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Paradise Lost. The Image of the Netherworld in the Near East

ABSTRACT

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Τα σωζόμενα κείμενα της Εποχής του Χαλκού στην Εγγύς Ανατολή μας επιτρέπουν να σχηματίσουμε μία αρκετά πλήρη εικόνα για τις δοξασίες σχετικά με τον Κάτω Κόσμο. Στην ευρύτερη Μεσοποταμία ήταν διαδεδομένη η πεποίθηση ότι η εκούσια ή ακούσια αποτέφρωση ενός θνητού εμπόδιζε την είσοδο της ψυχής του στον Κάτω Κόσμο. Αντιθέτως οι Χετταίοι υιοθέτησαν μεν σε μεγάλο βαθμό τις μεσοποταμιακές δοξασίες σχετικά με τη γεωγραφία του Κάτω Κόσμου, τη μεταθανάτια μοίρα των ψυχών και τις σχέσεις τους με τον επίγειο κόσμο, όχι όμως και την απαγόρευση της καύσης των νεκρών, προφανώς λόγω χουρριτικής επίδρασης. Τα πράγματα περιπλέκονται ακόμη περισσότερο στην περίπτωση του Αιγαίου της ΠΕΣ. Η εικόνα του Κάτω Κόσμου, όπως τουλάχιστον παρουσιάζεται στα έπη, είναι σαφώς επηρεασμένη από τις μεσοποταμιακές δοξασίες. Επίσης η τελετουργική καύση επιφανών νεκρών (όπως περιγράφεται στον Όμηρο και προκύπτει από ανασκαφικά ευρήματα) παρουσιάζει αρκετές ομοιότητες με την τελετουργική αποτέφρωση Χετταίων ηγεμόνων. Τι συμβαίνει όμως κατά την ΥΕΧ στο Αιγαίο; Πότε και γιατί αλλάζουν τόσο δραματικά τα ταφικά έθιμα;

The vulgar, as philosophers call the generality of mankind, implicitly taking as their text-book the fictions of Homer, Hesiod and other poets, assume the existence of a deep subterranean hole called Hades; spacious, murky, and sunless, but by some mysterious means sufficiently lighted to render all its details visible. Its king is a brother of Zeus, one Pluto; whose name –so an able scholar assures me- contains a complimentary allusion to his ghostly wealth. As to the nature of his government, and the condition of his subjects, the authority allotted to him extends over all the dead, who, from the moment that they come under his control, are kept in unbreakable fetters; Shades are on no account permitted to return to Earth; to this rule there have been only two or three exceptions since the beginning of the world, and these were made for very urgent reasons. His realm is encompassed by vast rivers, whose very names inspire awe; Cocytus, Pyriphlegethon, and the like. Most formidable of all, and first to arrest the progress of the new-comer, is Acheron, that lake which none may pass save by the ferryman's boat; it is too deep to be waded, too broad for the swimmer, and even defies the flight of birds deceased. At the very beginning of the descent is a gate of adamant: here Aeacus, a nephew of the king, stands on guard. By his side is a three-headed dog, a grim brute; to new arrivals, however, he is friendly enough, reserving his bark, and the yawning horror of his jaws, for the would-be runaway. On the inner shore of the lake is a meadow, wherein grows asphodel; here, too, is the fountain that makes war on memory, and is hence called Lethe. All these particulars the ancient would doubtless obtain from the Thessalian queen Alcestis and her fellow-countryman Protesilaus, from Theseus the son of Aegeus, and from Odysseus of Homer. These witnesses (whose evidence is entitled to our most respectful acceptance) did not, as I gather, drink of the waters of Lethe; because then they would not have remembered¹.

Lucian's satirical description shows that common people of his time still believed in a gloomy and depressing afterlife, even after the much more appealing promises of countless prophets and cults, like the Orphics, the Bacchians², the Christians and many others, who offered a more comforting idea about the afterlife asking just little in return, observance of their rites and belief in their dogma. So why did these people still adhere to such a depressing image of the afterlife, as it seems only on the account of old poets, such as Homer and Hesiod? This is strange, because Hesiod himself warns us that the Muses, which are the poet's source of information, don't always tell the truth³. And in Homer's poems the most detailed description of the Underworld doesn't come from the poet himself, a god or some other trustworthy witness, but from Odysseus, the one person that actually tells the most lies in both poems. Even Alcinous, king of the Phaeacians, was not quite convinced after hearing Odysseus' tale about the Netherworld:

Odysseus, in no wise as we look on you do we deem this of you, that you are a cheat and a dissembler; such as are many whom the dark earth breeds scattered far and wide, men that fashion lies out of what no man can even see. But upon you is grace of words, and within you is a heart of wisdom, and your tale you have told with skill, as does a bard... But come, tell me this, and declare it truly⁴.

