Conduct and Behavior as Determinants for the Afterlife: A Comparison of the Judgments of the Dead in Ancient Egypt and Ancient Greece

by

Gary A. Stilwell


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A COMPARISON OF THE JUDGMENTS OF THE DEAD IN
ANCIENT EGYPT AND ANCIENT GREECE

By
GARY A. STILWELL

A Dissertation submitted to the Program in the Humanities in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Degree Awarded:
Summer Semester, 2000

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The members of the Committee approve the dissertation of Gary A Stilwell defended on April 26, 2000.

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Shannon L. Burkes
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To my Father

Russell Steven Stilwell

Who lived in Justice and Moderation

And faced death with Wisdom and Courage
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues that conduct and behavior were believed essential for determining one's post-mortem fate from the earliest periods of both ancient Egypt and ancient Greece.

Part one of this four-part study examines Plato's eschatological myths and provides a complete catalog and brief discussion of all references in them to conduct and behavior that affect one's fate in the afterlife.

Part two traces the evolution of the concept of the afterlife from Homer to the Dramatists, also cataloging all references to the afterlife that mention conduct and behavior.

This part of the study demonstrates that the concept of reward and retribution in an afterlife, based on conduct in this life, is already found in Homer. However, it is in Pythagorean and Orphics circles of Greater Greece that it reaches its most dramatic development and from that milieu provides such an enormous impact on Plato.
The third part deals with the connection between conduct and the afterlife in ancient Egypt up to the time of the Book of the Dead. An extensive catalog of Egyptian virtues and vices that have afterlife consequences is compiled from the religious texts of the 5th to 18th Dynasty.

In part four, the relationship between conduct and behavior and the afterlife beliefs of the two societies are compared and contrasted.

In the earliest periods, the afterlife texts appear to be concerned only with the elite: the king in Egyptian 5th Dynasty Pyramid Texts and the heroes in Homeric and Hesiodic Greece. This study argues that there is some evidence in the early texts of both societies for a belief that commoners could also be rewarded or punished in an afterlife. In later periods both societies’ religious texts dealing with the afterlife exhibit a much more developed democratization.

As post-mortem beliefs became more democratic, conduct and behavior grew in importance. However, from the earliest time periods, both societies believe that the gods, primarily Maat in Egypt and Dike in Greece, are responsible for the proper ordering of the cosmos and that violations of that order will call down the most dire consequence -- the loss of a beneficent afterlife.
INTRODUCTION

Introductory Comments

This dissertation argues that conduct and behavior were believed essential for determining one’s post-mortem fate from the earliest historical periods of both ancient Egypt and ancient Greece. It makes the case for a behavior-based judgment of the dead at the dawn of the written record and provides a systematic comparison between the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians and Greeks about the basis for the judgment of the dead.

There have been many volumes written on the ancient Egyptians and Greeks, however, the relatively few that attempt to discuss the religions of both societies in a single work are generally compilations of individual unrelated essays.¹ There are even fewer writers who attempt to investigate the afterlife beliefs of the two societies in

¹ There are reference works, anthologies and compilations, several of which are cited in this project. Some examples are: J.M. Bremer, Th. P.J. van den Hout and R. Peters, eds., Hidden Futures (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1994); Hiroshi Obayashi, ed., Death and the Afterlife (New York: Praeger, 1992); and E. Hershey Sneath, ed., Religion and the Future Life (London: Fleming H. Revell, 1922).
the same work. Three scholars who have done so are cited below as important examples.

W. Brede Kristensen’s, \textit{Life out of Death}, in contrast with the other two examples cited below, limits his discussion to only the ancient Egyptians and Greeks. His primary concern is to compare their eschatological mythology, but he nowhere analyzes conduct and behavior in either society.

