

Journeys of the Soul in the Afterlife: Egyptian Books of the Afterlife and Greek Orphic Mysteries

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Abstract

Although studies in the ancient Greek and Egyptian conception of the afterlife may be extensive, the two systems of belief are rarely set against each other using the comparative method. To that end, this paper will focus on the afterlife conceptions of *both* of these ancient cultures, exclusively comparing their ideas, images, and practices pertaining to life after death. Additionally, the extent to which these cultures promoted postmortem *gnosis* and/or wisdom, as opposed to moral scrutiny of individual life-choices, will be explored. The paper seeks to investigate motivations behind this emphasis on afterlife behavior, recitation, and right-ritual, which both ancient Egypt and Greece share. The works of two early 20th century scholars of religion, W. Brede Kristensen and G. R. S. Mead, will form the academic basis, as well as the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the more recent archeological discoveries known as the Orphic Gold Tablets.

Introduction

In ancient times, the human being's fate after death occupied a significant amount of focus and attention. The journey of a soul through the afterlife was not merely some imaginative flight of fancy or speculative conjecture, but a living part of the cultural milieu. For ancient peoples, the afterlife and their place in it offered a possible scenario for their future, and without the aid of modern science to temper that view, they were less disposed to balancing their ideas against the hard data of material reality. In Egypt, especially, cults of the afterlife flourished and were a prominent aspect of the community. Their beliefs dominated architecture and religious philosophy, and culminated in ritual burials. Similarly, in Greece we find the same obsession with the afterlife, par-

ticularly in mystery religions such as the Orphic cults. However, the Greeks were more secretive concerning their practices. Orphic and Egyptian death cults offered spells, rituals, and passwords for successfully traversing the afterlife, and both propounded penalties for failing to perform these actions at the proper time. Although these civilizations are seldom dealt with in the same forum, striking similarities emerge when the two are compared. Parallels exist between Egyptian and Greek beliefs in the afterlife, in periods far earlier than the Hellenization of Egypt by Alexander the Great. While these two civilizations never fully merged with respect to their religious and philosophical views pertaining to the afterlife, ancient Egypt and Greece did cross-pollinate in the years leading up to Alexander's takeover around 333 BCE. This induces the conclusion that the ancient peoples emphasized their conduct and behavior *after death*, as opposed to the moral scrutiny placed upon our corporeal lives in modern-day society.

A principal text that will be utilized is *Life out of Death: Studies in the Religions of Egypt and of Ancient Greece* by W. Brede Kristensen (1867-1953), first published in 1925. The reason for relying on this somewhat dated text is best described by Jean Jacques Waardenburg:

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Kristensen made the attempt to come to an understanding of the religious documents on the basis of religious values which, in his view, were proper to the religion studied. He was attentive to the symbolism of the studied religions, in particular to what related to the problem of life and death. Kristensen was opposed to evolutionary views on the development of religion, preferred to study the texts apart from their time sequence, and to concentrate on their ideational content.¹

Kristensen appropriately analyzed the material relevant to this study in such a context that it is suitable to utilize his work as a handbook. The decision is based in part on the general way in which he handled the symbolism and primary texts, framing his thoughts around the question of life after death, and not subscribing too dogmatically to the overtly materialistic methodology of his time. Instead, he retained a portion of the original esotericism of religion. Like minded scholars such as G. R. S. Mead (1863-1933) have been selected for this article under the same pretense.

On the other hand, contemporaneous scholars like E. A. Wallis Budge (1857-1934) who employed similar academic processes were omitted, owing to Kristensen's ability to consistently compare afterlife themes in both ancient Egypt and Greece in a single volume. While subsequent related studies have been carried out more recently, the goal here is to extend back in scholarship before a rigid, materialistic methodology took over.