So the question is, how did Homer and Hesiod manage to convince their contemporaries about their gloomy image of the Netherworld, which was so depressing, that even Achilles, the greatest hero of Iliad, after spending just a few years in Hades, said to Odysseus, that he'd "rather be a serf under the sun, than king over all dead"⁵. That's because this particular image of the Netherworld was not new and definitely not invented by those two poets. They've probably codified and transcribed in poetic form older and deep rooted beliefs. Walter Burkert⁶ and especially Martin West⁷ showed that Homens and Hesiods image of the Netherworld originated more or less from the Near East. As we are going to see, they were not mistaken.

In Sumerian sources, right after the death of a person his spirit is called **im**⁸. A series of rituals and offerings and most importantly its proper burial allow the release of **im**⁹ and its transformation into its final form, which was called **gidim**. This transformation took place several days after the burial. In a text describing a ritual we read:

¹ Lucian, Of mourning 2-5.

² e.g. Edmonds 2004; Graf and Johnston 2007.

³ Hes., Theog. 27 f.

⁴ Homer, Od. 11, 362-370.

⁵ Homer, Od. 11, 489-491.

⁶ Burkert 1961; Burkert 1995.

⁷ West 1997, 149 ff.

⁸ Katz 2007, 172 f.

⁹ Lulil and his sister 55: "His spirit [im] is released". Thureau-Dangin 1922; Katz 2003, 205 f.

*Fat sheep for when the **im** of Tezenmama was seized. The first day. One big goat for Ninsun, and two fat sheep when the wooden altar of the **gidim** of Tezenmama is performed. The eighth day*¹⁰.

Before or right after the burial of the dead body, an airy ghost, called **kaš₄** (=messenger) could appear to his mourning relatives, if there has been an urgent unfinished business of the dead. This messenger looked like the dead person right at the moment of his death. In a Sumerian poem we have following description of the **kaš₄**:

*My messenger, he comes, yet he has not come; he comes, yet he has not come. He has eyes but he cannot see. He has mouth but he cannot converse. My messenger, who approaches came, he who approaches also came. I placed bread and wiped it. From a bowl whose strap had not been opened, From a dish, whose rim had not been soiled, I poured water; I poured to the ground, and he drank it. With my good oil I anointed the figure. With my new garment I dressed the chair. The im has entered, the im has departed. My messenger, in the netherworld [kur]; in the midst of the netherworld [kur] he was whirling, he is lying*¹¹.

In Akkadian sources we have two different, but similar terms¹². The spirit at the moment of its departure from the dead body is called **zaqiqu** or **ziququ**. It probably had the form of a tiny airy bird, was harmless to the living and remained constrained in the Underworld. But a **zaqiqu** could be transformed into an **etemmu**. Unfortunately, there is much confusion in the available written sources concerning the exact nature of these two terms. The general idea is that this transformation took place when the **zaqiqu** received all the proper offerings after the burial¹³. An **etemmu** could interact with the living, offer them counsel and also protect them if needed. It retained its power for as long as it received the needed offerings and as long as the bones of the deceased remained unharmed. If at some later point an **etemmu** no longer received offerings, then it got angry and could harm the living, it could even turn into a **mitu**, a monster-like demon of the Underworld¹⁴. But eventually an **etemmu** would lose its power and turn into a powerless **zaqiqu** constrained in the Underworld some generations later. So it seems that the relatives of the deceased had any reason to preserve his **etemmu**, while on the contrary his enemies would prefer it to remain in the weak state of a **zaqiqu**, so that they remain safe from his revenge. From some Neoassyrian texts we learn that in order to achieve that the bones of one's enemies had to be either pulverized or mixed in a mass grave¹⁵. This practice reminds us of **maschalismos** in much later Greek texts, which allowed murderers to remain unavenged by the spirit of their victim¹⁶.

In the Homeric poems the spirit of a living person is called **thymos**, a term that is quite difficult to translate, but is somehow connected with the personality and also the memory of the person¹⁷. The spirit of a dead person is called **psyche**, a term that is never used in connection with a still living human¹⁸. **Psyche** exits the deceased right at the moment of his death, in airy and smoke-like form¹⁹, either from his wound²⁰ or from his mouth with the last breath²¹. But somehow the **thymos** still exists and can even interact with the living in the form of an **eidolon**²², if needed, but only until the conclusion of all burial rites, when it finally leaves the bones of the deceased²³. This means that the **psyche** retains its **thymos**, namely its personality and memories, for as long as the deceased remains unburied. Thus, the spirits of the unburied, of those who died prematurely or had a violent

10 Recording of the expenditure of animals for two rituals for the dead princess Tezenmama, TIM 6,10 (ŠŠ 7.3.8): Katz 2007, 190.

