



Orphism- An Ancient Religion of Salvation (陈家豪)

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Introduction

Mythology, religion, and philosophy are very important subjects of the ancient Greeks, since these subjects exert great influence on Greek culture and later on Western religion, philosophy, and literature. We should not neglect the value of Greek myths by treating them as untrue or false. [i] We should, as Ninian Smart said, treat myths as neutral. [ii] For the ancient Greeks, myths were believed to be their reports on their national, cultural, and familial histories. [iii] Moreover, the Greeks regarded myths as stories which contain metaphorical explanation of the origin and meaning of the natural phenomena, such as thunder, earthquake, and tsunami. [iv] Human experiences, such as birth, sufferings, and death, are also elucidated by various mythological stories in an implicit way. Orphism is a good example of this because it was treated by the ancient Greeks as one of those famous mystery religions whose mythological texts reveal human concern about the nature and destiny of the universe and human beings. In fact, Orphism is essentially a religion of salvation. According to Andre Boulanger, in all the so-called Orphic literature the revelation of the origin of the universe, the gods and the nature of humans all leads to the idea of salvation as the ultimate goal. [v] The main teachings of Orphism are theogony, cosmogony, anthropogony, dual nature of humans, metempsychosis, underworld judgment, and the Orphic life as a ritual of purification. All the doctrines constitute the conceptual basis of Orphic soteriology by exemplifying the fact that human body is evil and the physical and spiritual life is full of sufferings. Since evil and suffering are presented, salvation is needed. As a result, Orphism offers salvation as a consolation of the miserable situation of human beings.

It is hard to know when Orphism emerged from the Greek culture; yet most scholars proclaim that it began in the sixth century BCE. [vi] Walter Burkert says that “transmigration of souls is a doctrine that suddenly appeared in the Greek world toward the end of the sixth century BC.” Orpheus, Pythagoras, Plato, and Pindar are said to be the promoters of this tradition. [vii] We also have evidence that Onomacritus, a teacher of the Orphic religion, lived during the reign of the tyrant Pisistratus and his sons, which can be dated around 560–510BCE. During this period, the Orphic religion was welcomed and encouraged by them. [viii] Different from other Greek religious teachings, the Orphic doctrines were recorded and transmitted in written form. We get our knowledge of the Orphic doctrines

mainly from the Hymns of Orpheus or the Orphic literature which is a collection of writings from different times by many authors. [ix] Unfortunately, most of the m are now lost, so we can only know about the central teachings of Orphism from various surviving fragments. [x]

Founder

As the first Greek religion, Orphism bears a founder, Orpheus, who is the greatest mortal musician; and it is legendarily said that he can enchant the nature and animals by his songs. [xi] Although it is uncertain that Orpheus ever existed, many writings and doctrines are attributed to him and Musaeus, another mythical singer. [xii] The life of Orpheus is quite shamanistic. He descended to the nether world to bring back his beloved, deceased wife Eurydice, but he failed to recover her soul. [xiii] Although he could not bring his wife back to life, he gained the secret knowledge of salvation in the underworld and wrote it down in poetic form. As a result, Orpheus failed to save one dead person but acquired the secret knowledge for the sake of the salvation of the whole of humanity. This is how the Orphic teachings come into existence. Since Orphism was formed after Orpheus' intention to save his beloved wife, many scholars agree that salvation is the major theme of Orphism.

Cosmogony

It is necessary to examine the Orphic creation myth because its theogonic and cosmogonic themes provide a conceptual foundation on which the notion of salvation can be built into the anthropological philosophy. The followers of Orphism declared an alternative scenario of creation in place of the traditional Greek theogony and cosmogony of Hesiod. Indeed, they wrote a group of apocryphal writings attributed not to Hesiod and Homer but to Orpheus and the priest Onomacritus. Hence, Orphic religion can be treated as an opponent of the traditional Greek religion. [xiv] The Orphic creation myth can be found in many sources, but the main source, suggested by W. K. C. Guthrie, is the Orphic fragments from the Rhapsodic Theogony. [xv] Hence, these Orphic fragments will frequently be referred to in the subsequent discussion of the Orphic creation myth.

