INVENTING
THE AFTERLIFE

Even though their existence is no longer universally accepted, heaven and hell are still very much alive in Western civilisation. Priests and ministers often refer to them (if, admittedly, less to hell), literature uses them as metaphors, and the cinema even occasionally tries to represent them. Our ideas about the afterlife are part of the legacy of Christianity. As the first Christians were Jews, who lived in an area, Palestine, which at the time of Jesus was already heavily influenced by Greek culture,1 we might have expected that both Greece and Israel – or at least one of them – always had fully developed ideas about the soul and the afterlife. Yet nothing could be further from the truth. Heaven, hell and the immortal soul were all relative latecomers in the ancient world. Where, then, did these concepts come from and why did they develop? It is these questions which have stimulated me to write this study. Naturally, a book based on a series of lectures can only be selective. That is why I will start with a short, panoramic survey of the development of the soul (section 1) and afterlife (section 2) among the Greeks and Jews (section 3) of the pre-Christian era. This survey will provide the reader with the necessary background against which the succeeding chapters (section 4) have to be seen.

1. Greek concepts of the soul

In the twentieth century the Western world has seen a meteoric rise of the sciences of psychiatry and psychology: clearly, we all want to care for our psychê, 'soul', in this world.2 However, an early Greek would not have understood this usage of psychê, since in the poems of Homer, the Iliad and the Odyssey, there is not one seat of a person's psychological attributes, but an enormously varied vocabulary.3 The most important word for the seat of emotions, such as friendship, anger, joy and grief, as well as emotion itself, is thymos,4 but there is also meno,5 'fury', noos, 'the act of the mind',6 and the words for kidney, heart,7 lungs, liver and gallbladder, although all these words are often used in a semantically indistinguishable and redundant way.8

Unlike these terms, the psychê is never mentioned when its owner functions normally.9 This happens only at times of crisis. For instance, when the embassy of the Greek army beseeches Achilles to suppress his anger and resume
fighting, he complains that he has been continually risking his psyche (IX.322). And when a spear was pulled from the thigh of Sarpedon, one of the allies of the Trojans, ‘his psyche left him and a mist came upon his eyes’ (V.696). In these, as in all other cases, the psyche is responsible for the maintenance of a person’s life, but its relative lack of importance is confirmed by the obscurity of its location. We only know for sure that it flew away from the limbs (XVI.856, XXII.362), through the mouth (IX.409), the chest (XVI.505) or through a wound in the flank (XIV.518).

It is the great merit of Scandinavian anthropologists in particular to have collected large amounts of data to show that most ‘primitive’ peoples have thought that man has two kinds of souls. On the one hand, there is what these scholars call the free-soul, a soul which represents the individual personality. This soul is inactive when the body is active; it manifests itself only during swoons, dreams or at death (the experiences of the ‘I’ during the swoons or dreams are ascribed to this soul), but it has no clear connections with the physical or psychological aspects of the body.” On the other hand, there are a number of body-souls, which endow the body with life and consciousness, but of which none stands for the part of a person that survives after death.”

The Homeric concept of the soul of the living is clearly closely related to this ‘primitive’, dualistic concept of the soul. Here too we find on the one hand the psyche, a kind of free-soul, and on the other the body souls, thymos, noos and menos, as well as the more physical organs, such as phrenes, ‘lungs’, and ètor, ‘heart’. The free-soul was often associated with the breath, and this seems to have happened in Greece as well, since psyche is etymologically connected with psychein, ‘to blow or to breathe’. The connection was already made by Anaximenes (ca. 550–500 BC), who seems to have stated that the psyche held our body together and controlled it just as the wind controls the earth (B 2 DK). He was followed by other philosophers,” and the same connection still occurs as a figura etymologica in an Orphic Gold Leaf (Ch. 2.2) found in 1974: ‘(the Underworld), where the psychai of the dead psychontai, ”breathe.”