However, to show the author is no mere spokesperson for Kristensen, the following criticism is offered:

The skepticism towards the ruling paradigms of his time could have made Kristensen into a scholar with a lasting influence. Unfortunately, this has not been the case.... Whichever god he approached, whichever ritual he analyzed, he always found 'absolute life' and/or 'absolute wisdom,' without ever supplying a detailed argument for this leading principle. Even in the first, introductory chapter of his *Life out of Death* the curious reader is left in the cold as to what

'absolute life,' which appears in the subtitle of that chapter, really means. As Waardenburg has well noted: Kristensen 'could not express himself well abstractly and what he wrote about his method appears rather opaque.'²

Now on to Kristensen: "The relationship between the Greek religion and eastern religions [can] no longer be denied. Recent archeological discoveries have shown this in the case of many Greek gods. On Crete, in Asia Minor, Egypt, Syria, and Babylonia—not to mention Thrace—one finds sources of what used to be called Greek cults."³

In other words, a common thread exists between the two cultures, which justifies their pairing together. When surveyed according to Kristensen's method, a number of similarities crop up, particularly among afterlife images, exclusive religious cults, and burial rites. Iconography such as the snake, bird, and boat recur among the vast array of images utilized by both groups.

In his book, Kristensen strongly asserts that Egypt and Greece share a similar attitude concerning the afterlife and what awaits human beings there. This attitude exerted a "penetrating influence on ... the spiritual life of these people."⁴ Kristensen believes that although the two religions are not without their immediate differences, those differences do not "necessarily exclude an equally real similarity."⁵ For Kristensen, various aspects such as the construction of sacred temples and sites, the iconography, and the correlation between myths connects the two cultures in a special way; and then there are the Orphic gold leaves and Egyptian funerary texts, which will be discussed later.

It is safe to assume that a common current of special knowledge about the afterlife flows into both the ancient Egyptian and Greek religions; though veiled at first glance, this relationship manifests itself in the myths of Osiris and the myths of Orpheus in the underworld, both of which impart a kind of hidden mystery code intended to transmit instructions about entering the afterlife properly.

In addition to these myths, certain texts were prepared to help facilitate the deceased's passage through the afterlife. In both cases ritual burial and preparation of the dead body played a key role, including the mummification process and the placing of engraved golden "leaves" in the tombs of dead Orphic initiates. We see an emphasis placed on the conduct of the deceased's burial, instead of a concern for how they lived their life, morally speaking, which is the dominant paradigm of today.

Judging from the similarities between Egypt and Greece, we may presume the afterlife journey was of significant importance to these ancient peoples, exerting a greater command over everyday conduct and suggesting a superiority of death over one's life experiences. However, as Kristensen states:

... many will think it strange that ethic considerations manifestly were not determinative in forming man's image of eternal life ... [and yet] it will be seen that according to Egyptian and also Greek beliefs ethical law was contained in the cosmic order of life.⁶

Ancient Egypt

No study of ancient Egypt can begin without briefly mentioning Egyptian living conditions along the Nile banks as so much of their religion and cosmology was derived therefrom. Being situated along the mighty river, Egyptian society regularly awaited the annual overflowing of its banks for the purposes of agriculture and farming. For the Egyptians, this was seen as an act of fertility, the upsurge of water saturating the parched, receptive earth and generating new life for the crops and plant life. Thus, for the Egyptians, "the sky, Nut, was a woman, while Earth, Geb, was a man, since the earth carried the Nile flood."⁵

Above all, one thing is certain of this ancient society, which is that they possessed more thoughts about death than thoughts about life.⁷ And they upheld a belief in the divine nature of deceased human beings. Thus death had a double meaning for them. It was their enemy in some respects, but it was, likewise, the source of their eternal life. The reasoning for their preoccupation with the subject is clear.

Even the annual flooding of the Nile had a double meaning for them, bringing both life with the crops and death from the dangerous floods.⁸

Osiris, ruler of the underworld, was one of the main deities associated with the afterlife and the dead. He had already undergone death and resurrection owing to the well-known myth where his brother Set conspired to have him killed, cut him apart, and dispersed him.⁹ But he was then put back together via the mummification process and brought to life by his wife Isis, at which point he assumed rule over the underworld.

"Look: I have found you lying on your side, O completely inert one! My sister, said Isis to Nephthys, it is our brother, this. Come that we may lift up his head! Come that we may reassemble his bones! ... Let this not remain inert in our hands! ... Osiris, live, Osiris! May the completely inert one who is on his side rise. I am Isis."¹⁰

Many cults were formed around this crucial figure, and thus when the deceased was faced with his journey in the underworld it was necessary for him to identify himself as Osiris, which we find in the Egyptian Book of the Dead. The aspect of the being which embarked upon this journey was even known as the Osiris-Soul. Therefore, identification with the king Osiris was critical for the deceased to survive the underworld.¹¹ And such identification, or spells, needed vociferation because for the Egyptians the spoken word was seen as magical; it was the ordering component out of which chaos was forced into logical order—i.e. the word is what causes the divine act of creation, of giving life.¹² This concept is highly related to the ancient Greek idea of the logos of reasoning capabilities. For example, "... stoics based their notion of the material cosmos on a divine fire called logos. This material suffused the universe with a reasoning power."¹³ Thus, the logos was seen as ordering creation out of formlessness and chaos.