According to the fragments of the Rhapsodies, there is nothing in the beginning except Chronos or Time, which is the primordial principle of the pre-natal

universe. Aither and Chaos are then born from the power of Chronos. (O. F. 66) [xvi] Then the supreme Chronos creates in the midst of the divine Aither a primordial silvery egg, from which Phanes or Eros, the first god, emerges (O. F. 70). [xvii] Phanes, the god of love, creates the first generation of gods, including Zeus, and the physical universe (O. F. 85). [xviii] As a partnerless, hermaphroditic being, Phanes harbors within himself all the potential or seeds of life. (O. F. 85). In other words, the Orphics believed that the process of creation is a transition from potentiality to actuality. However, the cosmos created by Phanes is not the present one because Zeus, the chief god, devours Phanes and his whole creation and then produces a completely new world: "He [holds] the body of all things in the hollow of his own belly ... Therefore together with him all things within Zeus [are] created anew ..." (O. F. 167). [xix] Having created all things anew, Zeus becomes the "foundation of earth and heaven," the king and "the first Father of all" (O. F. 168). [xx] The death of Phanes is the core theme of this theogonic myth, since it shows the suffering of an innocent, ancestral deity. Zeus commits patricide when he swallows Phanes, and the motifs of sin and suffering forecast the ideas of rebirth and salvation in the upcoming myth of Dionysos-Zagreus.

The Orphic cosmogony provides two significant themes which are closely related to the Orphic concepts of anthropogony, metempsychosis, and salvation. Firstly, the Derveni papyrus has revealed a new Orphic theogony that Zeus is the creator who is depicted as either timeless or eternal, since he is the beginning, middle and end of all. [xxi] In other words, there is a clear distinction between the eternal Zeus and the temporal cosmos which is subject to time and change. The Orphics believed that if Zeus can be a perpetual being, then humans can be eternal too. [xxii] With this idea in mind, they postulated that humans consist of body and soul, and the soul is immortal and ageless because it comes from Zeus, the timeless creator (O. F. 228a). [xxiii] In addition, Zeus' act of re-creation of the world signifies the rejection of the irreversibility of time. If time can be reverted through the act of recreation, then human souls, in a microcosmic scale, can also survive from the passage of time through rebirth. (O. F. 227). [xxiv] As a result, Zeus' eternal nature and his act of re-creation give great inspiration to Orphic thinkers on the subjects of immortal soul, reincarnation, and salvation. Secondly, the destruction and creation of the universe indicate the idea of cosmic cycle. Unlike the religions with a linear view of time, such as Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, Orphism is a religion "with a cyclical view of time" because the Orphic believers believe that the end of the world is also the beginning of a new cosmos. [xxv] The cyclical cosmic process can be viewed as the macrocosmic aspect of the mortal cycle of birth and rebirth. The death of a human being, like the end of the universe, is the beginning of a new life, and thus the concept of reincarnation is developed.

The Orphic teachings of anthropogony, metempsychosis, and salvation are clarified by a pseudo-myth of Dionysos-Zagreus. Our knowledge of this myth is derived from the fragments of Rhapsodic Theogony and the writings of Clement of Alexandria from about 200 CE, a Christian apologist who is unfriendly to Greek religion. [xxvi] According to Pausanias, the myth of Dionysos-Zagreus is actually the work of Onomakritos, while Clement only quotes from his work. Indeed, Pausanias once said, "Onomakritos took the name of the Titans from Homer and founded orgia of Dionysos, making the Titans into the authors of Dionysos' sufferings." (Paus VIII, 37, 3) [xxvii] So the Orphic myth of Dionysos-Zagreus is only a revised version of the Homeric myth. The myth begins after the re-creation of the universe. Zeus has a sexual intercourse with his daughter Kore-Persephone and then Dionysos-Zagreus is born. [xxviii] When he is still a boy, Zeus gives him the kingdom of the universe and proclaims him to be the king of the younger generation of gods (O. F. 208). [xxix] However, the Titans are jealous of the little boy; and therefore, they dismember the boy and swallow his flesh. The blasphemous action of the Titans enrages Zeus, who incinerates them by using his mighty thunderbolt and creates the human beings by means of their ash. Dionysos' heart is saved by the goddess Athena. She brings it to Zeus, and then Zeus causes Dionysos to be reborn again (Protrepticus 2.15). [xxx]

At the level of external plot, it is true that the myth of Dionysos-Zagreus is a story about a young god who is murdered by his ancestral deities. However, at the level of internal structure, the myth also reveals that the death and rebirth of Dionysos-Zagreus enable him to become "the symbol for human rebirth and salvation." [xxxi] It must be noted that when Zeus swallows the world, he produces new life; indeed when the Titans devour Dionysos-Zagreus, Dionysos remains dead until Zeus, instead of being a murderer, resurrects him. Thus, Zeus is the furthrance of life whereas the Titans symbolize the cessation of life. [xxxii] In the symbolic language of myth, Dionysos' rebirth becomes transcendent over the sinister and Titanic power of temptation and death. He, indeed, is the savior in Orphism. [xxxiii] It is this idea of triumph over temptation and death that forms the basis of Orphic reincarnation and salvation.

