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The Sweet and Elusive Hopes of Eleusis¹

by FRED D. MILLER, JR.

The Eleusinian mysteries made a deep impression upon Roman attitudes concerning death as Cicero testifies in the first century B.C.:

...among the many excellent and indeed divine institutions which your Athens has brought forth and contributed to human life, none, in my opinion, is better than those mysteries. For by their means we have been brought out of our barbarous and savage mode of life and educated and refined to a state of life and educated and refined to a state of civilization; and as the rites are called "initiations," so in very truth we have learned from them the beginnings of life, and have gained the power not only to live happily, but also to die with a better hope.²

Cicero’s younger contemporary, Crinagoras, poet of Lesbos, expresses a similar respect for them in the early imperial era:

Even if your life is always sedentary, and you never sail the sea or walk the highways, all the same set foot on Cecropia [Attica], so that you may see those long nights of Demeter’s sacred rites through which, while you live, your heart is without a care, and when you join the majority, your heart will be lighter.³

These nocturnal rites (δόγμα, τελεταί), which climaxed the annual festival held in the month of Boedromion (September) for Demeter and Persephone (and, later, the god Iacchos), were a source of consolation and even inspiration for the men and women admitted to the temple of initiation (ΤΕΑΕΟΝΕΛΩΝ) in Eleusis. It has often been claimed that the Eleusinian religion had an important role in the development of ancient Greek belief concerning post-mortem existence. Unquestionably, to those initiated in the mysteries in the Hellenistic and Roman periods, Eleusis held out a clear promise of a personal survival of death and of a blessed afterlife.⁴ But it is far more difficult to assess the influence of the cult upon the ways people had of thinking about death and the hereafter in the archaic and classical ages of Greece. It is necessary to consider two interrelated questions: What, exactly, were the benefits of initiation which

¹. This paper was written while I was a fellow at the Institute for Research in the Humanities at the University of Wisconsin. I am grateful to my colleagues at the Institute, Emmett L. Bennett, Jr., Max Baeumer, and Lawrence J. Johnson, for helpful discussions and criticisms of an earlier draft.


³. Palatine Anthology 11.42 = Epigr. 47, Rubens.

were promised at Eleusis? And insofar as the specific nature of benefits for which participants hoped can be ascertained, how early did such hopes begin to be aroused?

The confidence with which the “Eleusinian faith” has been reconstructed by historians of religion seems scarcely warranted by the available evidence. Scholars have experienced only frustration in the search for early epigraphic data bearing on the details of the rites and on their religious significance. The evidence available from the manuscript tradition is also distressingly thin, although it has been subjected to repeated, minute inspection by modern scholars. There are some brief, suggestive passages in the Homeric Hymn to Demeter, which should probably be dated within a half-century of 600 B.C., a few scraps from Sophocles and Pindar in the early fifth century, some allusions in Aristophanes’ comedy The Frogs, produced at the end of that century, and a reference in an oration of Isocrates from the early fourth century. It should be emphasized that the Eleusinian tradition was essentially oral and, therefore, not necessarily subject to the controls of a written tradition. It is hardly justified to assume a priori that the rituals associated with Eleusis underwent no change whatsoever over time; yet, even if it is presumed (on the basis of the facts that the cult retained a permanent site and remained under the control of two ancient dynasties, the Eumolpids and Kerykes) that there was little change in the sacred objects revealed to the initiates at the climax of the rite and in the ritual utterances of the hierophant, there is no reason to assume constancy in the interpretation placed upon them by the participants or even in the explanations proffered by their personal sponsors, the mystagogoi. Since religious symbols can take on

5. Cf. G. Mylonas, *Eleusis and the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1961), 281: “... the belief that inscriptions would be found on which the Hierophants had recorded their ritual and its meaning has faded completely; ... the last Hierophant carried with him to the grave the secrets which had been transmitted orally for untold generations, from the one high priest to the next.”

6. U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff contends that “the vocabulary, the relationship to Homer and Hesiod, and the style as a whole leave no doubt that it is no older than the sixth century B.C.” (Der Glaube der Hellenen [Berlin: Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1932], 2.47). Mylonas seems to have misread this (Eleusis, 3n). H. G. Evelyn-White defends a date as early as the seventh century (Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homerica [Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1914], xxxvi). T. W. Allen, W. R. Halliday, and R. E. Sikes (The Homeric Hymns [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1936], 111 f.), followed by Mylonas (Eleusis, 3n), favor a date around 600 B.C. In a recent, careful review of the evidence N. J. Richardson (The Homeric Hymn to Demeter [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974], 5-11) argues that the date of composition must lie between ca. 650 and ca. 550.

7. Aristophanes Peace 374 f. may also contain a hint of post-mortem benefits which a participant hopes to gain from the mysteries.

8. P. Foucart in *Les Mystéres d’Éleusis* (Paris: Librairie de l’Archives Nationales, 1914) argues that “it is not necessary to look for an evolution in the history of the mysteries: no religious or philosophical doctrine modified their rites and their doctrines. Starting from the day when they were definitely constituted until the end of paganism, they remained immutable” (260). But he fails to distinguish between the ritual acts and utterances occurring in the actual initiation and the religious beliefs in terms of which such occurrences were interpreted by the participants: e.g., “Could they, in a religion adapted by the state in a ritual instituted by Demeter herself, admit new ideas and ceremonies, introduce into the cycle of Eleusinian deities an [Orphic] god like Zagreus who would have usurped their functions and honors?” (256, my italics).