In post-Homeric times the psyche no longer leaves the body of a living person, but otherwise its meaning gradually expands at the end of the Archaic Age. Hipponax now can say: ‘I will give my much-enduring psyche to evils’, a passage where psyche seems to come very close to our meaning of ‘self. Somewhat differently, in a famous poem the more or less contemporaneous Anacreon says of a ‘boy with virgin glance’ that lie is ‘the charioteer of my psyche” (fr. 360 Page), where the psyche presumably is the seat of his emotional feelings.” This development of the soul was taken up by Pythagoras when he ‘invented’ reincarnation and thus, by stressing the importance of the return of the soul, revalued the psyche in a remarkable way (Ch. 2.1). Pindar continued both these developments. On the one hand, he brings psyche in a sense close to ‘character’, when he describes men as having ‘psychai superior to possessions’ (Nem. 9.32) and, on the other, he made the soul even more important by calling it now ‘from the gods’ (fr. 129 Maehler).
In the later tragedians the *psychē* has become the seat of all kinds of emotions and seems completely to have incorporated the *thymos*. The psychē now sighs, suffers pangs of emotion and melts in despair. It can even become 'tied to bed' (*Eur. Hipp.* 160) or 'joined to a thiasos' (*Eur. Bacch.* 75–6). This development of the *psychē* as the centre of man's inner life culminated in Socrates' view that a man's most important task was 'to care for his *psychē*'. At the same time, the incorporation of the *thymos* into the *psychē* probably led Plato to his theory of a tripartite soul. However, not all Greeks accepted the soul–body dualism, as Plato and Aristotle now articulated it in their varying ways. Important philosophical schools, such as the Epicureans and Stoics, or influential physicians, such as Herophilus and Erasistratus, continued to believe that the psychē does not exist independently from its body.

Through the *Septuagint*, which was gradually composed in Alexandria in the third century BC (Appendix 2.4), psychē entered the vocabulary of the Greek-speaking Jewish community and subsequently that of the early Christians. As the Old Testament did not yet know the Greek opposition of soul and body (section 3), it would take a while before the early Christians started to use psychē in such a way. For example, in the apostle Paul we rarely find psychē and never in respect to the afterlife. He sometimes uses Jewish-sounding combinations like 'every psychē' (Romans 13.1); more 'normally', he uses psychē as the seat of emotions in his Letter to Philippians (1.27). It is only after the growing influence of philosophically trained Greek theologians, such as Clement of Alexandria and Origen, that the Platonic opposition was gradually taken over by the Christian community (Ch. 5.2). And in due time, the Greek concept of the soul would influence the ancient Germanic world via the Latin translations of the Bible and thus, eventually, be responsible for the content of our modern term 'soul', which derives from Germanic *saizualo*.

Unlike the soul of the living, ideas about the soul of the dead have received much less systematic attention from scholars. Not surprisingly, anthropological studies have looked at those elements of the soul of the living that survive as a soul of the dead. To give one example, the word for the free-soul among the Siberian Mordvins is *ört*. Since the soul of the dead is also called *ört*, the conclusion can be drawn that among the Mordvins the idea of the soul of the dead was derived from the free-soul of the living, and this is indeed the case among most peoples. In Greece we would therefore expect that it was the psychē that survived, and that is exactly what we find. The dead Patroclus is represented by his *psychē*, who 'resembles him in every respect' (XXIII.65). Sometimes psychē is connected with *eidōlon*, 'image', as in the case of Patroclus, whose psychē 'was wondrous like him' (XXIII.104–7). The psychē of the Homeric dead has even kept some emotional faculties, since Ajax's psychē stands 'angrily' aside and others are 'grieving' (Od. 11.541–3).

Yet, such *psychai* are exceptions to the rule and typical of literature where individual dead have to have some mental faculties in order to come on stage. In other passages we hear that the psychē of the dead cannot be touched
(XXIII.100), that it lacks the *phrenes* (XXIII.104) and that only the seer Teiresias possesses a *noeis*; the others are mere 'shadows' (11.493–5). The dead are 'the worn-out' (11.476) or 'the feeble heads of the dead' (10.521, 11.29). What is striking here is the plural: the dead were clearly considered to be an enormous, undifferentiated group, as is also illustrated by a fragment of Sophocles, where the dead are compared to a swarm of bees: 'Up [from the underworld] comes the swarm of the souls, loudly humming.' With so many visitors, it is not hard to understand that Aeschylus calls the Lord of the Underworld 'the most hospitable Zeus of the dead.'"