Immortality of Soul

The myths of creation and Dionysos provide the Orphic believers a very importan

t source about the nature of soul, evil, sufferings, reincarnation, and salvation. For the Orphics, the soul is distinct and separate from the body; and moreover, the soul is able to exist prior to its entrance to the body (O. F. 228b). [xxxiv] Since the soul pre-exists the body, the Orphics believed that the pre-natal existence of the soul can lead to the notion of post-mortem existence, in which the soul can survive from bodily death. [xxxv] The Derveni papyrus describes the body as something that is subject to development, change, and extinction. The soul, in contrast, is immortal, ageless, and beyond the impermanent rhythm of the visible world (O. F. 228d). [xxxvi] Besides immortality, the soul is also divine because it comes from Zeus whose power makes it completely pure and divine (O. F. 228c). [xxxvii] Therefore, the Orphic theology is characterized by optimistic idealism, since the purity and divinity of the soul is considered as higher and in sharp contrast with the impermanent body.

Dual Nature

As human beings are formed from the ash of the Titans who have previously swallowed Dionysos-Zagreus, the Orphic followers believed that human nature has two opposite aspects. Indeed, the nature of mankind is tied up with the Dionysiac nature and the Titanic nature. [xxxviii] The Dionysiac nature enables a human to act virtuously; yet the Titanic nature, according to Plato, is the ultimate cause of “civil rebelliousness, disobedience to parents, breaking of laws, and, most significant of all, disrespect to gods, all of which are involved in the episode of the Titans’ destruction of Dionysos” (Law 3. 701 b-d). [xxxix] The Dionysiac nature refers to the human soul surrounded by the Titanic nature. The Titanic nature, distinct from the body and the soul, is the main source of evil. Human bodies are also evil in accordance with the extent of their participation in the Titanic nature. Nevertheless, it is not accurate to interpret that the Titanic nature is “inside human beings or part of a dual human nature” because it merely encompasses the soul. [xl] Indeed, as a participant in the Titanic nature, the human body (soma) can be treated as the tomb (sema) of the soul limited by the boundary the Titanic nature. [xli] Moreover, the concept of evil in the myth of Dionysos-Zagreus, strictly speaking, is an ontological reality, since the Titans were treated by the Orphics as the ultimate divine ground of evil. This is quite similar to the Zoroastrian dualism of good and evil because Dionysos-Zagreus and the Titans match with Ahura Mazda (Ormuzd) and Angra Mainyu (Ahriman) in Zoroastrianism, represent the ontological sources of evil. [xlii] The idea of ontological evil indicates that humans are predestinated to act evilly because of their innate Titanic nature, and therefore the Orphic dogmas of creation and salvation are characterized by a pessimistic anthropology.

Metempsychosis

Since human nature has both good and bad aspects, we can imagine that every person stands on the border between the Dionysiac and Titanic natures, and there is a dialectical relation between them in each person's mind. The existential choice for human beings is about which of the two natures they submit to. [xliiii] In other words, people are free to choose good or evil, but they are essentially responsible for their actions and consequences, for it is not gods but the Titanic nature that causes all the troubles. [xliv] As a result, the Orphics introduced the doctrine of metempsychosis, a belief in the continual cycle of rebirths of the same soul in one or more successive existences which may be humans or animals. [xlv] The notion of reincarnation signifies a system of rewards and punishments that is attached to various actions. As human life is too short to bear the consequences of the deeds in a whole lifetime, other lives after death are necessary for bearing the consequences of the deeds in previous life. Above all, the Orphics believed that it is the Titanic nature that traps the soul in the continual cycle of rebirths; it is a kind of punishment before the soul to be set free. [xlvi] Different from the shadowy figure of Homer's epics, the Orphic idea of soul is regarded as the real or true self which must go through the rebirth cycle in order to bear rewards or punishments. [xlvii]