With this type of magical protection, especially as laid down in funerary texts such as *The Book of the Dead* (New Kingdom 1540-1075 B.C.E.), recently deceased souls could reach

the fields of Aaru, or the Field of Reeds, an Egyptian version of Heaven or Paradise. This also parallels directly with Elysium or the Elysian Fields, which was the ancient Greek variation of the same place.

Other predominant Egyptian deities included Ra, the sun god, and then his opposite, the symbol of evil incarnate known as the Apep snake. Like Osiris, this snake was viewed as the sign of death and renewal¹⁴ due to its annual skin shedding; however, it did not contain the quality of resurrection as did the king of the underworld, whose very existence offered the living a possibility of transcending death. Moreover, the Apep snake was specifically identified as the enemy of Ra. When the sun god traveled from west to east after nightfall, he traveled through the Kingdom of the Dead and symbolically battled and defeated Apep. This battle was considered inspiration for the recently deceased and was depicted on tomb walls and within funerary texts. The image of the snake turns up again when we explore ancient Greece, and it will also be recognizable from the Genesis story. Apep was the source of chaos and together with Ra the typical enemy of the deceased.

In the hereafter the deceased (like the gods and usually together with them) carries on his victorious battle against the powers of death. Numerous texts deal with the dangers and the enemies which threaten him with total annihilation so that he 'dies the second death,' thus dying in the absolute sense of the word never to rise up again ... The dead man like Ra travels during the night across the back of Apep and defeats the snake be it in the depth of the Kingdom of Death or at the eastern horizon.¹⁵

Thus, another prescribed formula for the deceased to emerge victorious from their afterlife journey was to utter the words "I am the sun god Ra, Atum, Khepera" time and time again to the many foes of the underworld, including Apep, as cited in funerary texts.¹⁶ Both Osiris and Ra were seen as separate and yet interconnected, as Egyptian cosmology and myth are far from being cohesive.¹⁷ One reason for this may be attributed to the fact that Ra and Osiris

were in the underworld at night, when Ra was riding his solar disk from west to east, preparing to arise again with the dawn.

The type of divine self-identification mentioned here also appears in the Orphic "gold leaves" found in ancient Greece, where proclaiming oneself as an equal to the gods has the effect of granting certain allowances in the afterlife. Moreover, these "leaves" were discovered along with the remains of the deceased, meaning they were placed in the coffins or burial plots at the time of interment. As such, they function as a symbolic reminder, notes taken for a post-mortem exam, which will assist the deceased to pass the challenges they encounter while traveling in the underworld.

Burial rituals and symbolically cartographic hieroglyphs were very important for ancient Egyptians when burying their deceased. This began with the act of mummification, in which the dead body was bound up with cloth. Symbolically, the bandages or cloth represented the magical knot, seen in some images as looking like the mathematical infinity symbol, also called a lemniscate in algebraic geometry, and recognizable as the numerical figure 8 laying on its side. This symbol was often placed inside the hand of the deceased, which was to indicate the resurrection of both man and gods in universal life.¹⁸ By binding the entire body in this symbolic cloth, it is possible the priests were hoping to wrap up the deceased within the folds of eternity. Important spell books such as *The Book of the Dead* and the *New Kingdom Books of the Netherworld* were inscribed on scrolls and illustrated on the walls of tombs and coffins, replete with instructions and magical pronouncements meant to facilitate safe passage to the Field of Reeds. Other items of importance included the Canopic Jars which held the deceased's organs, humanoid coffins, geometrically aligned tombs, the burial masks, and some of the deceased's personal effects.