This meaning of *psyche* as 'soul of the dead' will remain present all through antiquity, although it is relatively rare in lyric and elegiac poets and in tragedy. Yet the revaluation of the *psyche* of the living also affected the ways the dead were seen," and in the fifth century the dead are said to be *apsychoi*, 'without a *psyche*'; dead Achilles can be called a 'corpse without a *psyche*', and, in a parody of this usage, Aristophanes even speaks of a *psyche apsychos*, 'a soul-less soul'." The usage of *psyche* as soul of the dead was also taken over by the Jews and Christians. The best early example is undoubtedly in *Revelations* (20.4), where in one of his visions the author sees 'the *psychai* of those who were beheaded' in heaven.

2. Greek ideas of the afterlife

Now if the *psyche* changed in character over the ages, can we observe the same regarding life after death? In the Iliad a soul of the dead goes straight to the underworld," whose gates are guarded by canine Cerberus (*Il. V.646*). It is situated under the world, but also in the west—perhaps a sign of a conflation of different ideas about the underworld. The soul can reach this 'mirthless place' (11.91; Hes. *Op. 152–5*) only by crossing a river, the Styx, a crossing for which no help is required (XXIII.70–101; 11.51–4), but which cannot be done without a proper burial. The picture of the underworld is bleak and sombre, and dead Achilles understandably says: 'do not try to make light of death to me; I would sooner be bound to the soil in the hire of another man, a man without lot and without much to live on, than be ruler over all the perished dead' (11.489–91).

The underworld is called Hades," which the most recent analyses appropriately connect with a root *a-wid-*, 'invisible, unseen', whereas its deepest region was called Tartarus." The place gave its name to the homonymous ruler of the underworld, who was a shadowy god in Greece with few myths and fewer cults: he does not even occur with certainty on archaic vases. Homer (XV.187–93) mentions that he acquired the underworld through a lottery with his brothers Zeus and Poseidon. The passage is one more example of the increasingly recognised Oriental influence on Homer, since it ultimately derives from the Akkadian epic *Atrahasis*. Hades' connection with the underworld made him 'horrible' (VIII.368) and 'the most hated of all the
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gods' (IX.158), although only post-Homeric times depict him as a judge of the dead (Ch. 7.1). Fear made people euphemistically refer to him as, for example, 'Zeus of the Undervorld' (IX.457), 'the chthonian god' (Aesch. Pers. 629) or 'the god below' (Soph. Ajax 571). He was even death personified.42

Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood has related this negative idea of the afterlife to a more general attitude towards death.43 She started from Philippe Aries' splendid L'Homme devant la mort, which daringly surveys the development of the attitudes towards death from the Middle Ages until modern times.44 According to Aries, there is in Western Europe a development of an attitude that goes from accepting death, via fearing death, to finally concealing death. At the same time, we see a corresponding change of interest in the afterlife: from relative unimportance, it becomes the overwhelming focus of interest, whereas nowadays belief in it is gradually disappearing.45

Do we not find something like a similar development in early Greece? There can be little doubt that early Greece comes very close to the first period sketched by Aries, the 'Tamed or Domesticated Death', in which death is accepted as a natural phenomenon. The disguised goddess Athena tells Odysseus' son Telemachus: 'death is common to all men, and not even the gods can keep it off a man they love, when the portion of death which brings long woe destroys him' (3.236–8). In contemporary mythology, personified death (Thanatos) is the brother of personified Sleep (Hypnos)." This appears to be another way to express the feeling that death is something natural and, once it has come, unthreatening. Death, then, is unavoidable and even the children of the gods, even mighty Heracles, die and go to Hades.

