

WHAT LIES BEYOND?

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In our club we have addressed numerous historical topics, each with some empirical evidence to support our presentations. From that approach I shall stray this evening to a subject for which historical evidence is utterly lacking. Yet, as Shakespeare was not alone to realize, it is nonetheless a matter of some consequence and a persistent puzzle. It is, in Hamlet's words, "... the undiscovered country, from whose bourn, No traveler returns...." (*Hamlet* III.1 79-80).

Yes, I have chosen to speak on a subject on which no witness has given a reliable report, and yet it is one that has troubled, I believe, every civilization: What happens when we have, hopefully after many productive years, departed this earthly life? It is my intent to present a broad chronological survey of how "the World-to-Come" has been interpreted in ancient Mesopotamia, in Egypt, in the Classical World, the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, in later Judaism and Christianity, and finally in Islam.

The issues for all of them remain remarkably alike. To set them out at the start, they are: immortality of the soul, resurrection of the body, reward and punishment in a Heaven and Hell, and the transmigration of souls. My task shall be to act the role of both Dante's Virgil and his Beatrice, to guide you

through the unwitnessed landscape of what lies beyond.

The two major civilizations of the Ancient Near East, the Mesopotamian and the Egyptian, view the afterlife in strikingly different fashion. Although the multiple myths of Assyria and Babylonia may vary, the dominant image has been of a place that is described as gloomy or bleak. All subsist in nothing more than a partial life; there are no rewards or punishments, no consideration of whether the dead had or had not lived a moral life. The main concern seems to be that they not return from the netherworld to torment the living.

The Egyptians saw matters very differently. After all, they had a pharaoh, deemed to be an immortal god, who had to be given a uniquely exalted place in the afterlife corresponding to what had been his status on earth. However, whereas, after death, the pharaohs ascended to the upper realm of the gods, mere mortals descended to a netherworld below. And there, in sharp contrast to the Mesopotamian dead, they were put to religious and moral judgment before Osiris, the lord of the underworld. Before his throne, a history of proper performance of one's duties was highly regarded. One official's confession has been preserved in an inscription:

I am truly an official of great heart, sweet and lovable...

I am no drunkard, I was not forgetful;

I was not sluggish at my task.

It was my heart that furthered my rank,

It was my character that kept me in front.¹

Only if they passed the test could mortal Egyptians take their place as workers in a netherworld that much resembled the Nile valley in which they had lived their lives.

With the ancient Greeks we get a variety of views, differentiated principally, as we shall find also to be the case among the monotheistic religions, between the faith of a philosophical elite on the one hand and a folk religion of the masses on the other. Like Dante many centuries later, Homer's hero, Odysseus, pays a visit to the realm of the dead, which the Greeks called Hades, so designated after a god of the same name. He is in quest of the blind prophet Tiresias, who he hopes will reveal to him his future. There he finds mostly the evanescent shades of average Greeks, neither rewarded nor punished, wandering about more or less aimlessly; Homer makes no distinction with regard to how they conducted their earthly lives. Eternal punishment, in a deeper domain called Tartarus, is reserved exclusively for the grandest of sinners. In its vales may be found the deceitful Sisyphus, vainly trying to roll that boulder up the hill, only to have it roll back down; there is Tantalus, the wicked monarch, unable to get at the water and the fruit tree that stubbornly remain almost within his reach; and, finally, there is the giant Tityos, who attempted to rape the goddess Leto, and who analogously to Prometheus, is now forced to suffer two vultures daily pecking away at his liver.

The counterpart to these abominable sinners consists of their opposites: the majestic heroes who fell at Troy or at Thebes. They too receive a wholly different, special treatment from that of the masses. Instead of remaining in the nondescript Hades they are whisked away to the Elysian Fields or the Isles of the Blessed. Homer tells us that "No snow is there nor heavy storm, nor ever rain, but ever does Ocean send up blasts of the shrill-blowing West Wind that they may give cooling to men."²

Parallel to Odysseus's visit to Hades is the brief sojourn there of the god Dionysus, as portrayed in Aristophanes' comedy, *The Frogs*. His purpose is a literary one: Dionysus is there to interview the shades of Aeschylus and Euripides in order to determine who was the greater dramatic poet and therefore most worthy of being brought back with him from Hades to the realm of the living. He tells his guide Heracles that he should make his trip a comfortable journey:

What road will take us quickest down to Hades--
And, please, no extremes of heat or cold.