Once the deceased was prepared and placed into his elaborate death chamber, the journey of the afterlife began in earnest. His soul exited the tomb in the form of an anthropomorphized bird known as the Ba-bird, of which there are

countless hieroglyphic representations. According to the Egyptian Book of the Dead, the goal was to accompany Ra in his solar barque and enter into the cyclic circle of the sun, thus transcending death and then, presumably, entering the Field of Reeds. But numerous trials and obstacles were situated in the way. Most notably, the 125th chapter of the Book of the Dead, where the deceased comes before Osiris and is “judged” before the 42 judges. His heart is placed upon a giant scale, with the symbol of justice or *ma’at* as a counterweight. He must then utter the prescribed dialogue lines both to Osiris and the 42 judges. He is questioned and must recite a litany of proclamations to prove his purity to the judges (which include other gods, such as Thoth). The goal of this line of questioning is to give the deceased a chance to reveal his righteousness and assume the title of “Osiris,” which is conferred upon those who go forward into immortality, as Osiris did before them. This is why the dead soul is always referred to as Osiris throughout the Book of the Dead.

Thus speaks the famous litany of the 125th chapter:

O Wide-strider who came forth from Heliopolis, I have not done wrong ... O Fire-embracer who came forth from Kheraha, I have not robbed ... O Nosey who came forth from Hermopolis, I have not stolen ... O Swallower of Shades who came forth from Kernet, I have not slain people ... O Burning One who came forth from backwards, I have not told lies ... O Doubly Evil One who came forth from Busirite Nome, I have not had intercourse with a married woman ... [etc.] ... [etc.] ...¹⁹

If the deceased performs all this correctly, and if his heart is judged as “pure,” then he is allowed to proceed. While this imagery will sound familiar to modern religious views of the afterlife, and is even known in some circles as the Ten Commandments of the Book of the Dead, Kristensen adjures us to be cautious:

... *ma’at* has little or nothing to do with ethical standards. Its life is the mystery of spontaneous life, i.e. the mystery of resurrection ... We consider cosmic law (the law

of nature) and ethical law as totally different ideas ... The judgment of the deceased before Osiris, after his heart has been weighed on *Ma’at*’s scale, was not an ethical judgment in our sense of the word.²⁰

Thus, the Egyptian view of the afterlife did not depend on moral actions performed during this life, but rather on the “purity” or harmonious orderliness of the soul of the deceased, which determined whether or not he was fit to enter into the fields of immortality. This worthiness was largely determined by proper burial practices having been performed, as well as the proper spells and magical words uttered at the prescribed times.

Those not found “pure” ran the risk of being devoured by crocodiles, snakes, and other wild beasts, and certain spells in the Book of the Dead, such as spells 31-35, are directed against these adversaries. If the deceased is determined to be worthy, passage may be possible, but his or her journey is still not over, as there are many more gateways through which to pass, and each one is guarded by still more fearsome beasts that can only be overcome by knowing and uttering their names and reciting the correct spells.²¹ Other penalties for “impurity” or not being duly prepared include a lake of fire, another “second death” (this one total obliteration), and being devoured by Apep, the enemy of the sun god.

Here we find a crucial distinction between the way these ancient peoples viewed the afterlife and our own, current views. Our modern conception, more or less, is that the afterlife is a portal into heaven (or hell), into which the deceased passes, and then time and activity just cease—the story ends. Your fate is thus determined by the life that you lived: you were good, you go to heaven; bad, you go to hell. With the ancient Egyptians, as well as with the ancient Greeks, as we shall see, it was not that simple.

Although the moral life of the deceased was not entirely dismissed, it was not the be-all and end-all of the story. Instead, a complex journey awaited, rife with dangers and challenges, to which the deceased was subjected. This, then, became the most important aspect of the after-

life, which these people expressed in every nuance of their society and culture.

Ultimately, for the ancient Egyptians the destination of their journey through the afterlife was resurrection and eternal life in the Field of Reeds where once and for all they entered the realm of the gods, not merely as faithful subjects but truly as one of them, one of the immortal creative divinities who could never die. As we shall see, this concept is strikingly similar to the one held by the Orphic Mystery cults of ancient Greece—as both religious systems emphasized what to do in the afterlife, rather than how to act in this life.

Ancient Greece

With Greece, we are primarily interested in the mystery religions, particularly with the Orphic cults. Admittedly Zeus and his pantheon of Greek gods, and their respective mythologies, would seem to parallel Egyptian mythologies, though these Greek myths were more of an exoteric form of religion—exoteric taken from the Greek *exōterikos* literally meaning external and according to Merriam-Webster: “suitable to be imparted to the public [only].”

