

Reading Response 4

Homer's depiction of the underworld appears in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, also known as *Homer's Book of the Dead*. In this book, Odysseus recounts his visit to the underworld.

Odysseus' reasoning for visiting the underworld is to contact the prophet, Tiresias, in hopes that he can help him reach his homeland of Ithaca. First, Odysseus had to sail to the farthest realm of Oceanus. Here Odysseus and his men beached their ship and followed the stream of Oceanus to a specific spot as they were indicated. At the indicated location, Odysseus dug a pit with his sword and poured in it libations to the dead. Here, he also sacrificed animals, having their blood fill the pit. The souls of the dead began to appear and Odysseus tells his men to flay and burn the sacrificed animals, and to pray to Hades and Persephone. At the pit of blood, Odysseus drew his sword and did not allow the spirits to drink the blood until he spoke to Tiresias. First, the soul of Odysseus' comrade, Elpenor, speaks with Odysseus. Elpenor did not have a proper burial after his death and asks Odysseus to properly bury him; Odysseus agrees. Then, Odysseus sees the soul of his mother but doesn't allow her to come near the blood before speaking to Tiresias. The soul of Tiresias comes up to Odysseus and asks him to move his sword so he can drink the blood. After drinking the blood, Tiresias gives his prophecies to Odysseus and informs him that the souls that he lets near the blood will speak to him and those that he refuses will back away from him. He then allows the soul of his mother to drink from the pit and she reveals to him that this is where mortals go when they die. After this, the souls of many noble people as well as the souls of heroes, like Achilles and Agamemnon, approached the pit and spoke with Odysseus. It is also worth noting that Odysseus also saw Tantalus and Sisyphus enduring harsh punishments. Tantalus and Sisyphus were notorious for committing crimes against gods. The book ends with hoards of shrieking souls swarming up towards Odysseus which frightens him and causes him to run towards his ship to continue his journey.

In *Plato's Myth of Er*, the afterlife is depicted very differently than that of Homer. Plato's depiction of the afterlife has religious and philosophical influence. In this story, a man named

Er, who died in war, came back to life twelve days after his death, and told what he had seen in the other world. Er said that when his soul left his body, it traveled with many other souls to a divine destination. Here, there were two openings in the earth next to each other, and opposite were two other openings in the upper region of the sky. There were judges in the space between these openings who passed sentences. The judges ordered the virtuous souls to go to the right through one of the upward openings in the sky but the sinful souls were sent to the left through one of the downward openings. When Er approached the judges, they told him that he was chosen to be a messenger to humans about the afterlife and ordered him to observe everything. From the remaining two openings, Er observed many souls rise out of the earth covered with dust and dirt, and many other souls coming out of the sky, pure and shining. Now, with these two groups of souls in the same place, they questioned one another and told each other about what they had experienced. Those who came up from earth were in distress and told of the many things they had suffered and terrible things they had seen in their thousand year journey under the earth. Those who descended from the sky recounted immense happiness and sights of inexpressible beauty. In other words, sinners were punished for their sins and the virtuous were rewarded for their good behaviors. After completing this journey, the souls were to take another journey and choose their next life. This choice was very important for the souls, as it would reflect what they had learned in life and in death about the importance of virtue. After choosing their next life, the souls were encamped by the river of forgetfulness where they were to drink a fixed amount of the water from it. Drinking this water made the souls forgetful of everything. In the middle of the night, there were thunder and earthquakes. The souls slept through it but suddenly, the souls exploded upwards like shooting stars, each in a different direction to be reborn. At this point, Er's soul mysteriously returns to his body on earth and his journey in the afterlife ends.

Homer's depiction of the underworld is not very clear when compared to Plato's. It seems that everyone ends up in the same place after they die in Homer's account. Being a hero, living a virtuous life, or living a sinful life did not matter. They would all end up in the same

realm in the underworld. However, Homer does imply that those who committed crimes against the gods were punished in the underworld. These people were possibly placed in a special place in the underworld to be punished. He also depicts the spirits of the underworld with the same pursuits, passions, and prejudices they had while alive; but they are joyless, without direction, and in gloom. Unlike Homer's depiction, Plato's depiction of the afterlife is very clear and has religious and philosophical significance. In Plato's afterlife, when the soul leaves the body, the soul travels to a divine place where they are rewarded for their virtues and punished for their sins. From their virtues and sins, as well as the rewards and punishments that followed them, the soul is expected to learn about the importance of living a good, virtuous life. With the experiences of life and death now under their belt, the souls were to choose their next life and undergo reincarnation. There is no indication of rebirth or reincarnation of any sort in Homer's afterlife.

It is evident that Plato's afterlife has much more meaning than Homer's. Homer's afterlife seems to just be a gloomy place where mortal souls accumulate and stay forever. Plato's afterlife, on the other hand, represents much more. It consists of the moral judgment of one's soul and many important lessons. Every virtue and every sin is accounted for, as the virtues are rewarded and the sins are punished. Given that Christianity was spreading in the region at the time of Plato's writing, it is easy to understand why there is religious and philosophical influence in his depiction. With Homer's writing being much older than Plato's, it is understandable why Homer's depiction of the afterlife is so vague and obscure when compared to Plato's.