There is also no evidence that the board of three exegetai drawn from the Eumolpid clan, which sometimes tendered legal advice relating to the cult of Eleusis, was concerned with maintaining doctrinal orthodoxy. As F. Jacoby has convincingly argued, “They were acquainted with rituals and able to give
new meanings in the course of fundamental changes in popular attitudes toward religious matters, it is essential to mark the time at which a particular attitude toward the mysteries is expressed. And it cannot be uncritically assumed that a statement made at a later time expresses religious views held at an earlier time.

There is some archaeological evidence that Eleusis was an important religious site even during the Mycenaean age of Greece. Moreover, the Greeks themselves believed that some of their oldest poetry was recited during the Eleusinian festival. But the earliest literary source for the religious views actually associated with Eleusis is the Hymn to Demeter, composed around 600 B.C. In the Hymn's account of Demeter's establishment of the mysteries, she demonstrates to the Eleusinian ancestors the performance of her rituals and reveals her awesome rites, which in no way can be transgressed or prized into or sounded; for great awe for gods holds speech in check.

The requirement of secrecy, by itself, does not prove the existence of any esoteric teachings; but the Hymn proceeds to make crucial claims about the fate of those who partake in the mysteries, as opposed to those who do not:

Prosperous is he of men on earth who has beheld these things; but he who is not initiated and takes no part in the rites, never of like things has a portion when he is dead under danky gloom.

To interpret this passage correctly it is necessary to understand the description of the initiate as öββίος. To most modern scholars these lines have appeared to say that the initiate is "blessed" in the afterlife and that the uninitiated person will not "enjoy a like fate after he is dead."

In fact, however, it is unlikely that the word would have suggested spiritual blessedness to the rhapsode's original listeners in the late seventh or early sixth century. In epic poetry it is never used for post-mortem

Authoritative information about applying them; but they did not explain the ritual... by speculations as to its religious meaning. There is not the vestige of a dogma or any religious doctrine at all that could be derived from ancient exegesis," Atthis: The Local Chronicles of Ancient Athens (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1949), 49.

9. Mylonas, Eleusis, 38-57, and E. Vermeule, Greece in the Bronze Age (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1972), 287, identify the isolated Megaron B, located on the same site as the later telesterion at Eleusis, as a Mycenaean temple, without inferring a continuously existing cult in honor of Demeter (whose name has yet to be identified in Linear B inscriptions). V. R. d'A. Desborough, The Last Mycenaean and their Successors (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), is uncertain, however, even about the religious nature of Megaron B because "no evidence came to light to show that this spot was used for any purpose at any time between LH III [ca. 1350-1100] and the sixth century. The gap is formidable" (43). B. C. Dietrich attempts to respond to this in The Origins of Greek Religion (New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1974), 141n, but it can scarcely be claimed that archaeological findings provide strong confirmation for the continuous existence of a single cult from the Mycenaean era.


11. Reading ιλεγεμεν, "mouldy, slimy," with the MS.; some editors correct this to the Homeric ἤγεμεν, "hazy, murky" (as at I. 446).

spiritual blessedness, but only for prosperity, measured in terms of worldly possessions. For example, a disguised Odysseus describes himself to Penelope's suitors as having been δλβιος in wealth, in having a home.13

More significantly, Achilles addresses the grief-stricken Priam, who has come for the body of his dead son, "We hear you used to be δλβιος," and amplifies, "you were lord once in your wealth (πλούτω) and children."14 The connection between wealth and being δλβιος is established in the Hymn itself a few lines later:

...Exceedingly prosperous (μεί γ' δλβιος) is he whom they [the goddesses]
zealously love among the men on earth:
speedily they send, as guest in his great house,
Ploutos, who gives wealth to mortal men.

Ploutos therefore has a place in the Eleusinian pantheon. In the ceramic art of the fourth century (which may, or may not, have some direct connection with Eleusis).15 Ploutos was represented as a god of fertility who appeared as a child, matured, and grew old by the time of the harvest. Thus it can at least be said that the person of Ploutos suggests, for the Eleusinian cult, an emphasis on abundant harvests and material prosperity.