On the other hand, the mystery religions concerned themselves with mystic experience, i.e. direct contact with the divine, offered only to the exclusive, initiated members. Kristensen defines the mystery religions as “initiation into eternal life, which is to say the mystery of death.”²² The experience of initiation into one of these religions conferred what Greeks called *gnosis*, special knowledge of the divine, and wiped out fears of death. For initiates, the ritual experience of being admitted into these cults took them bodily into the underworld, so that afterward their conviction about the possibility of an afterlife became unshakable, and the rest of their life was devoted to pursuing immortality and godhood in the afterlife. In the words of Plutarch, “... the initiate, perfect by now, set free and loose from all bondage, walks about, crowned with a wreath, celebrating the festival together with the other pure people, and he looks down on the uninitiated, unpurified crowd in this world in mud and fog beneath his feet.”²³

Beliefs like these, couched in highly symbolic language and iconography, are what link the ancient Greeks with the ancient Egyptians, more so than any exoteric pantheon. While the mystery religions were practiced only by initiated members, their existence and their beliefs occupied much of the cultural imagination. Myths were the most important part of ancient Greek religion—indeed, of all religions—and these mystery myths interwove in and out of the exoteric polytheism. Many of the dramatic works of that time also mentioned mystery religions or dealt with them directly, and some of the individualities surrounding these esoteric religions were very popular, such as Dionysus, Orpheus, and Persephone. Though much of ancient Greek life championed material expressiveness within the sensible, the mystery religions took up the other end, concerning themselves with death, the afterlife, and the underworld.

Principal among these were the Dionysian Mysteries, which exalted the death and rebirth of Dionysus, similar to the Cult of Osiris in ancient Egypt. Within this mystery were still more esoteric practices such as the Orphic. Orpheus, while related to Dionysus, offered his own unique example for the safe journey in the afterlife, and it was very common to have both Dionysus and Orpheus present in the same mystery system.²⁴ Herodotus, the historian, uses them synonymously, and asserts that the rites for both were virtually identical. Worshipers of the Dionysian mysteries claimed their ritual came from Orpheus, owing to the fact that he was the god of poetry and a song-writing lyricist, and so they based their beliefs on the poetic writings of Orpheus.²⁴ The following is a brief summary of the Orpheus legend sketched by G.R.S. Mead in his 1896 book *Orpheus*:

Son of Calliope (one of the muses) and Eagrus, King of Thrace, Orpheus was the first singer, poet, and divine singer. With his seven-stringed lyre, he played the songs of harmony, and all manner of men flocked to hear him play, and wild beasts lay down at his feet, so beautiful was his music, of which Apollo had been his instructor. But great tragedy was in store for Orpheus. His beloved, Eurydice, was

bitten by a serpent lurking in the high grass. Orpheus desperately tries to relieve the pain of his beloved, and his music was said to resound through the hills, yet in vain. Eurydice eventually dies and goes to Hades in the underworld. Compelled, Orpheus follows after her and persuades the king of death to release Eurydice.

So impressed is Hades with Orpheus's lyre music that she is permitted once again to return to the earth—but on one condition: Orpheus must not look back as together they travel out of the underworld. But when they almost reach the boundary of death, his anxiety becomes so great that he turns to see if his beloved is still following him. At that moment, she is instantly taken from his sight. Orpheus dies thereafter from grief,

possibly torn into bits by the Bacchanals (a popular death in Greece), and the muses collect his remains and bury them, yet his head continues to sing on the island of Lesbos.²⁵

What this myth has to tell us about ancient Greece and its mystery religions is that Orpheus journeyed to the underworld and returned with special knowledge about how to pass successfully through it. This information was then revealed to members of the Orphic mystery cults and, as we shall see, inscribed upon “golden leaves” known also as the “golden tablets” and interred within the tombs of dead initiates.

In Egypt, only a fraction of the population was literate, few could access the Book of the Dead reproduced on tomb walls, and still fewer had access to the papyrus manuscript. The elite of Egyptian society, the pharaohs, had strong beliefs regarding the afterlife, but possession of a soul and expectation of immortality depended on social status. The majority were forgotten after their deaths. So it would seem that we are

looking at two elitist funerary religions, since in Egypt the elite was based on social class, while in Greece it stemmed from initiation into the mysteries.