Dionysus has descended

...to fetch a poet: 'Why a poet?'
That his advice may guide the city true
And so keep up my worship!...

Ultimately, he chooses Aeschylus, much to Euripides' dismay. We may conclude that in popular Greek culture, one could be portrayed as returning to

this life and also that the Greeks could be right merry about that realm beyond.

Utterly different with regard to human fate beyond death is the Greek philosophical tradition, as exemplified especially by Socrates and Plato. Condemned to death, the wise Socrates contemplates that departing this life may not be such a terrible fate. He tells his death-hour companions: "No one knows with regard to death whether it is not really the greatest blessing that can happen to a person."³ Why is death a blessing? Because it represents liberation of the immortal soul from the mortal body in which it has lain imprisoned since birth. But not all souls can make a clean get away. That escape is only for those who have risen to philosophical heights in this life. As for the other souls, they are doomed to be reincarnated again and again, imprisoned in yet another body, until, at length, they are fully and finally purified of earthly dross.

Here, in ancient Greece, we find the uncoupling of immortal soul from mortal body that becomes central in much of Christian thought as well as the doctrine of the transmigration of souls that we will reencounter in the Jewish mysticism called Kabbalah. But before we leave the classical world it is worth noting that not all of its philosophers believed in any life after death at all. The best example is Lucretius. To this Roman Epicurean poet and philosopher death is forever, and all that one can know for certain is that it is more peaceful than sleep.

Let us return now to the ancient Near East, but this time to the other end of the Fertile Crescent, to Ancient Israel and to its Hebrew Bible. What did the Israelites believe about life after death? The answer is: not very much. To be sure, one statement does recur in the book of Genesis. When a protagonist, for example Isaac, dies, the text informs us that he "was gathered to his kin." (Gen. 35:29). In some sense "family," later to become so important a value in Judaism, continues to bind individuals together, even in death. However, in the early portions of the Bible we will find no Heaven or Hell, no resurrection or judgment, not even a soul in the Greek sense of the concept. What we find instead is a nondescript realm called in Hebrew *Sheol*. All will descend to that subterranean landscape, the good and bad alike, and there they will subsist in an existence of which the biblical text tells us next to nothing, nothing at all about rewards or punishments in a life beyond. In late biblical texts the dead in Sheol are sometimes called *rephaim*--ghostlike shades, beings without any strength of action. One of the Psalms suggests that the dead are completely cut off, both from human life and from access to God:

Deliver me as befits your faithfulness

For there is no praise of You among the dead;

in Sheol, who can acclaim You? (Psalms 6:6)

And yet, even if the inhabitants of Sheol cannot reach God, God, being the Lord of the Universe, can reach the denizens of the deep, as another Psalm assures us:

If I ascend into the skies, You are there;

If I descend to Sheol, You are there too. (Psalms 139:8)

But of course, there are exceptions. Two biblical characters apparently do not end up in Sheol. They are Enoch of whom the Bible says "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, for God took him." (Gen. 5:24). And, more famously and colorfully, of Elijah it is related that as he was walking and talking with his disciple Elisha "a fiery chariot with fiery horses suddenly appeared and separated one from the other; and Elijah went to Heaven in a whirlwind." (II Kings 2:11). According to Jewish tradition, that ascent was not in fact an actual death. Elijah lives on to visit every Jewish home each year at the time of the Passover holiday--somewhat analogously to the undying Santa Claus

In the Pentateuch compensation occurs in this life, not in the hereafter. One need only examine Chapters 27 and 28 of Deuteronomy to learn of all God's curses that will befall the Israelites in this life if they commit any one of a variety of sins and, conversely, the promises of national bliss in return for obedience to God. "All these blessings," says our text, "shall come upon you and take effect, if you will but heed the word of the Lord your God. Blessed shall you be in the city and blessed shall you be in the country. Blessed shall be the issue of your womb, the produce of your soil, and offspring of your cattle, the calving of your herd and the lambing of your flock..." (Deut. 28: 1-4.).

