Brennan 2005; Stephens 2007. For a collection and analysis of the fragments of Stoic writing see Bakalis 2005.
[18] On the cult of the ruler in the Roman world see Taylor 1931; Price 1986; Ando 2000; Gradel 2004.
[19] On Alexander at Siwa and the origins of divine kingship see Bosworth 1977, 51-75
[20] On the divine kinship of Hellenistic rulers see Chaniotis 2005; Roubekas 2015.
[21] For the revolt of the Maccabees see Gruen 1993.

that traditional Roman sensibilities could not view him as a king, much less as a god.

Despite this caution, one option left open to the Caesars was deification on the point of death. This was made available to those emperors who were deemed worthy by the Senate of apotheosis. Among those who received the honour were Julius Caesar, Augustus, Claudius, Vespasian, and Titus. The less popular among the early emperors, such as Tiberius, Caligula, Nero, and Domitian, did not attain such dignity. But what is interesting is that while in the West emperors had to wait until death to be offered even the possibility of divine status, in the East they could be worshipped as kings and gods even during their lifetimes. This signifies a basic difference in cultural outlook between East and West: Since Hellenistic times the Greek-speaking East had become used to divine rulers whose reign entailed a godlike status, whereas the Latin-speaking West sat uneasy even with the idea of monarchy, never mind the idea that a sole ruler could be venerated as a god. Nevertheless, it was not the Caesars who introduced the idea of apotheosis into Greco-Roman eschatology. Since early times the Greeks had believed that the hero Heracles ('Hercules' in Latin) was assumed into the company of the gods as a reward for his various labours (see Juvenal *Saturnalia* 11.60-64). Similar beliefs were held about Dionysius born of Semele by a thunderbolt from Zeus and the healer Asclepius. In the Roman world we find comparable ideas about Aeneas the legendary founder of the Roman people and. Romulus the founder of Rome. Notably these were all mythical, or at best semi-mythical, figures. In Classical Greece (c. 479-338) we know of no historical person who was elevated to the level of divinity. But when Alexander the Great visited Siwa in 331, the situation changed dramatically. Once Greek culture became intermingled with Egyptian and Persian cultures after the absorption of the empire of Darius III into the Macedonian domain, it became more possible for a Greek to speak of divinity, and this indeed became the norm among Greek-speaking rulers after the time of Alexander, whose empire in absence of a nominated successor fragmented into the Hellenistic kingdoms carved out from it by his generals. When Rome became a *de facto* monarchy three centuries later similar practices emerged.

In only one known case was the body of the apotheosised mortal said to have been assumed into heaven. According to the Roman historian Livy Romulus while sitting on his throne in the company of the Roman citizenry was snatched up to heaven in a rainstorm.[22] In all other cases we know about, apotheosis entailed the separation of soul from body. Here we see a fundamental difference between the Greco-Roman notion of apotheosis and the Christian doctrine of the Resurrection. Central to the witness tradition of the early Church were two claims, the post-mortem appearances of Jesus and the empty tomb.[23] In the case of hero cults in Greece and Rome, in contrast, there was never expectation expressed that the tomb would be empty. This explains why veneration of heroes would take place at their tombs where their bodies lay. Even if a hero had been apotheosised, no one apparently believed that his body had been resurrected.[24] The same was true in the case of virtuous souls which in Orphic and Pythagorean belief had been assumed into heaven.[25] 'Astral immortality' as a doctrine is witnessed also in Egypt and Persia and entailed the idea that in the case of very virtuous men and women the

[22] For a discussion of the literary references to this event see Gosling 2002.
[23] For a full discussion of the Biblical and extra-Biblical reference, see Wright 2003, 209-449.
[24] Burkett 1985, 205-6.
[25] West 1971, 188.