But the Hymn also holds out to those who partake in the mysteries the promise that they will be δλβιος even after they are dead; otherwise, it is hard to understand the statement that the uninitiated will never have a "portion of like things" (δωκο()] when they are dead.16 And yet δλβιος seems inappropriate as a description of the condition of a deceased person. It is not helpful to suggest that the word has some sense other than "prosperous" in the "worldly sense" without explaining what this sense might be.17 One solution to the problem is to interpret the promise of the Hymn as having nothing to do with the spiritual condition of the dead. Rather, the mysteries would be understood, by participants, as holding out, as a source of consolation and hope, the promise that, although they

13. Odyssey 17.420; cf. 11.450.
15. These include representations of a child with cornucopia on a late red-figured hydria from Rhodes (depicted in Martin Nilsson, Geschichte der Griechischen Religion [Munich: C. H. Beck'sche Verlagshandlung, 1967], 1, Pl. 44.1; and discussed in Nilsson, Geschichte, 1.317, Minoan-Mycenaean Religion and its Survival in Greek Religion [Kongressutgivna av Kungl. Humanistiska Vetenskapsamfundet i Lund, Bd. 9, 1927], 559; Richardson, Homeric Hymn, 318); and on a pelike from Kertsch with paintings on both sides (depicted in Nilsson, Geschichte, Pl. 46.1, and discussed in Geschichte, 1.318, Minoan-Mycenaean Religion, 560 f., and Richardson, Homeric Hymn, 318 f.; compare the vase lid in Tübingen in Nilsson, Geschichte, Pl. 45.1, and the pelike out of the Sandford-Graham collection in Pl. 53.2). Ploutos is also depicted as an old man with an overflowing horn of plenty (on a vase from Vulci in Nilsson, Geschichte, Pl. 42.1, discussed in Geschichte, 1.319, 472, and Minoan-Mycenaean Religion, 561 f.). Ploutos was thus represented as a god of fertility who appeared as a child, matured, and grew old by the time of harvest. Mylonas is rather sceptical as to the relevance of these representations to the actual rituals of Eleusis (Eleusis, 210, 213).
16. Wilamowitz (Glaube. 2.43) sees no positive claim concerning the afterlife here, but he was relying upon a variant reading of θνιος for θνιαν. Cf. Karl Kerényi, Die Mysterien von Eleusis (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1962), n. 15.
17. Kerényi suggests that the word has a special meaning for the initiates (Mysterien, 29), but he does not deal with the difficulty that the word occurs in its ordinary sense at I. 486.
would die, their existence would be perpetuated in their offspring who would multiply and prosper. This is essentially a promise of collective immortality rather than personal survival. It has been argued that, as an agricultural cult, the Eleusinian would naturally be more concerned with new life (crops) perpetually coming into existence out of old than with the continued existence of any particular individual (whether it be a human or a wheat plant.) This would also be in accord with the Homeric association of being δαβιδς and having progeny.

Although this solution is, perhaps, the tidiest, many scholars have felt, on the basis of later Greek and Roman perceptions of the mysteries, that there must be more than this to the promise of Eleusis even in earlier times. They have tried to connect the promise to the actual condition of the deceased by means of two different lines of interpretation: according to one interpretation Homer's description of the souls of the deceased in the underworld provides the context in which the promise was understood by the participants; according to the other interpretation the context is defined by the translation myths in Homer and Hesiod in which humans escape death by being transported by the gods to Elysium. In support of the latter, it might seem significant that Hesiod uses the word δαβιδς to describe the heroes who have been transported to the Isles of the Blessed. But they are "prosperous" because "the land bears them honey-sweet fruit three times a year." On this interpretation the "secret" of the mysteries was a promise of Elysium or the Isles of the Blessed to those initiated at Eleusis. However, the godlike heroes of the translation myths never died. They escaped death as a result of divine intervention, and thus they remained embodied human beings capable of enjoying worldly prosperity. The difference between such fortunate persons and the ordinary run of mortals, including the participants in the mysteries, is very real for the poet of the Hymn to Demeter, as he shows in the episode of Demophoon.

While she abides at Eleusis, the goddess Demeter assumes the role of nurse to the infant Demophoon. She exhibits occult powers, making use of a charm or remedy and a safeguard against witchcraft and teething pains; and, in secret, she contrives to make the child immortal by anointing him with ambrosia in daytime and breathing upon him. "In the night she would conceal him in the fire's force like a blazing piece of wood." He matured at an unnatural rate with a godlike countenance, and Demeter would have made him unaging (αγηγως) and immortal (αδανατος) if the child's mother had not spied on her and caught her in the

18. A promise of fertility is implicit in the reference to Ploutos in the Hymn (cf. supra n. 15). L. Deubner (Attische Feste, 86) detects evidence of "an ancient fertility charm" in a ritual form which, to be sure, is found only in late sources: Proclus (On Timaeus 293c) reports, "in the Eleusinian rites, looking up to the heavens, they cry 'rain' (δαιμων), and looking down to earth, they cry 'receive' (εγκλαιμον);" cf. Hippolytus Refutatio 5.7.34. There is no reason to accept Deubner's further claim that this primitive fertility religion represents a pre-mythical level of thought.
act of putting him in the fire. In response to Metaneira's outcry, Demeter condemns mortals for their senselessness and inability to foresee their portion:

[259] Immortal and unaging for all his days
would I have made your dear child and granted him imperishable honor,
but now it is not possible for him to escape death and the demons.