11 *The Messenger and the Maiden* 38-49: Katz 2003, 202-204.

12 West 1997, 151; Scurlock 1995, 1892; Selz 2000; Selz 2005, 99 f.

13 Scurlock 2002.

14 Scurlock 1988; Scurlock 1995, 1890; Farber 1995, 1897 f.; Scurlock 2006.

15 Scurlock 1995, 1892.

16 Vermeule 1979, 49. s.v. *μασχάλισμα, μασχάλισμός*: Aristophanes Gram.; Pausanias Attic.; Photius; Hesychius; Suda. For a detailed discussion: Rohde 1925, 322-326.

17 LSI 810 s.v. *θυμός*; Λορεντζάτος 1989 s.v. *θυμός*. Only once in the homeric poems *thymos* actually enters the Underworld (Hom. Il. 7, 131). Other parts of the spirit of a living person are: *μένος, νόσος, μήτις, βουλή* (Rohde 1925, 45 n. 41), also *κήρ* and *φρένες* (Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, 56). The term *αἰών*, which means "vital force", is used for younger persons (Hom. Il. 16, 453; Od. 9, 523-4). It resembles with the akkadian term *napištu*: Scurlock 1995, 1892.

18 With only one exception in the homeric poems: Il. 21, 569. s. also Λορεντζάτος 1989, 397.

19 Hom. Il. 23, 100 f. s. also West 1997, 151; Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, 58 f.

20 Hom. Il. 14, 518 f.; 16, 505.

21 Hom. Il. 9, 408 f.

22 Hom. Il. 23, 61-107. Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, 56.

23 Hom., Od. 11, 216-222.

death were quite dangerous²⁴. They are the only ones which cause fear to Odysseus during his visit in the Underworld²⁵. But they posed a threat to Odysseus only because he actually entered their realm. Here lies an important difference between the Mesopotamian and the Homeric perception of the Afterlife. The spirits of the dead who were properly buried, were confined in the Underworld, weak and without any memory of their former existence, resembling the **zaqiqu**. It was not possible for them to turn into something that was more like the Mesopotamian **etemmu**, so there was really no need to keep on offering them food.

But what happened to the spirit right after the death of a person? How did it get to the Underworld? According to most of the available Mesopotamian texts, the spirits of the deceased had to make a long and arduous journey over land. If someone could afford it, he would take with him in his grave a chariot, a donkey or at least a good pair of shoes for walking. A lamp could also come handy to help him stay on the path. They would also need food for the journey and gifts to bribe some of the deities of the Underworld²⁶. In a Sumerian poem about the Death of Ur-Namma, king of Ur²⁷ we read:

*Urnamma was sitting on his donkey, the donkey was buried with him. The ... of the land was turned with him, the dignity of the land was changed. The road of the **kur** [the Netherworld] is a desolate path. With the king the chariot was covered, the road twists he cannot advance.*

Also Inanna (and later Ištar), when she descended to the Netherworld, she followed a land route and went through several Mesopotamian cities²⁸.

In the Sumerian corpus of the laments for a young dying god we usually find a description the efforts of his mother to find her lost son, while she follows him into the Netherworld. A constant is that the mother first follows the stream of a river, then arrives in a swamp and finally finds herself at **kur**, a word which means "mountain", "foreign land" and also "Netherworld"²⁹. In the poem *Gilgameš, Enkidu and the Netherworld* Enki has to use a boat to reach the Underworld³⁰ and in the poem *Enlil and Ninlil* we read that, when the young god Enlil was exiled, he had to walk, but also travel by ship to reach the Netherworld³¹. Enlil had to cross „the river of the kur, the river that eats men“ and needs the help of the ferryman *lú-šá-addir*³². The last point is a bit strange, because in other Sumerian or early Akkadian texts we never hear explicitly that spirits needed the help of a ferryman. But on the other hand, in Neoassyrian texts of the seventh century B.C. we read that the deceased was required to pass over a river called Khubur with the assistance of a ferryman variously known as *Siluši* or *Khumut-tabal*, in order to reach the gate(s) of the underworld city³³. Unfortunately it is unclear, whether the belief about the ferryman of the Underworld can be dated in the Bronze Age or not³⁴. Interestingly, its Greek equivalent, *Charon*, does not appear in the Homeric or any other early poems, but is attested only after the late Archaic period³⁵.