However, there did occur in Egypt what J. Edward Wright refers to in his book *The Early*

History of Heaven as the democratization of heaven, where this private knowledge of the afterlife gradually passed down from pharaoh exclusivity with the Pyramid Texts, to monarch exclusivity with the Coffin Texts, and finally to larger accessibility with the economical Book of the Dead.²⁶ Similarly, there are accounts of Orpheus being engaged in a similar dissemination of knowledge, and in one myth he is said to have been killed by a

lightning bolt from Zeus for just this reason.²⁷ Thus we find a parallel stream running through both cultures, one that confines itself primarily to life after death and knowledge thereof.

One of the greatest discoveries in recent archeology and epigraphy is just these golden leaves which were buried with the initiates of the Orphic-Bacchic mystery religions. The research and scholarship surrounding these artifacts is similar to that which has been done on ancient Egypt—that of characterizing beliefs and an approach to the afterlife of the ancient Greeks. The first of the leaves was found in the early 1800s, slightly damaged in what is now called Stongoli, Italy, but which used to be known as Petelia. Since nothing of these tablets was ever mentioned in ancient Greek texts, they were something of a curiosity. Over the course of the late 1800s and early 1900s, more of them were discovered, both in Greece and Italy (what was ancient Rome). However, due to their oddity and specialty, not much was known about them outside of certain academic

Thus with the ancient Greeks, as with the Egyptians, death was viewed as both the great enemy and the sublime liberator, conferring upon the deceased eternal life, as well as admission into the paradisaical fields of the afterlife. For them, the idea of cosmic immortality was no mere metaphor, but a true destination to be reached via an arduous route of distractions, penalties, and gateways.

circles, and it is only recently, after a long challenge of handling the translation, that the materials and scholarship have been made available in English.²⁸ The insights into the afterlife these amazing artifacts offer us are strikingly similar to some of the beliefs held by ancient Egyptians.

These leaves or tablets were usually made of gold, small and very thin, often folded into a tiny envelope-like shape, and sometimes worn as necklaces or amulets. Inscribed in Greek letters, they offered a summary or a reminder of what the deceased must say in order to pass through the afterlife safely and reach the Elysium (or the Elysian Fields), which is the Greek version of the Field of Reeds. And just as in Egypt, there were numerous hazards facing the deceased, obstacles that strove to prevent the unworthy from entering that divine destination. The following passage is taken from a golden tablet found in the cist-grave of a woman in 400 B.C.E. in Calabria. The tablet was rectangular, folded, and placed upon the upper chest of the deceased, suggesting the possibility of a necklace. Notice the similarities between the proclamations here and those that we encountered in the Egyptian Book of the Dead.

This is the work of memory, when you are about to die ... down to the well-built house of Hades. There is a spring to the right side, and standing by it a white cypress ... Do not even go near this spring! Ahead you will find from the Lake of Memory, cold water pouring forth; there are guardians before it. They will ask you ... what you are seeking in the darkness of murky Hades. Say, "I am a son of Earth and starry Sky, I am parched with thirst and am dying; but quickly grant me cold water from the Lake of Memory to drink" ... and they will grant you to drink, and you, too, having drunk will go along the sacred road on which other glorious initiates and bachoi travel.²⁹

Many of the other golden tablets reveal similar instructions, specifically what to do and what to say, and when. So again we find in ancient Greece, as in Egypt, not a judgment of moral deeds done in life, but rather a specific litany

to be recited, which grants the deceased admission into paradise. We also have a central figure or a guide: Osiris in Egypt, and Orpheus-Bacchius in Greece. Consider the following from a tablet found inside a sarcophagus in Macedonia:

I am parched with thirst and am dying ... I am a son of Earth and starry Sky ...
But my race is heavenly ... Pure and sacred to Dionysus ... Bacchius am I ...³⁰

Still other tablets are even more elaborate and announce the attainment of immortality of godhood for the deceased: "Happy and blessed, you will be a god instead of a mortal," and, "...accept this gift of Memory, sung of among mortals ... come, by law grown to be divine." And the litanies often end thus: "A kid I fell into milk."³⁰ This latter is perhaps a reference to the milk and honey of heaven, and the kid being the soul returned to its infant, original state, that of purity and innocence. We might conjecture about the Lake of Memory, and to drink therefrom is to recall one's own divinity, which is forgotten while being incarnated on the physical plane, this inner divinity being an important principle of all mystery religions.