Although Demeter does promise unfailing honor to Demophoon and proceeds to institute her rites, in view of this passage one can scarcely agree with the thesis that the “secret” of Eleusis was a promise of immortality to Demophoon and his kinsmen.22 It may be objected at this point that it is a mistake to press the details of this particular myth23 too far and to expect consistency in “primitive” reflections about death and what comes after it. In response to this it must be emphasized that the myth is internally consistent and that it presents a view of death and immortality which presupposes a conception of the person that may be described as naive nondualism: a person is thought of as a human being, a biological organism, which is born, lives, and finally dies, and which is, accordingly, in no way divine. Such a view does not necessarily rule out immortality, but immortality can only consist in the survival, without death, of the embodied person. This can only be achieved by means of some physical transformation or transmutation of the living organism by magical or medical means or by means of some physical transportation of the living organism to some geographical domain where death has no dominion. The idea that the person can continue to live after the death of the human organism makes no sense on the nondualistic view of the person. Moreover, it seems unreasonable to suppose that the initiates expected to gain admission to Elysium when by a single failing they failed to satisfy a minimal requirement of admission: they died.

The other way of trying to connect the promise of Eleusis with the actual condition of the deceased relies upon the hypothesis that the dead were conceived by the rhapsode and his listeners in the Homeric way, wherein the human being perishes at death but is succeeded by the

23. The significance of this story is in dispute. On the one hand, Nilsson goes too far in discounting its importance: “This episode was created out of the poetic design to form a transition to the revealing of Demeter” (Geschichte, 1.660). This rests on the dubious assumption that mythic materials should be classified either as etiological or as folklore, i.e., artistic fabrications. Since Demeter’s effort misfired, the episode would hardly be repeated in ritual. However, the significance of the tale can only be seen within the context of the Hymn: it serves to establish the existence of Demeter’s occult powers, and it associates the goddess with the role of nurse, so that it lends credibility to the promise of benefits from the mysteries. S. Eitrem (“Eleusinia—les mystères et l’agriculture,” Symbolae Osloenses, 20 [1940], 133–51), on the other hand, seems to go too far in deriving a religious significance from the episode: regarding “the gift of blissful immortality,” he contends that “it is impossible for the goddess to realize it, thanks to the stupidity of men.” Moreover, the tale “has the appearance of an answer to the question why the mystes of Eleusis do not aspire to deification” (149). This is not supported by the text. The attempt of Demeter is an isolated instance of favoritism. Demophoon is not standing proxy for the human race, and Metaneira is not an Eleusinian Eve condemning the human race through her misdeeds. But Eitrem is quite right to suggest that the story brings out the distinction between immortality and the benefits, whatever they may be, of Eleusis.
physical residue of his corpse and spirit. Although there is a sense in which the living human being and the spirit which survives him share a personal identity, the living person does not seem to be identified with an indwelling spirit. The spirit or ψυχή is physical in nature but intangible, like smoke or a shadow, with only the faintest trace of a living human's rational or emotional capacity. Although the spirit visually resembles the living person, it lacks the person's distinctive ability to project himself into the world by carrying out actions on account of its disembodied character. The spirits, who are driven by some sort of inner necessity to Hades, must dwell there under "misty gloom" or, in Hesiod's representation, "under danky gloom." It must be emphasized that this interpretation is only an hypothesis, since there is no mention of ψυχή or ζώωλον in the Hymn; but it is not a groundless hypothesis, since there is strong evidence of Homeric influence throughout the Hymn. According to the interpretation founded on this hypothesis, the promise is not of genuine life after death, in the sense that the initiated could hope, when deceased, to enjoy a level of awareness or capacity for action characteristic of an embodied living person; rather, it is a promise of relatively better postmortem conditions for the spirits of the initiated.

The Hymn itself offers only one possible clue as to the form which the "prosperity" of these spirits will take:

[481] ... he who is not initiated and takes no part in the rites, never of like things has a portion when he is dead under danky gloom.

It might have appeared from the context that a most significant benefit of the mysteries is that the spirits of the initiated will escape the fate of being consigned to the "danky gloom"—that is, they will not be exiled from the sunlight. Echoes of this particular hope might then be found represented in colorful terms in Aristophanes' Frogs, which was produced two centuries later: The comedy, which follows a descent by Dionysus to Hades, contains, early on, a rough sketch of infernal geography by Heracles, who has made the trip earlier himself:

[154] Her.: Next the blowing of flutes will go around you, and you'll see the finest sunshine—like ours—groves of myrrle, and happy bands of men and women, and much hand-clapping.
Dion.: Who are they?
Her.: Those who have been initiated.

Later, a chorus of deceased initiates provides a very significant description:

24. The textual basis for this interpretation is prepared in my "Homeric Death," forthcoming.
25. Cf. Richardson's discussion of similarities and differences between the Hymn and Homer, Homeric Hymn, 30-52.
Chor.: Let’s go to the flowery meadows abounding in roses, in our own way, with the fairest dances (καλλιχορηγώτατον) playing, which the prosperous fates (Δήμαι Μείωται) convene. For us alone sun and sacred light, who were initiated and maintained a righteous way of life toward strangers and fellow citizens.