It is essentially the teachings of pessimistic anthropogony and reincarnation that form the substratum of Orphic eschatology and distinguish Orphism from the traditional Greek religion. As a mystery religion of salvation, Orphism has a set of distinctive theological doctrines in regard to the destiny of the souls in the world beyond the grave. [xlviii] This tragic aspect of Orphic theology is a well-known speculation which places humans in an existential situation, since humans have always been frightened by the fact that death is inevitable and the post-mortem existence of the soul has always been cloaked in a veil of mystery. [xlix] However, the Orphic brotherhoods used the notion of post-mortem existence of an immortal soul as a foundation to build the doctrines of underworld judgment and salvation. It is the unknown reality after death that horrifies humans on one hand and offers consolation and hope to them on the other.

Judgment After Death

The first thing that the soul will encounter after death is a judgment in Hades,

or the underworld. [1] The judgment is mandatory for people from every class. In other words, both poor and rich people will be judged after death, since in hell the rich people have no special priority. Similar to the Biblical teachings, Orphic fragments of Rhapsodic Theogony teach us that if a man has committed misdeeds, his soul will be brought down to Tartaros and punished in various horrible ways; but, if a man has lived a moral or virtuous life, his soul will be rewarded and sent to the meadows of a blissful paradise known as Elysium (O. F. 222). [1i] W. K. C. Guthrie indicated that Plato has listed two kinds of underworld judgments which can be classified as Orphics. Firstly, Plato described a scene of judgment in the Gorgias in which the wicked souls must pass through a confusing and forked road by carrying water in a sieve or leaky containers (493b-c). [1ii] We all know that it is an absurd act because it is not possible for a sieve to hold water, and thus the punishment exemplifies the sufferings of the soul. In addition, the sieve is a symbol of the soul of a foolish man because "it [cannot] hold anything owing to its lack of faith and forgetfulness." [1iii] The second kind of punishment is to be found in the myth of Er in Plato's Republic (10. 614-621). Plato declared that after a judgment, the righteous souls travel to a heavenly location (Elysium), but the unrighteous souls will "go to a place of dirt and squalor underneath the earth" (614d). [1iv] The torment of burial in mud or filth is quite possibly an Orphic invention and has an allegorical meaning of purification, since the Orphics believed that the mud can purify one's sin from his or her previous lifetime. [1v] Here we can see that the punishment of being buried in mud, together with the punishment in the Gorgias, does not only emphasize the spiritual sufferings but also links up with the soteriological concept of purification. Since life before and after death is full of sufferings, the Orphics believed that salvation is needed and longed for a paradise in which sufferings is absent.

Unlike the unrighteous souls, the virtuous souls will go to a paradise, named Elysium or the Islands of Blest, after judgment. [1vi] In Elysium, the righteous souls enjoy a happy life because they are free from the Titanic elements, which are the sources of evil and sufferings. [1vii] This blissful image seems to be based upon the Garden of Eden, which is the archetype of the mythological motif of paradise, in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Nevertheless, following a thousand and years period of reward or punishment, both wicked and righteous souls are asked to drink the water of Lethe, which will make them to forget their experiences in the previous lives, and they will enter the mortal bodies and be reborn again. (O. F. 227). [1viii] Aristotle mentioned in his *De anima* that after the punishment or reward in the thousand year period, the soul will be generated in the air and then enter the body from the air by the act of breathing: "The soul, borne by the winds, enters from the universe into animals when they breathe" (1. 5. 410b, 27-30). [1ix] As we can see, happiness for the Orphic brotherhoods is merely momentary because it is followed by another period of sufferings in the cycle of rebirths. [1x] The momentary happiness and sufferings directly lead to the

idea of salvation which becomes the main teaching of Orphism.