Already in later parts of the Odyssey, indications of a change in this picture become visible. For the first time, we now hear of a special abode for a happy few. In Book 4 of the Odyssey Proteus relates to Menelaos that he will not die, but the gods will send him 'to the Elysian Plain at the ends of the earth', an area with an attractive, always moderate climate (563–7). The name of Elysion is pre-Greek, and we therefore cannot know to what extent the poet used older representations.46 In any case, in the somewhat later Hesiodic Works and Days we hear of the Islands of the Blessed,47 to which many heroes will come at the end of their lives on earth (167–73). This changing conception is also seen in Books 11 and 24 of the Odyssey where Hermes appears as a guide. It is only in the epic Minyas that we hear of a ferryman of the dead, Charon – naturally an old man, since the glory of youth would not fit the gloomy underworld.48 His late arrival in Greece is confirmed by the fact that the custom of burying a deceased with an obol, a small coin, for Charon becomes visible only in the fifth century.49 Guides suggest a difficult route. In other words, the appearance of these figures implies that the world of the dead was mentally dissociated from the living: death had apparently become less natural, less easy to tolerate. At the same time, a guide is also someone who knows the way: the need for a reassuring, knowing person is therefore also a sign of a growing anxiety about one's own fate after death.
This uncertainty is reflected in a growing interest in the area of the dead, as illustrated by the accounts of a descent into the underworld. The myths of Heracles and Theseus in Hades, whose descent had first only stressed their bravery, increasingly provided details about the underworld. The gradual 'upgrading' of the underworld becomes visible in different ways and in different milieus in our texts. At the Eleusinian mysteries there had long since been a promise of a better life in the hereafter, though without detail, as is illustrated by Sophocles' words: 'Thrice blessed are those mortals who have seen these rites and thus enter Hades: for them alone there is life, for the others all is misery' (F 837 Radt).53 In Pythagorean and Orphic circles (Ch. 2), however, the idea arose of a 'symposium of the pure' (Pl. Rep. 2.363c). This is already visible in the Sicilian Empedocles, one of the early Greek intellectuals and 'miracle-men' (however curious this combination may seem to us), who states that having completed its reincarnations the soul will become a table-companion of the gods (B 147 DK). The idea ultimately goes back to the mythological tradition that important mortals shared the table of the gods, but we do not know whether Empedocles derived the idea from the Orphics or the Pythagoreans, since both movements shared the idea, which would remain popular well into the Hellenistic period.55 At the same time, the Orphics developed the idea of a kind of hell, where sinners had to wallow in the mud (Ch. 2.2). It is in the fifth century, then, in Orphic–Pythagorean milieus that the contours of the later Christian distinction between heaven and hell first become visible.

There is another idea which cannot be traced to a precise milieu. In the later fifth century Hades had already received the name Plouton, 'the rich one', which was related to the Eleusinian cult figure Ploutos. He now not only became the god who sent up 'good things' to the mortals from below, but was also believed to be a 'good and prudent god'. The connection between the underworld and material wealth is also expressed by the names used to denote the dead. Whereas in Homer, as we saw, the dead were preferably called the 'feeble heads of the dead', we now find terms such as albioi, endaimones or makarioi, 'blessed'. However, unlike our modern 'blessed', the Greeks interpreted these words in a strictly materialistic sense: the dead were people blessed with material goods and better off than the living."

In the later fifth century these ideas about the 'good life' in the underworld were also exploited by Athenian comedy. Pherekrates has given a graphic description of the wealth that was awaiting the dead in the beyond in his Metalleis (I quote an excerpt):

All things in the world yonder were mixed with wealth and fashioned with every blessing in every way. Rivers full of porridge and black broth flowed babbling through the channels spoons and all, and lumps of cheese-cake too. Hence the morsel could slip easily and oilily of its own accord down the throats of the dead. Blood-puddings
there were, and hot slices of sausage lay scattered by the river banks just like shells. Yes and there were roasted fillets nicely dressed with all sorts of spiced sauces. Close at hand, too, on platters, were whole hams with shin and all, most tender... Roast thrushes... flew round our mouths entreating us to swallow them as we lay stretched among the myrtles and anemones. And the apples!... Girls in silk shawls, just reaching the flower of youth, and shorn of the hair on their bodies, drew through a funnel full cups of red wine with fine bouquet for all who wished to drink. And whenever one had eaten or drunk of these things, straightaway there came forth once more twice as much again.