But back to Sheol--one thing we do learn about it. Those that dwell

there can be conjured up if you but have the right technique. The parade example is, of course, when the tragic King Saul, about to lose a major battle to the Philistines, calls upon the witch of Endor to bring the seer Samuel up from the dead that he may prophesy the outcome of the conflict. Of course, the result of this necromantic act--when Saul had himself had prohibited necromancy--only adds to to the unfortunate monarch's despair. On the morrow he and his sons will join Samuel in Sheol.

However, we must remember that the Bible is better described as a set of books than a single consistent volume. And in the later books we can discern a new idea emerging that will be crucial in both Judaism and Christianity, namely resurrection. It seems to appear in the famous vision in the Book of Ezekiel (37:5-13) where "dem bones, dem bones dem dry bones" take on flesh. God promises, in the exilic Prophet's words: "I am going to open your graves and lift you out of the graves, O My people, and bring you to the Land of Israel." (37:12) But Ezekiel seems here rather to be metaphorically describing the renaissance of the Israelite people, than the fate of an individual after physical death.

More crucial to an emerging change in orientation are the late books of Job and Daniel. Job's suffering raises the question that could not forever be hidden away and which reappears many centuries later in the philosophy of Immanuel Kant: Why, in this life, do the wicked prosper and the virtuous suffer? Perhaps an afterlife is required to balance the scale. But Job is at a loss

for any answer beyond his earthly life. Not so Daniel, who may have lived in Maccabean times when the Judeans rebelled against the Syrian decree to adopt pagan worship. In the last chapter of the Book of Daniel, Chapter 12, we have the only clear articulation of personal resurrection. According to the vision of its author, at the end of time the great prince Michael will appear at a period of trouble and then:

Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence. And the knowledgeable will be radiant like the bright expanse of the sky, and those who lead the many to righteousness will be like the stars forever and ever. (12:2-3)

For the first and only time in the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, we have a clear division after death with many of the good receiving immortality, many of the wicked their punishment. In the last verse of the book, Daniel is promised that he shall join the righteous, arising to his destiny at the end of the days. (12:13).

This notion of resurrection would soon assume a variety of forms. It would become crucial for early Christianity and it would divide the parties in ancient Judaism.

The earliest text in the New Testament to deal with resurrection is the fifteenth chapter of First Letter to the Corinthians. There Paul tells us that whereas the

physical body may decay, there is also a spiritual body that is imperishable. At an indeterminate time the trumpet will sound and the dead will be raised free from decay. That victory, Paul asserts, is the gift of Jesus Christ. His resurrection makes possible the resurrection of all who follow him. The Gospels differ from Paul in that for them the resurrection is not of a spiritual body but of a body of flesh and blood. The Evangelists do not speak of an immortality of the soul. And yet, as the Gospel of Mark notes, "...when people arise from the dead, there is no marrying or being married, but they live as angels do in Heaven." (Mark 12:25). It is in this Gospel, generally thought to be the earliest in composition, where we learn that those who oppose Christ will be cast "into the pit, where the worm that feeds upon them never dies and the fire is never put out." (Mark 9:47-48).

The later, non-synoptic Gospel of John adds the idea of postmortem judgment, but only for the wicked: "... [T]hose who have done right will come out to resurrection and life, and those who have done wrong, to resurrection and judgment." (John 4:29). There is as yet no notion of purgatory and there is none of reincarnation; the judgment is final.

But who will pass the judgment day and achieve a future existence in Paradise? The most familiar text in this regard is Matthew 19:24: "It is easier for a camel to get through a needle's eye than for a rich man to get into the Kingdom of God!" (Matthew 19:24). Apparently, poverty helps. As for the wealthy, salvation or damnation is doled out by how they treat a suffering

person like the hungry Lazarus. The final judge, according to Matthew, is Jesus Christ himself, seated upon his "glorious throne." With the angels in attendance and the nations gathered before him, the Son of man will separate the sheep, who were obedient, from the goats who were not, sending each to their appropriate destiny. (Matthew 25:31–46.)

The notions of life after death, which remain scattered throughout the New Testament, are brought into dogmatic form by the Nicene Creed of 325, which looks for "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the World-to-Come." Shortly thereafter, the greatest of the Church Fathers, St. Augustine, introduces the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul but combines it with a resurrection of the body that occurs at the end of time when soul and body will be rejoined in a higher form of existence. In the interval between death and resurrection the soul will enjoy either rest or severe suffering depending on how it had conducted its life in the body before death. In his *The City of God* (xxi:9) Augustine is quite explicit that, for the wicked, the fire and the worm will prey upon both body and soul.