Another question is the exact location of the Underworld. Which way did the spirits have to go right after their Death? West, east, north, south or simply downwards? From the south Mesopotamian point of view, the previous description, namely that spirits needed to follow a river, then cross a swamp, in order to arrive at the mountain of **kur**, suggests that the Netherworld lies in southeast-east direction. But this point of view contradicts with later texts, which mention explicitly that the entrance to the Underworld lies in the west³⁶. The gates that the Sun-God used every evening to enter into the Underworld were also

24 Hom., Od. 11, 37-50.

25 Hom., Od. 11, 43.

26 Scurlock 1995, 1884.

27 DU 70-75: Flückiger-Hawker 1999; Katz 2003, 26; Black, Cunningham and Robson 2006, 56 ff.

28 ID 7-13.

29 For sumerian laments from the old babylonian period s. e.g. *Eršemma of Ninhursaga* 3-5, 9-12 (BM 98396): „As for the birth-giving mother, her beautiful one was lost (to her)/the water carried off the delightful one/as for the birth-giving mother, inquiring and searching the foot of the mountain (kur) gets closer./... the foot of the mountain gets closer; the peak of the mountain gets closer/and she, she lifts numun-rushes in front of her; she lifts sumun-rushes/the mother of the lad lifts šušu-reeds/ the mother of the lord shed tears in the reed thicker“ (Katz 2003, 18-25).

30 GEN 14-16, 21-25 (Katz 2003, 39-40).

31 Behrens 1978; Cooper 1980. Boat models were found in Mesopotamian (Woolley 1934, 145; Cohen 2005), Egyptian (Jones 1995@26 ff.) and also Minoan tombs (Davaras 1984).

32 Katz 2003, 39; Cohen 2005, 101.

33 Scurlock 1995, 1886-1887; West 1997, 156. s. also Vermeule 1979, 72-73.

34 Selz 1995; *contra* Katz 2003, 33.

35 LIMC III.1 (1986) 210 s.v. Charon I (C. Sourvinou-Inwood); Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, 353-361; West 1997, 155.

36 West 1997, 153.

located in the west. In addition, Inanna followed a west-northwest route to reach the gate to the Realm of the Dead³⁷. There is a hint in some Sumerian poems, that this belief existed at least during the late third millennium, as for instance in the poem *Udugul 250-252*³⁸:

*In the arali [=Underworld] the path is laid out for them [i.e. the demons coming up from the Underworld], in the urugal [=grave] the gate is open for them. They leave toward the gate of sunset*³⁹.

So the urugal, namely the grave, functions as a gate that leads to the path to the Underworld. That's also the way that some Demons or even the Dead themselves could follow to return to the earth [ki] and threaten the living, as Ereškigal, the queen of the Underworld warns the other gods⁴⁰. But as we read in the poem *The Death of Dumuzi* this gate, luckily for all the living, opens only inwards⁴¹. Another way to reach the Underworld seems to be through certain openings in the ground⁴². But such openings were not actually supposed to be used as short-cuts to the Underworld, only for communication with the Dead, in special places that functioned as Necromancies. Artificial pits could also function as communication points with the Underworld. Such a pit, dated around 2300 BC, was probably discovered in Tell Mozan, as suggested by the offerings found in it⁴³.

In the Homeric poems, Odysseus reaches the fringes of the Underworld with the help of a northward wind⁴⁴. But this does not necessarily mean that the entrance to the Underworld itself was located in the north. Odysseus did not enter the actual Underworld, but arrived in a no-man's land between Hades and our world. All spirits had to wait there during the time between their death and their burial⁴⁵. In order to get there, Odysseus had to cross the river Okeanos, but it seems that more rivers, called Styx, Pyriphlegethon, Kokytos and maybe also Acheron blocked the access to the actual Realm of the Dead⁴⁶.

It seems that the spirits of the newly deceased did not need any map or detailed instructions to find their way to the Underworld. But when they reached the gate of the realm of the Dead, not everyone was allowed to enter. In the poem *Inanna's Descent*⁴⁷ we read:

*Without Ningestinna, the great scribe of the arali,
he does not enter the road of the kur.
He will not cross the path of the netherworld.*

The entrance to the netherworld was a palace called *ganzir*⁴⁸. All who wished to enter the Realm of the Dead had to go through seven gates⁴⁹. The first one faced the no man's land and the seventh gate led directly to the palace of Ereškigal.