(F 113 K.-A., tr. C.B. Gulick, Loeb)

The stress on food is of course a reflection of the precarious food situation which would dominate the Western world until the twentieth century, and we cannot fail to see that Pherekrates' picture is closely related to those medieval ones of the Schlaraffenland or the Land of Cockaigne."

Others took a completely different direction and rejected a subterranean afterlife altogether; inspired by Pythagoreanism, they preferred a celestial immortality."

This idea becomes first visible ca. 432 BC when on an official war monument the souls of fallen Athenians are said to have been received by the aithēr, 'the upper air', but their bodies by the earth (IG I1 1179.6–7). Euripides picked it up and first seems to have applied it to deified mortals (Erechtheus, IV.71–2 Diggle) and war heroes (Suppl. 533–4), but he later allowed the aithēr also to ordinary mortals (Hel. 1013–6; Or. 1086–7), after which, in various variations, we find the idea on private gravestones well into later antiquity, even in Jewish and Christian contexts.62

Given all these new developments, it can hardly be a surprise that the fifth-century public was very interested in the nature of the underworld. This interest is well illustrated by the references in tragedy and comedy to its goings on (above), its geography and its most famous inhabitants."

Yet, despite the arrival of all these new ideas, the old conceptions did not die."

On the contrary, tragedy and Plato show that on the whole the Athenian public did not firmly believe in rewards or punishments after death.""

In fact, they do not seem to have expected very much at all. 'After death every man is earth and shadow: nothing goes to nothing', states a character in Euripides' Meleagros (fr. 532 Nauck).""

It is always hazardous to extrapolate from a literary genre to collective representations,"" but we can confidently state that in tragedy Orphic and Pythagorean views of the underworld are conspicuously absent. In Plato's Phaedo Simmias even claims that it is the fear of the majority that their soul is scattered at death 'and this is their end' (77b). Most Athenians may therefore have agreed with the statement in Euripides' Hypsipyle that: 'One buries children, one gains new children, one dies oneself. Mortals do take this heavily, carrying earth to earth. But it is necessary to harvest life like a fruit-
bearing ear of corn, and that the one be, the other not' (234–8 Diggle). It is this attitude which predominantly survived among the Greeks into the Byzantine period – even among the Christians. 68

3. Soul and underworld in the Old Testament

Let us now turn to the world of ancient Israel. We are much less informed about Israelite ideas concerning the soul and the underworld than about Greek views, since our only source is the Old Testament. Moreover, the tests of those books of the Old Testament which describe the earliest period of the Israelites have been revised at a relatively late stage in Israel's history, probably after the Babylonian exile. in the so-called Deuteronomist revision. 79 Consequently, studies of Israelite concepts customarily limit themselves to a synchronic description for the time covered by the Old Testament. It is only in the intertestamentary, Hellenistic period that we start to find Greek influence.

There is in ancient Hebrew no term equivalent to our 'soul'. From the various words which together correspond to our notion of the soul, the most important one is nepeš, 80 which seems to have combined the functions of the thymos and psyche of the living. It is probably connected with a root meaning 'breath' (Exodus 23.12, 31.17; 2 Samuel 16.14) and can often be translated 'life' or 'life-force'. For example, when Rachel was dying, her nepeš left her (Genesis 35.18) and when the prophet Elijah resurrected the son of a widow, he prayed for the return of his nepeš (1 Kings 17.21–2). At the same time, the term can also signify the seat of emotions, such as the inclination to evil (Proverbs 21.10) or the desire for God (Psalm 42.2). Unlike psyche, though, it never means the soul of the dead and is not contrasted with the body. Israelite anthropology was strictly unitarian and remained so until the first century AD, when the Greek belief in an immortal soul started to gain ground in Palestine and the Diaspora. It cannot be chance that we find the first examples of this development among those Jews, who had been thoroughly influenced by Hellenistic culture, such as Josephus (Bell. Jud. 2.154–65. Ant. 18.14–8) and Philo (De mundi opificio 135).