We shall return to Christian notions of the afterlife later, but let us turn now to early Christianity's contemporary, rabbinic Judaism, the form of Judaism at the time of the New Testament and in the centuries thereafter.

With regard to life after death it should first be noted that there was disagreement. The Sadducees denied it altogether. Because it was not

mentioned in the Torah, and perhaps also because they were the wealthy class, they felt no need to believe in compensation in a life beyond. The contemporary Jewish historian Josephus makes it clear when he writes of the Sadducees: "They also take away the belief in the immortal duration of the soul and the punishments and rewards in Hades." (*Wars of the Jews* II:14). Not so the Pharisees. Of them Josephus writes: "They say that all souls are incorruptible, but that the souls of good men only are removed into other bodies,--but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment." As the Pharisees became the ancient Rabbis, guides of the Jewish community, and the Sadducees disappeared with the destruction of the Second Temple, it is the Pharisees' notion of life after death that became characteristic of traditional Judaism. We need to explore it a bit further.

How and where will the resurrection take place? According to one later source, it will occur in the Holy Land at the time of the messianic redemption. How is that possible for those who die elsewhere? Rabbi Simlai had an answer that gained popularity. He said:

"The Holy One, blessed be He, will burrow in the earth and their bodies will roll through the excavation like bottles, and when they arrive at the Land of Israel, their souls will be reunited with them."⁴

In the Talmud, the collective product of the Palestinian and Babylonian rabbis, we find an issue that, as we have seen is taken up in the New

Testament: the issue of who merits entry into Heaven and who does not. This matter is discussed in detail and with bewildering difference of opinion in the talmudic tractate Sanhedrin, Chapter 10. One view holds that "All Israel has a share in the World-to-Come," a world that offers a blissful life after death. But another text indicates that there are also Jews who are excluded: for example, the person who denies resurrection, who rejects the divinity of the Torah or who denies the existence of God. Such Jews are condemned to punishment in Gehenna, though, according to most sources, for no more than a year. What of non-Jews? Here there are various answers but the one most quoted, especially in recent years says: "The righteous of [all] the nations have a share in the World-to-Come." (Tosefta Sanhedrin 13.2)

Not surprisingly, the Rabbis also compared existence in this world with some form of life in the World-to-Come. One rabbi suggests: "Better one hour of bliss in the World-to-Come than the whole of life in this world." But another takes issue and insists: "Better is one hour of repentance and good works in this world than the whole life of the World-to-Come."⁵

By the seventh century a new religion had come onto the scene with its own conceptions of life after death. It was based neither upon an oral revelation nor upon a messianic event but rather upon a book that was intrinsically divine, the Qur'an, where life after death is more explicitly and colorfully described than in either Testament. Here there is reward in the form of resurrection. "God brings

the dead to life," says the Qur'an, "and on the Day of Judgment those who have led away from God will "taste the torment of burning." (Qur'an 22:6–9). The dead will be sentenced to everlasting existence either in Paradise or in Hell. There is no reincarnation. You have only one chance to prove your worthiness through faith in the mission of Muhammed and through acts of charity. In Islam the resurrection is strictly reserved for Muslims, with special consideration given to those who have died as martyrs for the faith. The martyrs need undergo no judgment; they are immediately swept into Paradise. Jews and Christians are to be tolerated in this life, but they do not have a place in the World-to-Come. Neither, it seems, do women. For the portrait of that other world, as has been so often noted, is strictly a paradise for males.

The 37th Sura describes the situation of the fortunate:

Sitting on couches, face to face
 With cups from a flowing stream being passed around,
 Clear, delicious to drink,
 Neither dulling the senses nor intoxicating,
 And with them maidens of modest look and large lustrous eyes,
 Like sheltered eggs in a nest.

Later texts indicate that there are no less than seventy dark-eyed virgins for each man, their virginity--most remarkably--ever reconstituting itself anew.

In Christianity and in Judaism, meanwhile, imaginings regarding the afterlife are also become more colorful. In the Christian world one need only

point to the descriptions of Hell, Purgatory, and Paradise in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In Jewish mystical teaching we now get a positive view of the transmigration of souls. It plays a major role in the Zohar, the principal text of the Kabbalah, and it also finds its place in Hasidism, whose rebbes have no problem claiming to be the reincarnation of a famous ancient rabbi or even of the Prophet Jeremiah.