37 Buccellati 1982. Inanna (ID 81 f.) mentions that after she reached the gate at Ganzir, she continues her travel eastwards. This does not mean that the Underworld was located in the east, as suggested by Katz (2003, 17). Her route probably resembles that of the Sun-God. After she reached the gate to the Underworld in the west and she descended in it, she had to travel back east, in order to reach the palace of Ereškigal. s. also Kramer 1937; Kramer 1939; Penglase 1994, 14-26.

38 Katz 2003, 27 f.

39 The phrase *gate of sunset* cannot be a metaphor (*contra* Katz, 2003, 341), since this belief recurs in all later Mesopotamian texts.

40 Nergal and Ereškigal (Dalley 1989, 173): [Ereškigal speaks] *Send that god to us, and let him spend the night with me as my lover! I am unclean, and I am not pure enough to perform the judging of the great gods. The great gods who dwell within Erkalla. If you do not send that god to me! According to the rites of Erkalla and the great Earth I shall raise up the dead, and they will eat the living. I shall make the dead outnumber the living!*

41 *The Death of Dumuzi* 40 f. (Katz 2003, 34 f.): [Dumuzi] *The kur is my „crack“; my foot has slipped; it [the kur] does not let me ascend [from here]. The tomb is a big door; it stands in front of me, it [the tomb] does not let me ascend [from here].*

42 GEN 164-168 (Katz 2003, 29-30): *His [Giglameš's] loop and his stick fell into the bottom of the netherworld. He used his hand but he could not reach it. He used his foot but he could not reach it. At the gate of ganzir; the front of the netherworld, it stood still. Gilgameš shed tears and turned pale.*

43 Collins 2004.

44 Hom. Od. 10, 504 ff.

45 Hom., Il. 23, 70-101; Od. 11, 51-54.

46 Kullmann 2002, 148 f.

47 ID 284-286: Katz 2003, 27.

48 Sladek 1974, 59.

49 ID 73-75: *After Inanna approached the palace ganzir; she thumped maliciously on the door of the netherworld, she shouted maliciously at the gate of the netherworld. And further below in the same poem (119 f.): The bolt shall be placed on the seven gates of the netherworld. Each door of the palace ganzir separately he shall push open.*

It is also unclear, whether those seven gates were connected to seven walls or if there was one gate house with seven doorways. The fact, that no wall is actually ever mentioned in the texts means probably that the solid rock of the earth's interior served as a wall⁵⁰. In Mesopotamia there were various expressions for the underworld which included the word 'house'. In Sumerian it could be called 'house of kur' [é-kur], in Akkadian 'house of Dumuzi', 'house of darkness', 'house of death', 'house of dust'⁵¹, in all occasions the word bitu is used. But this does not mean that people in Mesopotamia pictured the Underworld as a huge palace of Ereškigal, which also housed all the spirits of the Dead. From the poem *Gilgameš, Enkidu and the Netherworld*⁵² we learn that in the Underworld there was a big city. This city was surely enormous, but did not extend to the whole of the Underworld. On its fringes there was a great dais, where dwelling places could be built for prominent newcomers, such as the king Ur-Namma⁵³. Much further away, in a probably less pleasant place, lived the leprous men and certainly all the other outcasts, who retained their low social status even in the Netherworld. In the poem *Death of Ur-Namma* we read that inside this great city there were many palaces for all the important officials and even separate palaces for their spouses⁵⁴.

This great city was governed at first only by a female Goddess, Ereškigal. As we learn from the poem *Nergal and Ereškigal*, Nergal became at some later point her husband, but even then, she did not loose supremacy over the Underworld, although some later texts give the opposite impression⁵⁵. Her palace seems to have been organized in a similar manner to early Mesopotamian palaces: she had a visier, called Namtar, and a series of officials and scribes for the administration. She designated offices and also gave away land for the residence of all her important subjects. Her palace had a broad courtyard and also a throne room, where the audiences took place. There was of course a strict protocol for all those seeking an audience with the queen, even for powerful gods, like Nergal her future husband. A chair was brought for the guest, the baker brought him bread, the butcher brought him meat, the brewer brought him beer, and someone even washed his feet. All those who were finally permitted to see the queen, even Nergal, had to kneel and kiss the ground in front of her⁵⁶.

