

Section 8 – The Proliferation of Deity

Heaven and Hell

Those of us brought up in cultural traditions shaped by the Abrahamic cults of monotheism are used to the idea of an afterlife in Heaven. We are allowed entry if we are good and obey the code central to the religion here on Earth. In other words, Heaven is a promised place of reward, after death, for our behaviour in life.¹

Since the time of the Natufians, through the Sumerians and all the other ancient cultures of the near east, and for the Greeks and many others, the afterlife, both for humans and deities, was through the Underworld. This was regarded as a temporary resting-place before the soul was reincarnated.

The Sumerian deities lived in Heaven, an invisible realm which was contiguous with the real world. This realm was restricted to the deities; humans could not enter it. Human life was spent in the World, and while Heaven was very close, it was inaccessible to us. When goddesses and gods died, they left this spiritual plane, just as humans leave the physical plane, and entered the Underworld.

Sumerian mythology proposed no reward after death for anything one might do in life. Its focus was on behaving well according to the expectations of the culture and society, and being rewarded while one was still alive. The desired behaviours were to work hard and have many children. The ultimate reward, in this cultural view, was to be surrounded by a large and loving family. For your efforts in raising them well, your children would take care of you and shower you with love. They would work to keep you when you become old and even after you died, they would pray for you so that your discomfort in the Underworld would be minimised.² Their prayers after your death were not to secure for you a place in Heaven, but to ameliorate the grim time in the cold, dank Underworld.

The Egyptian understanding is not cyclical, but linear. One life on Earth is offered, and how we behave in it will determine how we spend eternity. But if we cannot rise again, and there is only the

¹ This idea of reward after death did not appear until much later in Mesopotamia, but was more fully developed in Egyptian culture from early on.

² This can still be seen in many Asian cultures, where children are expected to ‘repay the mother’s milk’ or in other words, to support their parents.

horror of the Underworld, where is the incentive to live a good life? Clearly this was not satisfactory. So the Egyptian myth-makers invented a solution: a paradise to which the souls of those who had been good in life would pass after death.

The Egyptians called this place the Fields of Aaru or the Fields of Reeds and it was ruled by Osiris. By living a good life and learning the answers to certain questions which would be asked after death, by certain funerary rites including mummification and embalming, but most of all by having commissioned a Book of the Dead, one might pass all the tests and arrive in the Fields of Aaru. There one would spend eternity in grace, in the company of the good god Osiris.

In the Goddess cultures, where life was essentially egalitarian and the joys and pleasures of life were celebrated, simply returning to life on earth was reward enough. And there was always the opportunity to do even better if one tried harder next time. To an Egyptian, as well as to all the followers of the later Abrahamic cults, this was simply not available. There was no reincarnation into the world of the living; no chance to try again, to do better. Mortal life was just a passing preliminary phase in which one established whether one would pass an eternity of suffering or joy.

The idea of Heaven as a wonderful paradise where obedient humans might go is an invention of the patriarchal death cults; indeed it is central to their reward system. In more developed versions of these cults, it is paired with an opposite, which we call Hell.

Hell is not the same as the Underworld; it is a perversion of the idea. Grim and forbidding though it may be, the Underworld is not a place of punishment, while Hell has no other function. Hell is designed specifically to intimidate the living, so its horrors are grotesque.

In the patriarchal death-cults, life became a one-way street: birth from oblivion, a life of struggle and work, and then death.³ Only in the death-cults do we see 'terrifying linearity' at the core of the entire tradition. There is one life, and failure to pass the tests will result in suffering an eternity of torture and misery. On the other hand, conforming to the rules laid down by the culture will be rewarded with everlasting bliss.

For this idea to have any persuasive power, the relative positions and qualities of Heaven and the World had to be changed. Heaven became accessible to humans, albeit only after their deaths. Mortal life was represented as a 'vale of tears', and Heaven divorced from it and made fabulous in the scale of its rewards.

³ Although Catholicism is one of the death-cults, it retains much of birth-oriented, Goddess culture. Here we see a phenomenon called Purgatory, which means 'the place of cleansing'. It is much more like the earlier understanding of the Underworld, from which it was probably adopted. Purgatory, like the Underworld in Goddess culture, is a place of temporary, not permanent, residence.

The patriarchal death-cults proscribed all earthly pleasures as sinful. They denied them to people whilst they were alive, while promising delivery after death, but only to those who did as they were told. For those who did not obey, they promised an eternity of torture, often preceded by a horrific death. Every act in life would be judged. This became the most effective form of social manipulation humanity has ever invented.