

THE MYSTIC PHILOSOPHY OF ORPHEUS

Imperator Ralph M. Lewis, F.R.C.

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The most influential of all the mystery schools at this period was the Orphic. Its peregrine initiators were the first missionaries in the pre-Christian world. They journeyed from island to island, community to community, in the Hellenic world, extolling the advantages of initiation into the Orphic mysteries and initiating candidates. Wherever they went, they established branches of the ever-expanding school. It is related that the founder of the Orphic mysteries was Orpheus, a partly legendary and partly historical character. It is said that he lived, before the Trojan War, in Thrace. Thrace was that section of ancient Greece that now corresponds to Northeast Macedonia.

Orpheus was a priest of the Dionysiac mysteries, also one of the early mystery schools of Greece. He was held to be a magician and a theologian, the latter in the sense of an exponent of the life of the gods. Most of all, he was famed as a great musician. It is said that he charmed everyone with the music of his lyre. There is a report that he journeyed into Hades. Hades was not necessarily hell, as we think of it today, but rather another world, another plane of existence, in which humans dwelt, sometimes in torment and at other times in a state of paradise. Orpheus went to Hades in search of his sweetheart and while in Hades his beautiful music, we are told, won for him her release.

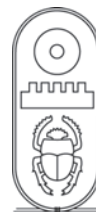


The Dionysiac Mysteries: Dionysus at the side of his mother Semele, attended by a woman with sacred cakes. [Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii.](#)

Orpheus's adventures in Hades became the basis of the Orphic doctrines. Each of his experiences was interpreted from a mystical point of view. The Orphic doctrines contended that the human soul is of divine origin, that it lives for thousands of years in the body and forever out of the body. Thus the Orphic doctrines expounded immortality. The soul, however, is of a mixed nature. Aside from its divine content, there clings to it an evil aspect. The main object of human existence, therefore, is to rid the soul of its evil contamination. The body is the prison, the tomb of the soul, and the soul is imprisoned within it.

Purity of Living

Only purity of living cleanses humans of sin and begins the lessening of that evil aspect of the soul. In fact, only purification will finally release the soul from its imprisonment in the mortal body. This final release cannot be accomplished in just one lifetime. There must be several incarnations until the soul is eventually free from sin. After any one exemplary life, the soul enters Hades. There it resides for a thousand years of joy



and then it resurrects to once again enter a mortal body.

There must be *triple* good lives here and on the other side before final release of the soul, so the Orphic doctrines expound. Each life must purge the soul of its titan or evil aspect. When the three lives of purity here and in Hades have been lived, then the soul resides in eternal happiness, in a state of paradise. The initiatory rite, to which candidates were obliged to submit, set forth the obligations that they must take. It also defined the kind of life they must live on earth. It admonished candidates, for example, not to eat meat, to thereafter clothe themselves in white garments and be chaste in their conduct. These initiations, sometimes held in grottoes, sometimes out in the open when the moon was full, dramatically depict for the tyro the journey into Hades and what he or she must expect. Candidates must display courage; they must display temperance.

The guidance of the neophyte's life was outlined for her or him. This guidance was given in allegorical terms by one preceptor. Another preceptor would explain the often-ambiguous terms, giving their full and rich esoteric meaning. The allegorical terms were meaningless to the outer, profane world, sounding like so much gibberish. Whenever the tyros, the neophytes, after their initiation, were asked about the wisdom, they would truthfully relate that they had been told thus and thus, and they would give just the allegorical terms, which were meaningless to others, but to which they, the candidates, possessed the inner key.

Pythagoras, it has been held, was the greatest of the converts to the Orphic mysteries. In his writings, he gives us some of this allegorical guidance. A few of the sayings we shall set forth, and likewise give the esoteric interpretations of them.

Esoteric Interpretations of Allegorical Guidance:

- “Pass not over a balance” refers to justice and equality.

- “Wear not a ring” is an admonishment not to bind one's soul about with a chain of ignorance, as the finger is bound with a ring.
- “Lay not hold of everyone readily with the right hand,” you will understand to mean: try and prove everyone before you admit him or her to your society as a friend and companion.
- “Eat not the heart,” you will construe as: rend not asunder the social bond that unites your society, by unnecessary disputes and useless differences.
- “Sleep not at noon” is an admonishment to shut not your eyes against the Light of Knowledge at a time when its hidden stores are more clearly displayed before you.

Soul Is Immortal

The Orphic doctrines won an immortal place in philosophy beginning with Socrates. According to Socrates, as related to us in the *Dialogues of Plato*, the soul is immortal. It has descended into humans from its high estate, but in the mortal it is transient. Eventually, it returns to its infinite source, nature. In nature the soul is akin to the first wisdom of nature. Therefore, the soul has innate wisdom or the wisdom of nature. The soul is the high good and its knowledge is the only true knowledge. The knowledge of the world of sensation, the knowledge received through our senses, is illusory and false. It becomes incumbent on us to awaken the knowledge of the soul, to recollect that which is within us. All humans are thus made equal, because the wisdom of the soul is alike in all mortals, regardless of their station in life or their birth.

In the *Phaedo*, Socrates tells Simmias that the purification is necessary for the separation of the soul from the body. This, of course, is a direct example of the Orphic doctrines. Socrates expounds that every philosopher seeks death instead of fearing it, but it is not the death that the average person knows about. It is the release of the

soul, it is the allowing of the soul to aspire to higher things, it is the liberation of the soul from those physical joys and pains that nail it to the body.

Plato enlarged upon the concepts of his master. To him the conscious life is the ordeal which the soul must experience before it can be released from its confinement in mortal form. He expounded that the soul is the only reality and is unchanging. Furthermore, the knowledge of the soul is the only true knowledge. The soul has inherent within it certain universals, certain fundamental ideas which all humans share alike, regardless of their station in life. Such ideas are the ideas of beauty, of love, of justice. The things of the world have no true reality; they do not actually have form until they come to participate in these universals or these ideas of the soul. In other words, things of the world must bind themselves to the soul, must find

a relationship to those inherent ideas that we have or else they are just illusory.

If something of the world appears to be beautiful, then that is a real form, because it is participating in that universal idea of beauty that is of the soul. In seeking the beautiful, humans are, therefore, realizing the content of the soul. They are trying to give objectification to their subjective and divine impulses. Art, music, poetry, these cause each of us to know the perfection of our soul. When we pursue these things, our consciousness is actually dwelling upon the nature of our soul. Our divine self is motivating us.

If these doctrines that we have just related seem familiar to you, it is because you have read, for example, the *Dialogues* of Plato or else you have experienced the perpetuation of some of these Orphic concepts in contemporary religion.

Θεὸς ἐγένου ἐξ ἀνθρώπου.

Through being a Mortal,
You have become God.

—Orphic Gold Tablet from Lucania