Unfortunately for us, the bakers, butchers and brewers seem to have been solely at the service of Ereškigal and the personnel of her palace. No text mentions that such professions existed outside her palace or that they offered their services to the rest of the Dead. Food could not be produced in the Underworld, there were no agricultural products, no game to hunt, no fruits to pick, so the spirits relied entirely upon the offerings of their living kinsmen⁵⁷. Since the offerings could not be collected and consumed by the Dead above ground, they had to be poured into holes in the ground. But when the food finally arrived to its recipients in the Underworld, it was unfortunately soiled by the mud and dirt it had to go through. That's probably the meaning of the following verses in the previously mentioned text, which inform us about life in the Underworld⁵⁸:

To the house where those who enter are deprived of light, where dust is their food, clay their bread. They are clothed, like birds with feathers. They see no light, they dwell in darkness. They moan like doves.

Also in the Homeric poems the Underworld is dark⁵⁹, dirty and muddy like tomb⁶⁰. The Dead „go about twittering like disturbed bats in a cave; in the mass, their noise was like the screaming of birds“⁶¹. The association of the deceased with birds is a theme that often recurs in Mesopotamian netherworld texts⁶², so it cannot be a coincidence that we find it also in the Homeric poems. But, in both cases, it is unclear whether we have to take this association literary, or if it is just a poetic exaggeration.

50 Katz 2003, 192.

51 West 1997, 158.

52 GEN 286-303.

53 DU 96.

54 DU 52-131.

55 Foster 1996, 612; Wiggermann 1998.

56 Nergal and Ereškigal iii: Dalley 1989, 169 f.

57 Katz 2003, 198. For *kispu* s. Jonker 1995, 223 ff.; Stede 2007, 112 ff.; Laneri and Morris 2007.

58 Nergal and Ereškigal (SBV) iii 4-7. Also in *Gilgameš* VII 173 f. 180; *Descent of Ištar* 10.

59 Hom. Il. 15, 191; Od. 11, 57. 93. 223; 20, 356.

60 Hom. Il. 20, 61-66; Hes. Th. 731. cf. West 1997, 161.

61 West 1997, 162. Hom. Il. 23, 101; Od. 11, 605; 24, 5-9. 11. 43. 633.

62 Berlejung 2001, 475 ff.

Gilgameš gives the following advice to his friend Enkidu, who is about to descend alive to the Underworld, in order to remain unnoticed⁶³:

You should not put on your clean garments: they would recognise immediately that you are alien. You should not anoint yourself with fine oil from a bowl: they would surround you at its scent. You should not hurl throw-sticks in the nether world: those struck down by the throw-sticks would surround you. You should not hold a cornel-wood stick in your hand: the spirits would feel insulted by you. You should not put sandals on your feet. You should not shout in the nether world. You should not kiss your beloved wife. You should not hit your wife even if you are annoyed with her. You should not kiss your beloved child. You should not hit your son even if you are annoyed with him. The outcry aroused would detain you in the nether world.

The above description corresponds with the theme of a *mundus inversus*, an inverted world, where everything is opposite to "normal"⁶⁴. Of course Enkidu does not follow the advice of his friend and so he was indeed detained in the Underworld. But thanks to the intervention of the gods Enki and Utu Enkidu's ghost was at least allowed to return briefly to the earth and take his farewell from his friend Gilgameš. After they somehow hugged and kissed, Gilgameš asked his friend about the "order of the netherworld". Enkidu's answer was of course not exactly what Gilgameš hoped to hear⁶⁵:

If I tell you the order of the nether world, sit down and weep! I shall sit down and weep!, which your heart rejoiced to touch, is, worms infest it like an old garment; like of a crevice, it is full of dust. 'Alas!' he said and sat down in the dust".

After these discouraging words Enkidu goes on with the actual description of the "order of the Netherworld". We, the modern readers, expect to find some kind of punishment for the evil and reward for the good men in afterlife. Indeed, there is a special mention to certain 'evil' Dead: those who disrespected their parents or were cursed by them, those who did something bad with the name of their god, those who gave a false oath and the proverbial citizen of Girsu, who refused water to his parents⁶⁶. Now, it makes sense to us that such persons should have a rather unpleasant time in the Afterlife. But the problem is, that the rest of the Dead, the ones who didn't actually do any really awful things, didn't necessarily have a much better time there themselves. Some people would undeservingly spent their time in the Underworld either in pain or being hungry: he who was eaten by a lion, he who fell from the roof, the leprous man, he who died in battle, he who had no funerary offerings and finally, he who was hit by a ship's board when diving⁶⁷. This means, that the circumstances of one's death, would play an important role for the determination of his status in the Underworld.

