

Death and the Afterlife in Homer

Death and what happens after death are universal concerns for humanity; around the world different cultures and religions contemplate our existence, and try to make sense of both our place in the world and our deaths. Although we no longer (for the most part) follow the religious beliefs of the ancient Greeks and Romans, their exploration of mortality and the afterlife can nonetheless be emotionally powerful and meaningful for us. In what follows, we will consider the presentation of death and the afterlife in some of the earliest Greek literature, Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

The most common name for the underworld was Hades, a personified god and brother of Zeus, but also a place to which the souls of departed mortals go. Hades is in fact far more commonly mentioned as the underworld than as a personified god in Greek literature, although we do see him as an actual character in some myths, most famously in the story of the abduction of Persephone by Hades, a tale told in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*. In post-classical times, the term Hades was adopted by Christian authors, including the early Church Fathers, Dante and Milton, to refer to the Christian concept of Hell. The term used is the same, but it is important to distinguish between the Christian conception of Hell and Hades. For Christians, Hell is a place to which the souls of the wicked descend after death, whereas the souls of the good are taken to Heaven to be with God. The ancient Greek concept is extremely different.

We cannot understand the gods of the Greek pantheon as moral beings in the same way that many monotheistic religions consider God to be a moral power. A similar principle is true of the early Greek conception of the underworld; in Homer it is not just the souls of the wicked who descend to Hades after death, but rather the souls of all mortal men, good or bad. The *Odyssey* does present a better afterlife for Menelaus and Helen, who are taken to Elysium, a happy place more like Olympus, by virtue of their relationship to Zeus. In another early myth too, heroes did achieve a divine status apart from the gods and were considered to be in an intermediary position between the gods and mortals; Hesiod describes a special existence for heroes in his myth of the five generations of men. For the most part, however, in Homer men and women from the most heroic to the least distinguished are to be found in Hades after their life has come to an end. In contrast, the heavens are where the gods live, and only the most select of mortals are able to gain a place in heaven, in which case they are divinized, made immortal, rather than dead; Heracles is an example of a great hero, the semi-divine son of Zeus, who is actually made an immortal god. Other heroes, however, such as Achilles, must die and descend to Hades.

Yet while most mortals descend to the underworld after death in Homer, to say that the underworld is a place for all humankind, regardless of what one has done in his or her life, is to simplify a complex concept. Much later than Homer, in the account of Hades by the Roman poet Vergil, there is a clear idea that different fates await those who descend to the afterlife in Hades. The very depths of the underworld, known as Tartarus, could be considered a parallel to our Hell, where those who displeased the gods were sentenced to some terrible punishments, some of which we will look at below. Conversely, those people who distinguished themselves in the eyes of the gods existed in a part of the underworld known as Elysium, an equivalent to our Heaven. It is here that Vergil pictures heroes and the great men of Greece and Rome after they die.

But let us return to look at the earliest extended account of the underworld, which is found in book 11 of the *Odyssey* of Homer, written in the 8th or 7th centuries B.C. This myth is told as part of the return of Odysseus from Troy; he is shipwrecked and driven off course, and it takes him 10 years to find his way home to his wife Penelope. On the way he lives through many adventures, one of which is a trip to the underworld, where he is instructed to go by the witch Circe in order to consult the Theban seer Tiresias. Odysseus and his companions sail to the ends of the earth, where Odysseus makes contact with the dead. The description of Odysseus' first encounter with the dead is terrifying – the ghosts of his former friends wail and move around him. With the exception of Tiresias, the seer who will give Odysseus important information about his voyage home, the souls of the dead are lacking in consciousness and are unable to speak to Odysseus until they have tasted blood. The underworld will become a happier place in latter accounts, but in the *Odyssey* it is a gloomy place which is best avoided. However, as the *Odyssey* makes clear, it is not possible to avoid it; the all encompassing and democratic nature of death is underlined.

Proper burial is an issue in the Greek world, and all individuals should receive a proper burial. When Patroclus dies in the *Iliad* there is a long description of his funeral. In the *Odyssey*, Odysseus encounters in the underworld his comrade Elpenor, who, not having received a proper burial, begs Odysseus to return and bury his body. While there is not a clear sense that Elpenor is not fully accepted into the underworld because he has not been buried (an idea found in later literature), his soul is not at rest until this has been done.

Even for those who have a better lot in death, it is made clear in Homer's conception of the underworld that life is in every way preferable to death. Odysseus encounters his mother and other of his friends from Troy in the underworld. Perhaps his most famous encounter, however, is with the great hero Achilles, the semi-divine man who brought about the destruction of Troy but was fated to die doing so. Odysseus speaks to him and suggests that Achilles should not grieve at

death because, as a great man, he is distinguished amongst the dead. Achilles replies that he would rather work on earth as a poor farmer than rule amongst the dead! Death, then, is not something which is pleasant in the Homeric conception.

Odysseus goes on to encounter several individuals who suffer particularly harsh punishments in the underworld – their fate is more similar to Christian conceptions of hell, and have fascinated generations of readers. One of those being punished is Tantalus, whom Odysseus describes to have an unending torture. Tantalus stands forever thirsty in a pool of water and hunger under succulent fruit trees; whenever he reaches for either, it recedes. This is a horrendous punishment, which was given to Tantalus for transgressing against the gods. He was a great king amidst the first generations of mankind, who was allowed to dine with the gods. In ancient Greek myths he is said variously to tell humans what the gods discussed at such dinners, to steal the divine food of the gods, or test the gods by killing and cooking his son Pelops to see whether they would detect the food (Demeter is supposed to have eaten a piece of shoulder from the stew). As punishment he is forever ‘tantalized’. Odysseus also sees Sisyphus, who receives another great punishment from the gods after his death. He is fated to push a great boulder up a hill for eternity, only to have it fall back down again and again. Like Tantalus, Sisyphus receives this punishment because he sinned against the gods. He was said to have angered Zeus by telling the river-god Asopus that he had carried off his daughter Aegina, and Zeus sent Death (Thanatos) to get him. Sisyphus trapped Death in chains, during which time no humans died – until Ares, the god of war, freed death and he took his revenge on Sisyphus. He sinned against Zeus, and is therefore punished in the underworld. These particular punishments are reserved for those who offend the gods.

The Homeric conception of death is not a reassuring one, but it underlines the importance of life and distinguishing oneself while still on the earth. Achilles tells Odysseus that he would prefer to be a poor labourer on earth than to rule amongst the dead, but his heroic deeds he performed in the Trojan war, the penalty of which was his death, ensure his immortal fame.