After being properly buried and bestowed with a golden leaf, the deceased initiate entered into the underworld and there encountered the same imagery as we encountered in ancient Egypt. They travel over water in a cosmic boat: the Nile in Egypt and the River Styx in Greece (also the forbidden spring and the Lake of Memory, as mentioned in the Orphic Gold Tablets). The snake makes an appearance, symbolized in Orphic iconography as the serpent crawling out from under the half-open lid of the Dionysian mystery casket. The snake represented the demon of the earth, Dionysus, and the chest his dwelling place, the symbol of the grave and the land of the dead. The owl of Athena, goddess of wisdom, is also depicted on pottery and on burial mound steles, along with the snake and boat, these three images coalescing into something that would seem Egyptian. The presence of her owl suggests that somehow wisdom dwelled in the land of the dead, dwelled in death.

Thus with the ancient Greeks, as with the Egyptians, death was viewed as both the great enemy and the sublime liberator, conferring upon the deceased eternal life, as well as admission into the paradisiacal fields of the afterlife. For them, the idea of cosmic immortality was no mere metaphor, but a true destination to be reached via an arduous route of distractions, penalties, and gateways. Immortality was not granted to the deceased because he or she lived a moral life while here on earth. The deceased were required to *know* certain information, even to memorize it; also to be prepared accordingly before death—all this resulting in the means by which to successfully enter the paradisiacal fields of immortality. Unlike today the afterlife was an active event, instead of passive ideology.

Conclusion

For ancient peoples such as the Egyptians and the Greeks, the afterlife occupied a central focus in their thoughts and beliefs. Not only that, it played a key role in their daily lives, as every moment was a preparatory movement toward that final journey. According to Kristensen, “[these] people were possessed more by thoughts about death than thoughts about life.... Clearly the Egyptian kings like all Egyptians were more concerned about their dwellings in the afterlife than those in this life.”³¹

For these people, the afterlife journey was not some imaginative vision, serving more as a didactic allegory or instructive narrative, but a serious reality. Dedication, knowledge, focus, and study for that important moment demanded the utmost solemnity. As is clearly present in the iconography, ritual texts, and burial structures of the two cultures, the afterlife played a prominent role within their societies. Judging from the text of the Egyptian Book of the Dead and the Orphic Gold Tablets, it can be concluded that these ancient peoples emphasized their conduct and postmortem behavior, as opposed to the moral scrutiny placed on corporeal deeds in modern culture.

Based on the abundance of archeological evidence these cultures left behind, one could

wonder why they placed such importance on the afterlife, and why it was more important than life itself, and to be taken literally. These were by no means unintelligent people, and their level of insight into the workings of nature, life, and death, though represented symbolically, is more literal than our present interpretation. It would seem dismissive to label them as merely ignorant because they lacked the scientific knowledge we today possess. This is clear from the level of mathematical, architectural, astronomical, philosophical and linguistic prowess they displayed, all of which are still being studied today. There would seem to be some other reason, some deeper truth, which they had tapped into, but which is now lost. The persistence and universality of heaven and the afterlife in humanity's worldview reminds us that this concept is not going away, that humanity is unlikely to give up its belief in the idea that there is a meaningful existence succeeding physical death.

Therefore, it is of benefit to look at these ancient practices with a fresh eye as to their validity, instead of placing all of our emphasis on the present moment-by-moment living. Losing our belief in the reality of the afterlife might have global consequences, for which we are not prepared. It is possible to envision a world that is totally and compulsively obsessed with material existence and material goods, having done away with postmortem ideals. Yet with these material goods becoming more and more depleted, a war over resources would result. Thus, there must be something held aloft that will inspire us away from complete materialism. There would be nothing more unfortunate than to wrap up this life, only to find that those innumerable gates, tests, dangers, and practiced recitals awaited us on the other side. Sadly, we have no scientific methodology available to determine whether or not this is the case, and so visionary speculation, unfortunately, is one of the few means we currently have at our disposal. However, possibilities might exist for today's students and spiritual seekers in studying some of these ancient texts, which could lead to a greater spiritual understanding.

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- ¹ Jacque Waardenburg, *Classical Approaches to the Study of Religion: Aims, Methods, and Theories of Research* (New York: De Gruyter, 1999), 390.
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