The point has been made already that later sources such as the Frogs should not be relied upon, when they are taken by themselves, as sources for substantive points of doctrine held in connection with the mysteries at a much earlier time. Yet it seems permissible to use them, with care, but only in connection with themes of which there is already some indication in earlier material. Indeed, much of what the chorus says would seem to be in tune with the suggestion of the Hymn that the spirits of the initiates will escape from the “danky gloom.” Sunlight, flute music, hand-clapping, circle dancing—this is Aristophanes’ vision of the “portion” of the initiates after death. His term καλλιχορηγώτατον, “with the fairest dances,” is an allusion to the well called Callichorus, mentioned by Pausanias as the place where the Eleusinian women first danced and came to the goddess. Pausanias seems to have in mind a ritual dance which was still carried on in his own time, and Aristophanes suggests that such dancing serves as a paradigm of the activity of the spirits of the initiated. The prospect of an unending round of repetitious circle dancing by shadowy creatures in the sunlight may not appear especially inspiring to us, but it would be an obvious improvement over the plight of the shades described in Homer.

On this line of interpretation, which is consistent with the evidence of the Hymn and which is supported by Aristophanes, those who had not been initiated could not hope to trip through rose-studded meadows after death. The rot and darkness of Hades awaited them instead. But there is no implication so far that those who fail to partake in the mysteries have to look forward to punishment from Persephone and her minions after death.

26. Reading ἱερόν with W. B. Stanford, Aristophanes The Frogs (London: Macmillan, 1958), li, 113. 27. The Frogs fails to meet this requirement in connection with two themes. (1) Aristophanes’ chorus makes reference to ἱερόν (597 ff.), who is not mentioned at all in the Hymn to Demeter but evidently emerged later as an important figure in the Eleusinian pantheon; cf. Wilamowitz, Glaube, 2.161. (2) There is also no apparent basis in the Hymn for the requirement of “maintaining a righteous way of life” (διεπήκε τὸν ἀρετὴν) in order to prosper after death (450 ff.; cf. n. 47 infra).

28. Pausanias I.38.6; cf. Mylonas, Εὐερία, 73. The well was used by the goddess to mark the site of her temple and altar (Hymn 270–72).


30. Richardson (Homeric Hymn, 315) suggests that the talk of decay in the Hymn and in Hesiod involves a confusion between ghost and corpse (alluding to the “decaying grave” in Sophocles Ajax 1167). But what might instead be involved is an analog, if both body and spirit are physical residues of the body which remains underground.
Nevertheless, another passage of the Hymn has seemed to some to provide a basis for the interpretation that the uninitiated “shall do penance everlastingly.” In this passage, Hades speaks to Persephone in an attempt to persuade her to stay with him:

... while you are here
you shall have dominion over everything that lives and creeps,
and you shall have the greatest prerogatives among the immortals;
to wrong-doers there will be retribution every day,
who do not appease your might with offerings,
religiously making sacrifice and rendering appropriate gifts.

Although some scholars have contended that Hades is implying eternal punishment, especially in line 366, the passage as a whole is not evidently concerned with punishment after death, since it concerns Persephone’s dominion over living things. There are, in fact, a number of cases in which Persephone and Demeter punish the living. In one tale, told by a hierophant, the goddesses take revenge against a man who cheated them out of an offering of a horse: “the one who did these things perished by the most painful death, by starvation; for even though many good things were placed before him on the table, the wheat-bread and barley-bread seemed to smell very bad, and he could not eat.” There are other examples, involving punishment for trespassing on sanctuary grounds, revealing the secrets, or prying into them. Sometimes the state was the mechanism by which retribution was exacted: trespassing and sacrilege were both punished by death. The thrust of Hades’ promise in the Hymn would seem to be that this sort of thing, namely punishment by death, could be expected to happen “every day.” The most that can be said for the claim that line 366 implies eternal punishment is that the line, read out of context, is ambiguous; but when it is read in context it seems to pertain to punishment of the living. It is important to recognize the open-ended character of a passage such as this. It is very doubtful whether the author actually intended to rule out post-mortem punishment; the question of whether the punishment of offenders would continue after death might simply not have arisen. Such an element of ambiguity may have left room

35. Pseudo-Lysias Against Andocides 1. The speech, which concerns a trial for impiety in 399 B.C. for offenses against the mysteries, was written some time after the actual event, apparently by the descendant of an Eleusinian hierophant (cf. 54).
37. Pseudo-Lysias Against Andocides 31, 53, 55; Livy 31.14; Diogenes Laertius 2.101; Scholium on Aristophanes Frogs 320. In connection with such infraction of cult regulations, Pericles is supposed to have remarked that “concerning such cases one ought not only to use the written laws, but also the unwritten, in accordance with which the Eumolpids do exegesis, which none yet was entitled to annul nor dared to gainsay, nor do they know who established them; for he believed that they would pay the penalty not only to human beings but also to the gods” (Andocides 10). Jacoby sees a distinction between the punishment decreed in the secular courts and “the slow but certain vengeance of the gods” (Atthis, 246, n. 96).
for subsequent reinterpretation: there are certainly references to post-mortem punishment much later in the *Frogs.* There is a distinctive imprecision and open-endedness in the promises as well as the threats made on the part of the gods in the *Hymn to Demeter.*