Such vivid imaginings, however, must not obscure a variant tradition in medieval times that harbors severe doubts about these details. It is the philosophical tradition and it exists in all three religions. In Judaism that tradition is represented most prominently by the philosopher and legal scholar Moses Maimonides who, being a disciple of Aristotle, leaned to immortality of the soul in preference to bodily resurrection, though he could not entirely deny the latter. In Christianity it is Thomas Aquinas, a theologian in some matters influenced by Maimonides, who likewise stresses the immortal soul and finds the ultimate goal of human beings to lie in achieving a perfect knowledge of God. And Islam can boast of the great Islamic medieval philosopher al-Farabi, who denied that the imagery of Paradise or Hell could be taken as anything more than poetry.⁶

By the Renaissance it was possible even to make fun of life after death. Immanuel of Rome, a sort of Jewish Boccaccio, put into the mouth of one of the characters in his Hebrew *Mahberet* the scandalous notion that a lascivious hell could be a lot more fun than a boring heaven.⁷

Moving on to the sixteenth century Reformation we find a more serious focus on how one can best get into Heaven, whether by human faith and God's Grace alone, as Luther would have it, or also by good deeds, as was emphasized by Calvin and by the Catholic Church. Protestant theologians cut loose from Catholicism by utterly rejecting purgatory.

By the eighteenth century intellectualism in both Christianity and Judaism has invaded the afterlife. We find that in the writings of the English minister Isaac Watts, known as "the godfather of British hymnody." In Watts's Heaven, not surprisingly, much time is spent in hymns and prayers. But there are also lectures to improve the mind. As one historian has put it: "Watts's Heaven resembles an eternal academic conference held in a fashionable resort."⁸ And for Samuel Johnson, it will consist in a consciousness of the favor of God, in the contemplation of truth, and in the possession of felicitating ideas. An analogous notion developed in Judaism where Jewish scholars were believed, upon death, to be swept from the academy where they had studied Talmud all their lives to a so-called *yeshivah shel maalah*, a Celestial Academy where they will be able to continue their studies forever.

As we move into our own century we find Liberal Christianity and Liberal Judaism alike stressing immortality of the soul in preference to resurrection of the body. Visions of Hell have increasingly been cast aside and Heaven opened up to good people of whatever religion or race. For many, as one writer put it,

"the afterlife had become an afterthought."⁹

So what, then, do most Americans today believe about what lies beyond? In 2014 the Pew Research Center conducted a Religious Landscape Study and this is what it found: 58 percent of all those questioned said they believed in Hell; 72 percent in Heaven. Among the affiliated religious groups the Muslims were the strongest believers: 76 percent in Hell, 89 percent in Heaven; Christians--of course with differences between Catholics and various Protestant denominations--came in at 70 percent and 85 percent. And Jews were at the bottom with only 22 percent believing in Hell and 40 percent in Heaven.¹⁰

If we are among the believers, we may still ask: What does it take to get into Heaven. A hasidic story gives a unique answer. It is told of a simple Jew named Zusya, who had died and gone to stand before the judgment seat of God. As he waited for God to appear, he grew nervous thinking about his life and how little he had done. He began to imagine that God was going to ask him. "Why weren't you as faithful as Moses or why weren't you as wise as Solomon, or as melodious a singer of Psalms as King David?" But when God finally appeared, Zusya was surprised. God simply asked: Why weren't you Zusya?"

I am far from having exhausted a complex and multifarious topic, but my time is up and I will end with mention of a sort of afterlife that is common to all three of the monotheistic religions and, indeed, beyond them to all humanity: It

goes like this: Our dead, whatever their fate may be after death, live on the acts of goodness they performed and in the hearts of those who cherish their memory.

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Notes

¹ Cited in Segal, 56

² Homer, *Odyssey* 4:61–63. Cited in Almond, 12.

³ Plato, *Apology* 28D.

⁴ Cited in Segal, 628.

⁵ Cited in Segal, 623.

⁶ Cited in Moreman, 85.

⁷ See Cecil Roth, *The Jews in the Renaissance* ((Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1959), 94.

⁸ Almond, 158.

⁹ Almond, 180.

¹⁰ More detailed information is available on the web.