In historical times the hereafter is called Sheol, which in the Septuagint normally is translated 'Hades', 81 but in the oldest Israelite ideas the grave must have played an important role, since 'to go down into the grave' (Psalm 16.10, 28.1 etc.) is equivalent to 'to go down into Sheol' (Genesis 37.35, 42.38, etc.). 82 Sheol was located beneath the earth (Psalm 63.10), filled with worms and dust (Isaiah 14.11, 26.19) and impossible to escape from (Job 7.9f). Its shadow-like (Isaiah 14.9) inhabitants no longer thought of the living (Job 21.21) or even of God himself (Psalm 88.13). Good and bad – Sheol received them all (Psalm 89.49). 83

It was only in the post-exilic period that new ideas came to the fore. Good and bad now started to be thought living in different compartments of Sheol (1 Enoch 22). As the earliest strata of the Book of Enoch must go back to the third
century BC, it is attractive to connect this development with Jewish presence in Alexandria, where early second-century Jewish historians already made Orpheus a witness to the truth of the Mosaic law (Artapanus FGrH 726 F 3), and adapted Orphic literature in the so-called Testament of Orpheus. Moreover, in the second century BC Sheol started to be complemented by Gehenna. This valley south of Jerusalem, where tradition located the sacrifice of children to Moloch during the time of the kings, now first became thought of as the place where punishments would be dealt out after the Last Judgement, but soon became the name for the fiery hell destined for the impious straight after their death and after the Last Judgement.

However, as in Greece, old and new continued to co-exist. Josephus relates that the Pharisees located the souls of the righteous and the unjust in the underworld (Bell. Jud. 2.163, Ant. 18.14), but mentions that he himself, despite being a Pharisee, believed that only the souls of the bad went to Hades, whereas the souls of the righteous remained in heaven until the final resurrection (Bell. Jud. 3.375). In fact, Jewish inscriptions and literature show that old ideas about the lack of a real afterlife would still have a long and persistent life (Ch. 3.2).

4. Plan of the book

Having seen that the soul and the underworld have their history too, I will now deal in detail with several particular problems and developments. First, I will discuss the rise of the immortal soul in Greece, which took place in the milieu of two closely related movements at the margin of the Greek city, Pythagoreanism and Orphism. Considering the importance of these milieus for the development of the Western concept of the soul, some attention will be paid as well to their lifestyle, religious ideas and social composition. In the case of Orphism, especially, the years since 1970 have provided a stream of new discoveries which enable us to sketch a much more detailed picture of this movement than previous generations could (Ch. 2). Accounts of journeys of the soul, however, were already ascribed to 'miracle-workers' from the Archaic Age and we will have to discuss these accounts as well in order to refine our picture of the rise of the immortal soul in ancient Greece (Ch. 3).

After Greece, we turn to the early Christians. The most striking innovation in the eyes of pagans undoubtedly was the belief in the resurrection. The Christians owed this belief to the Jews, but from whom did the Jews in turn derive their ideas? Did they borrow them from the Persians? And did pagans, perhaps, later borrow the idea from the Christians? The possibility of exchanging religious ideas has often been neglected, but will be of particular interest here (Ch. 4). How did the early Christians construct their representations of the afterlife? Did they exploit the current Jewish and Greco-Roman pool of ideas about life after death or did they develop new ones inspired by their own tradition? We will follow these developments in Western
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Christianity until the birth of Purgatory, the last great addition to normative Christian afterlife (Ch. 5). After the Renaissance belief in the hereafter started to decline, although sometimes vigorous efforts were made to reverse this development. We can not chronicle the whole of this history, but must limit ourselves to a brief discussion of spiritualism, the penultimate great 'invention' regarding the afterlife, which we will contrast with ancient necromancy (Ch. 6). We conclude our survey with some reflections on the logical conclusion to this development: the vision of an afterlife without any religious component in the modern so-called near-death experiences, which we will compare with similar accounts from antiquity and the Middle Ages (Ch. 7).

We add three appendices. Given the attention we have paid to the early Christians, we first ask why they actually started to call themselves 'Christians' (Appendix 1). We continue with the birth of the term 'paradise', a term which started to be used for the place of the afterlife in the intertestamentary period (Appendix 2). Finally, we discuss a recently discovered late antique vision of God's palace in heaven as a military court (Appendix 3). After all, although we mainly study collective representations, we should never forget that precisely in this field people can also have their very own idiosyncratic ideas.