Similar ambiguity haunts even later evidence, such as a fifth-century fragment of Pindar. This enormously influential poet gave voice to fundamentally new religious views in the second *Olympian Ode* and other works. Although these contain innovative ideas about reincarnation and post-mortem punishment, Pindar seems to have allowed the doctrinal content of his poetry to be influenced by the preferences of his patrons, since he voiced with equal enthusiasm old-fashioned notions about death and the hereafter: “Seek not, my soul, immortal life, but enjoy fully your means where you can.” There is obvious need to use great care in interpreting Pindar’s reference to the mysteries, a fragment from a dirge for an initiate of Eleusis:

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[fr. 138] Blessed (διβιος) is he who has seen these things before he goes under hollow earth; for he knows the end of life and knows the Zeus-given beginning.
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Pindar has, literally, breathed life into the old formula, if the final words, “Zeus-given beginning,” refer to a beginning of life after death. (Whether it is the real point of the words cannot, of course, be determined with certainty.) The fact that these lines have survived out of context, however, still leaves open the possibility of two fundamentally different lines of interpretation of the insight attained by Pindar’s initiate: (1) the death of the initiate will be followed by a renewal of his life (the doctrine of personal immortality) or (2) the death of one human being or living thing will be followed by the beginning of life by other human beings or living things (the doctrine of collective immortality). The arguments advanced in support of interpretation (2) in connection with the *Hymn to Demeter* could be repeated here; but, again, they are not decisive. On the other hand, it is tempting to eliminate this ambiguity by introducing another fragment of Pindar (131), which begins with a reference to a rite (τελετή) which frees us from toil and yields us a blessed portion (διβια τις): “while the body of all [human beings] obeys powerful death, still an image of life remains living, for it alone is of the gods.” Of course, some other rite beside the Eleusinian may be intended here. But, on the hypothesis that fragment 131 *can* legitimately be connected with fragment 138, they provide evidence that, in the early fifth century, an initiate at Eleusis embraced the doctrine of personal immortality. Moreover, they provide some content for such a doctrine. They imply a distinction between the person and the human being, the biological organism which perishes at death. The soul

38. Cf., for example, *Frogs* 45.
is not, as in Homer, a mere residue of the person; it is the person itself, which continues to live when the body dies. The person is viewed, in a dualistic as opposed to a nondualistic manner, as a divine passenger occupying a body for a time and escaping from it at death. This view bears a striking resemblance to the view of the person which Pindar develops in the second Olympian Ode, where the divine passenger undergoes post-mortem judgment and punishment or reward, and receives a series of incarnations until it attains the realm of the blessed. Since this whole body of belief has nothing to do with Eleusis, since it is antithetical to the nondualistic view of the person expressed in the Hymn, even if it is true that Pindar intended fragment 131 as a comment on the mysteries, it expresses something he, or the initiates for whom he was writing, brought to the experience of Eleusis in order to understand it, rather than anything he found in the Eleusinian tradition.

There is less open-endedness in an important fragment which Plutarch preserved for us from Sophocles' Triptolemus, a drama produced in 464 B.C. and named for a legendary figure associated with Eleusis:

[fr. 753] thrice blessed (τρεῖς ὄμοιοι)
these mortals, who, after seeing these rites,
enter Hades; for only to those persons there
is living (ζωή) possible, for others there everything is evil.

Here, in contrast with the Pindar fragment 138, there is scant room for doubt that the blessedness of the initiates involves their personal "portion" after death. Moreover, blessedness is tied, explicitly, to living after death. This fragment is extremely important, therefore, because it provides the earliest unambiguous evidence for a belief in an afterlife in connection with Eleusis. Moreover, again in contrast with Pindar, Sophocles has something to say about the post-mortem condition of the initiated. But Sophocles is having obvious difficulty in finding the proper words with which to express these beliefs, for he describes the contrast between the initiated and the uninitiated in a puzzling way. It would not be surprising to hear either that one set of persons is well-off and the other is not, or that one set lives on whereas the other does not; it is rather surprising to be told that the one set lives on, whereas the other is badly off! It is tempting to understand "to live" (ζωή) in this context to function as an evaluative term (to have the force of "good") since it is contrasted with "evil" (κακό). But unless "to live" is taken in its ordinary, descriptive sense, it becomes less certain that this formulation marks a real advance over earlier formulations. Yet if "to live" is taken in its ordinary, descriptive sense, the description of the fate of the uninitiated should have the force of denying that they live at all after death, a rather awkward, if not altogether impossible, interpretation of the words τοις δ' ἄλλοισ πάντα ἔκειντακά. Perhaps the explanation is that Sophocles is attempting in this fragment to wed the old view, expressed in the Hymn, that initiates and
the uninitiated have different portions after death (however this is to be interpreted) with a new religious conception of life after death. The resulting fusion makes for striking poetry (particularly in the juxtaposition of ἐξήν, referring to Hades, with εὐνυ), but, alas, incoherent doctrine. In conclusion, then, Sophocles and, to a lesser extent, Pindar provide evidence that participants in the Eleusinian mysteries were beginning to interpret their religious experience in terms of the radically new religious conceptions which emerged in the late sixth and early fifth centuries B.C.