J. Gwyn Griffiths’, \textit{The Divine Verdict} includes sections on Egypt and Greece along with those on Judaism, Christianity, Near Eastern, Roman, Indian, Iranian and Chinese religions. Griffiths, who has an excellent review of Egypt, covers so much territory that he is limited in space, thus he spends only a few pages on the Greek judgment under the heading: “The Minoan Judges of the Dead” (294-7). This allows only a cursory look at our topic and, therefore, very little attention is given to explicit comparisons of conduct and behavior as it relates to the afterlife.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{2} W. Brede Kristensen, \textit{Life out of Death} (Louvain, Belgium: Peeters Press, 1992). He does, however, make some comments related to conduct with which I take exception: “This Erinys was . . . not a revenger of a violated law or infringed right” (132); and “The expression [ma-a-t] occurs so often that Egyptian religion would have to be considered as a so-called ethical religion, if ma-a-t really had the same meaning as ‘righteousness’. But this is not the case” (58). Thus, he concludes that Egyptian religion is not to be considered an ethical religion. His argument is interesting and somewhat true, but misleading. I will argue that the concept of maat is precisely what Plato was attempting to establish 2000 years later.}

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{3} J. Gwyn Griffiths, \textit{The Divine Verdict: A Study of Divine Judgement in the Ancient Religions} (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991).}
S.G.F. Brandon’s[^4] *The Judgment of the Dead* has all of Griffiths’ topics in addition to sections on Islam and Japanese religion. Although his work was instrumental in providing an inspiration for me to pursue this subject further, he provides no explicit comparison between the judgments in Egypt and Greece. We also disagree on several particulars.[^5]

In light of these examples, we see that many have written about both societies separately, and sometimes even together in the same work. These works and others have provided us with valuable information and insights into the issues of Egyptian and Greek religion. However, I have found no one work that focuses on conduct and behavior as determinants for an appropriate recompense in the afterlife for ancient Egypt and Greece or that provides a systematic comparative analysis of the differences and similarities in the views of the two societies. This dissertation attempts to rectify that deficiency. In addition to the analysis, I


[^5]: Whereas Brandon allows that metempsychosis is an Orphic doctrine, I will argue that it is not. Also, he apparently has no problem accepting the genuineness of the *Nekyia* in *Odyssey* 11, which leaves room for a Homeric judgment, but nowhere does he discuss the undisputed lines concerning a possible post-mortem judgment in the *Iliad*. These are not insignificant issues for my analysis. Both because of the importance of the so-called Orphic influence on Plato’s myths and because the passages in the *Iliad*, along with those in the *Nekyia*, provide the best evidence of the antiquity of the Greek judgment of the dead.
have provided a catalog of terms that each of our subject societies found important to the quality of their afterlife aspirations.

This study is divided into four parts. The first part (consisting of chapter 1) surveys and analyzes the views of Plato concerning conduct and behavior as determinants for the afterlife. The second part (chapters 2-5) discusses the comparable views of the pre-Platonic Greeks. The third part (chapters 6-7) examines conduct and behavior as it affects the afterlife in Egyptian religious texts. Part four (chapter 8) provides an explicit comparison of the views of the two societies.

**Part One: the Myths of Plato**

Plato’s work has been analyzed extensively, but usually with regard to his philosophy, and very little scholarly interest has been given to his myths as serious religious texts regarding the judgment of the dead.⁶

Since Plato’s eschatological myths are the centerpiece of this inquiry, part one of this four-part study examines

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⁶ Note that the Egyptian texts are truly religious and that the Greek texts for the most part are not. Homer and the Dramatists are literature and Plato is philosophy. The Greek works, however, do reflect the religious attitudes of at least some portion of their society. Therefore we can legitimately aspire to make comparisons once appropriate care is taken to account for likely context and genre.
the Platonic eschatological myths, and provides a complete catalog and brief discussion of all references in them to conduct and behavior that affects one’s fate in the afterlife.