An unpleasant time in the Afterlife was also promised to the palace eunuchs, the women who never gave birth, the young men and women who never undressed their wife and husband respectively, and to the man with no heir⁶⁸. On the contrary, men with at least two sons obviously had a better lot. The afterlife status seems to depend heavily from the number of sons, again irrespectively of his other deeds⁶⁹. The reason for this is simply pragmatic. Someone with a lot of children, especially sons, would receive sufficient offerings, which would make him in a way "rich" and would have enough means of sustenance in the afterlife. On the other side, it was not a crime not to have any children, but then his spirit wouldn't receive any offerings, which would lead to starvation.

There were also two special categories of Dead: the stillborn children who never knew existence and those who died in a way unknown to us⁷⁰. Only these two categories of dead, together with the fathers of seven sons⁷¹, would spent their afterlife near the underworld gods, which probably means that they would be allowed to be their servants. On the other hand, the man who was set on fire, would simply stop existing⁷², because his spirit was evidently burnt together with his body.

63 GEN 184-198.

64 Kruger 2005, 402.

65 GEN 243-253.

66 GEN 8-28.

67 GEN 286-303.

68 GEN 268-285.

69 GEN 254-267.

70 GEN 286-300.

71 GEN 265-267.

72 GEN 301-303.

To sum up, if during his earthly life a person did not offend the gods or his parents, if he did not die a violent or premature death and, finally, if he had at least two or three sons, he were not going to feel constant pain or hunger in the Underworld. But still, he would have to wear dirty garments, his food and drink would taste muddy, he would live in darkness and moan like a dove. Indeed not a very pleasant thought.

Also in the Homeric poems the dominant picture is that there is no individual destiny for individual shades, no rewards or punishments for morally or otherwise reprehensible behaviour. It is in the following period that the concept of individual destiny in the afterlife develops⁷³. In the homeric poems only three mythological figures (Sisyphus, Tantalus and Tityos) are being punished in the Underworld⁷⁴. Interestingly enough, in the Homeric poems there is only one category of mortals who actually get punished by the Erinyes in the Underworld, namely those who violated an oath⁷⁵. It is strange, that, out of all crimes, only this was deemed as punishable in the afterlife⁷⁶.

Another important aspect concerning life in the Netherworld was the fate of the kings. Since the Underworld was conceived as a kingdom ruled by a queen, it was impossible for the dead kings to maintain after life their high status. Nevertheless, the important dead kings did not share the fate of the commoners, but could become servants in the queen's palace. Serving the gods signified an honorable status for a human spirit⁷⁷. There have only been three kings who've earned an even higher position: 1) Gilgameš became a *lugal*, a title that signifies (military) leadership, or an *ensi*, a title that in the Old Babylonian period was usually attributed to a dependent ruler⁷⁸. 2) Etana became *nubanda*, a title that referred to the leader of a group of soldiers or workers⁷⁹. 3) Ur-Namma was appointed as a judge, together with Gilgameš, and was given authority over soldiers killed in battle and over people described as offenders, but with no further clarification concerning their offences⁸⁰. Another judge in the Underworld was the sun-god Utu/Šamaš, as mentioned in texts from the Old Babylonian period onward. In the existing Sumerian texts Utu is never mentioned as a judge, it is not even clear whether he had to spend the night in the Underworld or if he could return home to rest⁸¹. The role of those judges is unclear to us, but the context suggests that they were only concerned with the conduct of the spirits in the community of the netherworld⁸². The Sun God possibly judged cases that involved both Living and Dead persons⁸³. Also the Anunna gods are mentioned as judges, but they most probably were only concerned with cases that involved (Underworld) deities⁸⁴.

Also in the early Greek epic, three former kings acted as judges of the Dead: Minos, Rhadamanthys and Aiaikos⁸⁵. Just like their three counterparts in the Mesopotamian Underworld, these three judges did not perform a *psychostasia* or any other kind of judgment of the newcomers in the Egyptian fashion. Achilles eventually became lord among the Dead⁸⁶, a role that reminds us of the term *lugal*, the previously mentioned title of Gilgameš⁸⁷.

The available Mesopotamian texts leave no doubt, that all mortals have to die and spend their afterlife in the Underworld. Even Gilgameš, who was partly god, had to share this unpleasant fate. In the whole history of mankind there has been only a single exception to this rule, as we read for instance in the poem *The Death of Gilgameš*. Enki explains to An and Enlil why Gilgameš has to die⁸⁸:

73 e.g. Plato, *Republ.* 363 c-d. cf. Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, 66.

74 For a detailed analysis: Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, 67-70.

75 *Hom. Il.* 3, 276-280; 19, 259 f.