soul would leave the body and be transformed into a star (see Aristophanes *Peace* 832-7).[26] In Plato we can observe a similar train of thought. Though Plato does not go as far as to say that souls become stars, in the *Timaeus* (29d-38b) there is a description of how virtuous souls take up their residence among the stars. In his account of the dream of Scipio Cicero mentions that souls of the virtuous are taken up into heaven (*De Re Publica* 6.13-16), but the idea of a physical resurrection or ascension is not present. The Stoics took this doctrine further by supposing that the soul was made up of a fiery substance akin to the stuff from which stars are made. It is often casually asserted that these beliefs are so similar to those of Jews and Christians that we might as well think that the early Church built its eschatology on popular myths that were circulating in the ancient world which, by the height of the Roman Empire, was culturally interconnected. But if we examine those beliefs more closely, we ought to observe how much at variance the Greco-Roman view of apotheosis was from the Jewish and Christian beliefs in resurrection. Indeed, it might be said that the belief in 'going to heaven when we die' has little foundation in either the Jewish or early Christian views of the afterlife, and might instead have more in common with the beliefs which were commonplace in Greece and Rome.

Christian doctrine was from an early stage in its history held open to ridicule by its opponents. Perhaps the most famous example of early anti-Christian polemic was the writer Celsus, who charged Christianity with borrowing its resurrection beliefs from transmigration beliefs of the Pythagoreans. Transmigration, or *metempsychosis*, was first espoused in Greece in the sixth-century B.C. and held that souls pass from one body to another at the time of death. This is certainly Near Eastern in origin and by the time of Plato was known in the form of the Myth of Er (see *Republic* 614b-621d; *Phaedrus* 245b-249d; *Phaedo* 80c-84c; *Gorgias* 523a-526b; *Meno* 81b-d). This held that when the soul passed from the body it was detained for a thousand years until given a choice of what creature it would later become. The soul would drink from the River Lethe (which means in Greek 'Oblivion') and reappear in some other animal frame. For Plato this merely meant that the soul was exchanging one type of prison for another and was better advised to try to escape the cycle altogether, not dissimilar to the Hindu and Buddhist doctrines of reincarnation and Nirvana. But what escaped Celsus was the fact that in Jewish and Christian eschatology, resurrection was not construed in terms of a renewed physical prison but was embraced as the final hope and vindication of the righteous. *Metempsychosis* is not like resurrection theology insofar as the old body is not resurrected. In Pythagorean and Orphic belief, the soul might pass from one body to another, but this is a far cry from Christian or Jewish idea of the resuscitation of the old body which, through the redefinition of physicality, is divinely transformed.[27]

Conclusion

In this essay I have made two essential claims. First, belief in afterlife is not the hallmark of a primitive culture which was unable to think or reason in a sophisticated way. Rather, when ancient cultures ceased to be primitive they developed serious views of death which propelled them to consider that this life is perhaps the antechamber of a much more widely envisioned existence. Secondly, there is precious little to unite the beliefs of pagan Greeks and Romans with Jewish

[26] For a full survey of the literary evidence for this belief, see Cumont 1949, 142-288.
[27] Martin 1995, 188.

and Christian doctrines of immortality. As soon as Greeks started to think in terms of the immortality of the soul they embraced dualistic conceptions which, as far as Plato and others were concerned, saw the soul as something inherently valuable and the body worthless. As Neoplatonism started to affect certain aspects of Christian theology in its early development there may have been a tendency to hold to the dualistic worldview which among other things encouraged mortification of flesh, and the Church from the second century of its existence down through the Middle Ages was challenged by dualistic heresies which regarded the physical world as intrinsically bad and the spiritual world as intrinsically good. Such views stand in direct opposition to the three most widely used formulations of the Creed upon which the faith of the Church is founded. The Athanasian, Nicene and Apostles' Creeds all affirm belief in the *resurrection of the body* which must entail the view that physicality, far from being wicked or the work of an inferior deity, as both the Gnostics and Manicheans held, is inherently good and holy and divine. When Greeks and Romans who believed in the immortality of the soul spoke about the body, it was rarely with any view of its sanctity. Belief in immortality is shared across cultures, but it is important not to take that observation too far by claiming that all cultures believe the same sort of thing wrapped up in different conceptual language. If we are to talk about the influence of Greco-Roman ideas on Jewish or Christian doctrine, we need to understand in all cases what we are really talking about before we assert, as a matter or creed or dogma, that all beliefs and doctrines were essentially the same.

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