Our first task, then, is to provide a systematic and thorough analysis of Plato’s eschatological myths; it is this section that primarily differentiates this study from the others discussed above. The behavioral terms in the judgment scenes in the various myths of Plato in the Gorgias, Phaedo, Republic and Phaedrus will provide the benchmark against which all other evidence is compared.

Part Two: The Pre-Platonic Greeks

Part two examines the evolution of the concept of the afterlife from Homer to the Dramatists, also cataloging all references to the afterlife that mention conduct and behavior.

To what extent were conduct and behavior important before Plato? The tendency in much scholarship has been to play down the role of conduct and behavior or to deny that it was important at all. This section will trace a consistent interest in the topic throughout Greece where there was always a strong undercurrent of belief, even when some intellectuals were denying the afterlife.
This part of the study demonstrates that the concept of reward and retribution in an afterlife, based on conduct in this life, is already found in Homer. However, it is in Pythagorean and Orphic circles of Greater Greece that it reaches its most dramatic development, and from that milieu provides such an enormous impact on Plato.

In Homer, contrary to the claims of some scholars (e.g., Erwin Rohde, *Psyche*, cited in chapter 2), we find an afterlife belief. There is conduct and behavior that figures into that afterlife, and there is a concept of something that continued to exist in the afterlife. After all, Homer says that dead men went to Hades as “something” and the gods punished them for breaking oaths. However, these ideas bore little resemblance to what was to develop over the next three or four hundred years.

Homer never denies an existence after death for anyone. However, this afterlife can range from that of a gibbering shadow or strengthless head to that of an articulate ghost and even to that of a very few heroic personalities being rewarded or punished.

Although there are several passages in the Homeric corpus that speak of an afterlife, only a few appear to indicate any sort of a punishment or reward in that afterlife.
Chapter 3 investigates the Greek works from Hesiod to the Orphic Tablets, including Pindar, Bacchylides, Simonides, Solon, Theognis, Heraclitus, Empedocles and the Eleusinian mysteries.

Here we see that the very little information concerning the afterlife found in Homer did not make much of an impression on his mainland intellectual successors. Hesiod, Solon, Theognis and even the later Democritus represent those thinkers who manifest no belief in a beneficent afterlife. Of course, it seems that all Greeks held to the fact of an afterlife – but in the form of the predominant Homeric concept of undifferentiated shades in Hades.⁷

In the western Greek world new ideas were coming to the fore where Pythagoras incorporated, modified and promoted the ideas of the Orphics. Since they believed in the conduct of this life influencing the next one, ethical considerations became more prominent in post-mortem rewards and punishments. Heraclitus, Pindar and Empedocles express these newer ideas in their poetry and thereby set the stage for Plato, who will incorporate them into his own eschatological teachings.

⁷ The Eleusinian mysteries, contrary to the testimony of the intellectuals, did appear to offer some differentiation, which will be investigated in chapters 3, 4 and 8.
Because of the supposed influence the Orphics had on Plato’s myths, one of the more interesting scholarly debates found in this project is that concerning their belief in metempsychosis. Did they hold that belief? We will investigate this issue in this chapter by examining the so-called Orphic tablets of Olbia.

Chapter 4 discusses the Dramatists. Aeschylus and Pindar were born on opposite sides of the Greek world around 520 BCE, just within a generation of the death of Pythagoras. They have both been credited with being the first to posit an afterlife consequence for one’s conduct in this life; however, the question of priority is less important than the fact that two Greeks on opposite sides of the Greek world came to a similar conclusion at approximately the same time.

All of the Dramatists both affirm and deny the afterlife in their writings, sometimes in the same work. Upon deeper analysis, we see that although all of the dramatists had much to say about an afterlife, there are actually very few strong statements linking conduct and behavior to the quality of that afterlife. This probably reflects the variety of contesting religious beliefs prevalent in 5th century Greece.