76 Sourvinou-Inwood, who studied this question very thoroughly, wrote (Sourvinou-Inwood 1995, 67) that this was the case because “*the oath played an important part in early Greek life. It was probably when life and social transactions became more complex and precarious, in the expanding communities and universe of the eighth century, that the oath acquired this eschatological underpinning in the context of a funerary ideology in which the inescapably collective destiny in Hades was under pressure*”. But, on the other hand, it can hardly be a coincidence that this is one of the three exceptions we've seen in Enkidu's description of the order in the Underworld (GEN 8-28).

77 Katz 2003, 121 f.

78 Katz 1993, 23-32; Katz 2003, 116 f.; Hamblin 2006, 97 ff.

79 Katz 2003, 120 f.

80 Katz 2003, 121; Lee and Mandolfo 2008, 121.

81 Heimpel 1986, 128 f.; Katz 2003, 50.

82 Katz 2003, 191.

83 Cohen 2005, 101.

84 Krebernik 2007, 359.

85 Vermeule 1979, 76.

86 West 1997, 164.

87 DU 95.

88 DG 116-128.

In those days, in those distant days, in those nights, in those distant nights, in those years, in those distant years, after the assembly had made the Flood sweep over to destroy the seed of mankind, among us I was the only one who was for life. He remained alive, Ziusudra alone, although a human being, remained alive. Then you made me swear by heaven and by earth, and I swore that no human will be allowed to live forever any more.

Ziusudra⁸⁹, was allowed to spend his countless days together with his wife on a distant island, called *Dilmun*⁹⁰. This far away island was unreachable to all mortals and even Gilgameš needed the help of the ferryman Uršanabi to cross the Waters of Death, in order to reach it⁹¹.

Also in the Homeric poems, all mortals have to die and go straight to the Underworld, including such heroes like Patroclus and Achilles, seers like Teiresias, even demigods like Sarpedon or Heracles. There is only one very peculiar exception to this rule. As we hear from Menelaus himself, in the *Odyssey*, Proteus promised him this⁹²:

But for thyself, Menelaus, fostered of Zeus, it is not ordained that thou shouldst die and meet thy fate in horse-pasturing Argos, but to the Elysian plain and the bounds of the earth will the immortals convey thee, where dwells fair-haired Rhadamanthus, and where life is easiest for men. No snow is there, nor heavy storm, nor ever rain, but ever does Oceanus send up blasts of the shrill-blowing West Wind that they may give cooling to men; for thou hast Helen to wife, and art in their eyes the husband of the daughter of Zeus.

This strange passage contradicts everything else we've heard by Homer about the fate of the mortals. Why should only Menelaus and his wife escape death and spend an eternity on the Elysian plain by the Oceanus? There has been much speculation about the Minoan and ultimately the Egyptian origin of the concept of Elysium⁹³. But the similarity to the previously mentioned myth of Ziusudra and his wife is so evident, that there isn't much need for such speculation. Here, as in most other aspects, the Homeric image of the Netherworld corresponds with the Mesopotamian, not the Egyptian one.

On the other hand, Hesiod's image of the Netherworld is radically different from the Homeric one, which is quite astonishing, because he did not live much later than the time we date the Homeric poems. Even the peculiar word that Homer used, *Elysium*, does not recur in Greek literature until Apollonios of Rhodes⁹⁴. Hesiod thought that the heroes who fought in the Theban and Trojan wars earned the right to a care-free Afterlife on the *Isles of the Blessed*. This idea wasn't of course new, but was more or less influenced by the Egyptian perception of the Netherworld⁹⁵. Later the poet Pindar gave access to the Isles of the Blessed even to people of his own time, including of course his own patrons⁹⁶. As Reece notes, "one begins to wonder who, other than the occasional oath-breaker or loathsome criminal, is left to inhabit an underworld Hades"⁹⁷. Nevertheless, the gloomy Mesopotamian concept of the Afterlife remained popular, no doubt thanks to the authority of Homer, and so in later periods we notice a general confusion about what happens to the human soul in the afterlife: does it go to the verdant Elysian Plain or to the unfriendly depths of Hades? A question that still remains unresolved.

89 Later known as Utnapištim, Atrahasis or Xisouthros: Gmirkin 2006, 110.

90 Bibby 1969; Black and Green 1992, 66.

91 Foley 2005, 240 f.; King 2009, 28.

92 Hom. Od. 4, 561-569.

93 e.g. Malten 1913, 35-51; Nilsson 1950, 620. s. also Assmann 2005, 392.

94 Apol. Rhod. Argonautica 4, 811.

95 Ikram 2003; Assmann 2005.

96 e.g., Pind. Ol. 2.

97 Reece 2007, 398.

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