There is also some evidence that the mysteries were affected, in quite a different way, in the later part of the fifth century by the “Greek enlightenment,” in which traditional ethical, social, and religious values were subjected to intense criticism and reevaluation. A number of intellectuals, including the philosophers Anaxagoras and Diogenes of Apollonia as well as Socrates, the sophist Protagoras, and the poet Cinesias were subjected to public scorn and even legal harassment on account of their “atheism.” The Athenians were less concerned with heresy in the sense of deviations from specific items of dogmatic belief, however, than with the repercussions of the enlightenment upon their political institutions and politically affiliated institutions, such as the cults of heroes and the mysteries of Eleusis. From anecdotes which have survived, one gathers that the mysteries took the brunt of the criticism of religious values in Athens. The earliest known critic of Eleusis was Diagoras of Melos (middle or late fifth century), who was reportedly so devastating that “he turned many persons away from the initiation.” As a result the Athenians put a price on his head. The substance of his criticisms is unknown. Perhaps he fomented doubts concerning the “sweet hopes” of Eleusis. An anecdote relates that he became an atheist when another poet used a poem stolen from Diagoras while swearing an oath of innocence without ill effect. This suggests that he was critical of the traditional belief that the gods safeguarded justice and morality in human society. He may have raised moral objections like the one attributed to Diogenes the Cynic: “What? Are you saying that Pataikion the thief will have a better fate when he is dead than Epaminondas, because he is initiated?” Whether or not this was the nature of the “crisis” of Eleusis associated with Diagoras, the increasing currency of ethical concepts in the fifth century seems to have had an effect even on popular attitudes favorable

41. Translations of εὐνυ such as “real life” or “true life” evade rather than deal with the difficulty. Rohde (Psyche, 1.225) contends that it is “presupposed” at Eleusis that the uninitiated live after death, but if Sophocles really does not believe that “only to the initiated is living possible,” then he has chosen an incredibly misleading way of expressing that belief!

42. In addition to the famous case of Alcibiades in Plutarch’s life, there is the case of Alcibiades in Pseudo-Lysias and the somewhat later episode of Theodorus reported in Diogenes Laertius 2.101. Cf. Jacoby, Atthis, 257, n. 119.


44. Hesychius On Famous Men 17.

toward the mysteries. For in Aristophanes' *Frogs*, produced at the end of the century, the chorus states that post-mortem benefits are reserved for those "who were initiated and maintained a righteous way of life toward strangers and fellow citizens" (454 ff.). The requirement to maintain a "righteous way of life" (εὔοσεβί διάγειν τρόπον) reflects a concern for moral worthiness of which there is no hint in the *Hymn to Demeter*, which requires only performance of the ritual of initiation. It is not necessary to suppose that Aristophanes' words represent an abrupt change in the official teaching of Eleusis; rather, they seem simply to reflect the manner in which the Eleusinian experience adapted itself, in the popular mind, to the new moral climate.

The final piece of early evidence concerning the hopes of Eleusis is a passage in the *Panegyricus* (ca. 380 B.C.) of Isocrates, who mentions the two gifts of Demeter which were shared by the Athenians with the rest of humanity:

[4.28] wheat, which was the reason for our not living like beasts, and the rite (τεκεηη), participants in which have sweet hopes concerning the end of life and all of time (τοι σύμμαντος αἰώνας).

Although the expression αἰών can refer to one's "lifetime," in Isocrates it elsewhere means "eternity." Nevertheless, Isocrates' description of the object of sweet hopes is ambiguous in precisely the same way as Pindar's: Is the object collective immortality or personal survival? A parallel passage in Isocrates is ambiguous in another way: "those who live in piety and justice lead their days safely, and have sweet hopes for all of time." Here it is not likely that he means that virtuous conduct in this life will earn a person another post-mortem life of bliss. Rather, the point seems to be the same one he makes elsewhere, that "it is a finer thing to exchange a mortal body for immortal fame." In this connection, he explicitly contrasts the life (ψυχή) which we retain for but a few years with the renown (εὐκλεία) which remains with our posterity "for all of time." Since "sweet hopes for all of time" need not involve personal survival after death in such contexts, they need not involve this in Isocrates' characterization of the mysteries.

In conclusion, the exact character of the promise of Eleusis concerning the future will probably never be known. Not only are the actual utterances and rituals of the Eleusinian ministers shrouded in total secrecy, but even popular statements about the mysteries contain maddeningly
vague or ambiguous language. It is not clear whether the uninitiated were subjected to post-mortem punishment. There is no consistent indication of a moral requirement which had to be fulfilled in order to enjoy the promised benefits. It is not even clear, from most of the sources, whether the promise involved personal survival in some form or collective immortality. Ideas which have impressed modern scholars as significant—the continued life of the person after the death of the human being and the moral requirement for post-mortem reward—appear in the fifth century in Aristophanes, Sophocles, and, perhaps, Pindar; but they seem to fall outside of the conceptual framework of the *Hymn to Demeter*. The most natural way to explain these facts is to attribute the unclarity not to the veil of secrecy (which the evidence suggests concealed only the actual performance of the rite and not a catechism of faith), but to an original open-endedness in the language of the mysteries themselves. It can be said with certainty that there was a promise that the mysteries would make the participants prosperous (ΩΑΛΟΟ); great benefits were implied after the death of the initiated; and the goddesses, Demeter and Kore, were cast in the role of sustainers. But it is not necessary to assume that the vague language used in popular accounts to describe the benefits of the mysteries conceals more precise doctrines. It is more likely that it was left to the participants to define for themselves the precise religious significance of these revelations, insofar as they were inclined and capable of doing so. Even the characterizations which survive probably represent popular interpretations of these benefits rather than official doctrine. The fact that the object of the mysteries was not to instruct the participants in a secret eschatology (an exercise which would, no doubt, have been lost on most of them) is evident from Aristotle’s observation that people participated in the mysteries “not to learn anything (οὐ μαθεῖν τι) but to undergo (παθεῖν) or be conditioned, i.e., to become suited to a purpose.”