Chapter 5 reaches some conclusions on the Greek authors. Our investigation into the earlier Greek writers
has shown that the Pythagorean/Orphic literature of the western Greek world was expounding on concepts such as the immortal soul, the soul’s rebirth through cyclic lives and an afterlife consequence for one’s conduct while alive. At this same time the mainland Greek intellectuals were still holding on to the predominant Homeric idea that included no beneficial afterlife.

It was in this intellectual environment that the Sophistic movement was creating a morally relativistic society where the laws were being questioned as having no support other than the conventions of the majority. Into this ethical breakdown came Socrates with his ideas of respect for the virtues and the laws, and building on the western Greek concepts of the soul, Plato followed through with support for the laws beyond that of mere convention, explaining in his dialogues and myths that the virtues were based in a much deeper reality.

All of the Greek literature reviewed in chapters 3 and 4 helped set the stage for what Plato later accomplished — some providing ideas in eschatology and others in ethics.

Part Three: The Egyptians

The third part of this study deals with the connection between conduct and behavior and the afterlife judgment in
ancient Egypt up to the time of the Book of the Dead. An extensive catalog of Egyptian virtues and vices that have afterlife consequences are compiled from the religious texts of the 5th through 18th Dynasties (c. 2700-1200 BCE).

Chapters 6 and 7 investigate the classical judgment of the New Kingdom and the earliest religious texts of the Old and Middle Kingdoms.

After discussing some important concepts concerning the ancient Egyptians as they appear in the Egyptian source texts, four primary questions are examined:

1. What entity is being judged?
2. When did a blessed afterlife become available to all persons?
3. What exactly constitutes the Egyptian judgment of the dead?

Here, it should be noted that the question of the judgment of the dead is nuanced by such factors as: who has an afterlife and who is being judged (King vs. non-royal commoners) and what type of judgment is involved (judicial vs. general). I believe that these factors have historically confused the question and this has led to much divergent scholarly opinion.

4. At what point in the development of the concept of a blessed afterlife did conduct and behavior come to matter?
It should be noted that this is not the same question as -- when was the king first judged or when was the commoner first judged or when did conscience first arise?

Thus, our inquiry concerns the link between conduct and behavior and the attainment of a good, bad or no afterlife and asks: Is that link found prior to the 9/10th Dynasty Instruction for King Merikare? More specifically, is it found in the Old Kingdom and especially in the 5/6th Dynasty Pyramid Texts?

**Part Four: A Comparison**

In chapter 8, the relationship between conduct and behavior and post-mortem beliefs during these three different phases of Egyptian and Greek development are compared and contrasted:

- The dawn of writing (Homer and Pyramid Texts),
- Intermediate texts (pre-Platonics and Merikare),
- Final texts (Plato and Book of the Dead).

In the earliest periods, the texts dealing with an afterlife appear to be concerned only with the elite: the king in Egyptian 5th Dynasty Pyramid Texts and the heroes in Homeric and Hesiodic Greece. This study argues that there is some evidence in the early texts of both societies for a belief that the common people could also be rewarded or
punished in an afterlife. In later periods both societies’ religious texts dealing with the afterlife exhibit a much more developed democratization.

As post-mortem beliefs became more democratic, conduct and behavior grew in importance. However, from the earliest time periods, both societies believe that the gods, primarily Maat in Egypt and Dike in Greece, are responsible for the proper ordering of the cosmos and that violations of that order will call down the most dire consequence -- the loss of a beneficent afterlife.

**General Conclusion**

As we shall see, some scholars allow that Homer’s people believed in an afterlife but denied that its quality depended on one’s conduct and behavior in this life. Many other scholars, of both Egypt and Greece, would agree and deny that moral conduct, as we moderns understand it, mattered significantly in the lives of the people of the earliest period and many also claim that such moral conduct played no part in their beliefs of an afterlife.

This kind of attitude tended to blind others to being able to recognize the values which the ancients held in high esteem and, as we have seen, led many to think that their