The point of the mysteries was to conduct the participants through a sequence of sacrificing, ritual cleansing, communal marching and dancing, fasting, unknown ritual activities, and, finally, beholding in a dramatic setting of eerie lamplight the secret, sacred objects of the ancient cult, all in order to produce a highly charged religious experience. The object was

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51. Further evidence for this role is found in Sophocles *Oedipus at Colonus* 1050–53 in the reference to the torch-lit shores of Eleusis

where the mistresses
nurture solemn rites for mortals, upon whose
tongue the golden key of the
Eumolpidæar ministers is established.

Although the mistresses, Persephone and Demeter, foster or nurture (τιφθανοντα) the rites of Eleusis according to this passage, the core meaning of τιφθανον is “suckle” or “nurse” (cp. Theognis 1231 and Liddell-Scott s.v. τιφθανον), and this usage with “rites” is quite unusual. The term recalls the role of Demeter as nurse in the *Hymn* and, by the power of association, might bring to the listener’s mind the role of the goddesses as sustainers after his death (in whatever specific form this might take). In using this passage to prove that a post-mortem rebirth “out of the womb of the Earth-mother” received symbolic representation in the secret ritual, Kern, *(RE*, 16.1239) seems to be placing too much weight on such a weak reed.

primarily affective rather than cognitive: to impress the participants with
the awesome sacredness of the sanctuary, to instill in them a sense of com-
munion with something transcending their mundane existences, and to
foster confident hope in the future.53 Such an explanation helps to ac-
count for the wide appeal and longevity of the cult. Its suggestive but
nonspecific promises made it highly adaptable to changes in the religious
environment.

This also implies that it is impossible, in principle, to resolve the long-
standing controversy as to whether the "sweet hopes" of Eleusis involved
personal immortality at an early point.54 All that is certain is that initiates
were promised post-mortem benefits denied to outsiders. Perhaps, at
a very early stage, participants understood their promised fate to be the
perpetuation of their existence in the persons of their progeny (collective
immortality), while other initiates in the same rites may have harbored
hopes for personal post-mortem benefits, understood from an essentially
Homeric point of view; for there would have been nothing in the vaguely-
worded promises to rule out such an interpretation. The very open-ended-
ness of the language associated with Eleusis would have invited the more
thoughtful participants to draw on current religious conceptions to inter-
pret for themselves the religious experience they had undergone. Conse-
quently, Eleusis was capable of adapting itself to the revolutionary new
ideas of post-mortem reward and punishment for moral and immoral
conduct, of genuine life after death, and of immortality of the soul. But,
by the same token, it could scarcely have been the source of these new
ideas.

53. Foucart argues that this passage is not inconsistent with his claim that the initiates were instructed
in a set of innovative religious doctrines: "The mystes do not learn anything, insofar as learning (μαθεῖν)
requires an act of the mind which acquires knowledge and understanding of things by a chain of reasoning
and demonstration; they are instructed in a manner which can be described as passive (ναοῖν), without
personal effort, without reflecting, by the impressions which they receive" (Les Mystères, 417). Such an
interpretation of the distinction between μαθεῖν and ναοῖν is difficult to defend. It is not supported by
traditional uses of the terms, e.g., in πάθει μαθοῖν, "learning through suffering" (cf. H. Dörrie, Leid und
[Hildesheim: Olms, 1968], 1.191-97). Nor is there any basis elsewhere in Aristotle for Foucart's inter-
pretation of either term: On Aristotle's analysis μαθεῖν is essentially passive rather than active (cf.
Physics 3.3). Moreover, when Aristotle sets ναοῖν in contrast to μαθεῖν elsewhere, he understands the
forms in an affective rather than cognitive sense. For example, in his discussion of the uses of music in
Politics 8 he contrasts two possible aims of musical performances: μαθησις (or παθοῖνα) and καθαρσις
(6.1341a, 17–24). The latter, "purification," involves the stimulation of a πάθος in the soul of the listener,
such as pity, fear, or religious exultation (καθαρτισμὸν) (7.1342a, 4–16).

54. Compare Guthrie (The Greeks, 284) who would "rest content with the known fact that the goddess
of fertility was also for them [the participants] the giver of immortality" with Nilsson who contends that
"this period was not acquainted with our and and late antiquity's need for individual immortality"
(Geschichte, 1.676).