Soteriology / Orphic Life

Soteriology is the core teaching of the Orphic religion because the ultimate goal of human life is to purge away or eliminate the evil Titanic element and cultivate the Dionysiac element in human nature. [lxi] The act of cultivation enables the soul to escape from its entanglement with the body and the continual cycle of rebirths, and finally the soul will rejoin the company of gods in Heaven. [lxi] Salvation can only be achieved by living an Orphic life as a sacred ritual of purification. In the *Laws*, Plato describes the Orphic life in detail and declared that vegetarianism and a ban on killing and eating animals are the principal characteristic of an Orphic life. Here Plato mentions not only the abstinence from killing but also the prohibition of performing animal sacrifice. [lxiii] For the Orphic believers, the abstinence from killing is an initiation which transforms people from meat-eaters to vegetarians. The idea of vegetarianism is based on the Orphic belief of metempsychosis. Indeed, the animal which one kills and eats might contain the soul of his or her relative or friend. [lxiv] Moreover, the Orphic prohibition against killing and eating animal flesh “stands in marked contrast to the Titans’ devouring Dionysos.” [lxv] The Titans’ murder of Dionysos-Zagreus is treated as the most sinful crime, and if we imitate their action by killing living beings, then we would submit ourselves to the Titanic nature.

The Orphics were also not allowed to eat eggs, though the reason is unknown. [lxvi] Beans, said the Orphics, must be banned too. [lxvii] According to the fragments of Euripides’ *Cretans* quoted by Porphyrius, dressing in white clothing is part of the Orphic life of purification: “Clothed in raiment all white, I shun the birth of men nor touch the Coffins of the dead ...” [lxviii] Herodotus, the well-known historian, mentions that the Orphics taught the rejection of woolen cloth, which is originally an Egyptian taboo. [lxix] The Orphics practiced asceticism, since they believed that their bodies were the source of evil; and therefore, the bodily appetites and passions must be subdued in order for the souls to be liberated from the bodies. [lxx] The most striking aspect of Orphic asceticism is the abstinence from sexual intercourse because the Orphics abhorred women, just as Clement of Alexandria says in the fragments of *Rhapsodic Theogony*: “For there is no worse, no more terrible thing than a woman” (O. F. 234). [lxxi] All the above prohibitions constitute the main features of the so-called Orphic life, which was treated by the Orphics as a ritual of purification of the soul. The Orphic ethics is illustrated as a teleological or goal-directed character of Greek moral teaching, for the Orphics described the Orphic life as a sort of pilgrimage in spiritual perfection through discipline of moral training. Although the Orp

hics treated the human life as full of sufferings, the idea of avoidance of killing living creatures is an encouragement to save and preserve life. [lxxii]

As the most important part in Orphic ethical system, the Orphic life exemplifies the miserable fact of human suffering and the final hope of salvation so as to “cease from the circle and have respite from evil” (O. F. 229, 230). [lxxiii] By living the Orphic life, man is able to avoid punishment in Tartaros and go to the blissful land of Elysium; but, unfortunately, this utopian paradise is only a temporary resting-place. [lxxiv] Following a thousand years period of reward or punishment, the soul will be reincarnated in a new body. [lxxv] If the ultimate purpose of the Orphic life is to achieve a momentary happiness and unable to conquer the continual suffering from transmiration, then someone might think that the Orphic life is not too useful. As a matter of fact, the Orphic life not only enables humans to achieve a momentary happiness in Elysium but also brings final liberation or salvation to us. A soul which lives the Orphic life three times can be fully extricated from the tragic cycle of rebirths. [lxxvi] The souls achieved final salvation will not go to Elysium; yet they will go to Heaven, a place where the souls have their origin (O. F. 228a) [lxxvii] Thus, the Orphics made a distinction between Elysium and Heaven, the final abode of the fully purified souls. [lxxviii] The translation Heaven is identical with Aither, which is regarded as a pure and gleeful region in which the gods live. [lxxix] In order to get into Heaven, the righteous souls must drink the water of Mnemosyne (Memory). Different from the water of Lethe, which is drunk by the impure souls in order to lose all memory of their past existence, the water can only be drunk by the souls whose purity are vouched, so that they will remember everything they encountered in their previous lives and enter a state of perfect divinity. [lxxx] The water Lethe might symbolize the sufferings of forgetfulness whereas the water of Memory is a symbol of rebirth and reminiscence of the past. All the sufferings from the past are now disenchanting by the sacred water of salvation. Therefore, the waters of Lethe and Memory bring the Orphic ideas of sufferings and salvation together.

Conclusion

After our exploration of the Orphic doctrines of cosmogony, anthropogony, dual nature, metempsychosis, underworld judgment, and Orphic life, we may conclude that Orphism is essentially a religion of salvation. The reason is that all the Orphic dogmas exemplify the fact that human bodies are evil and their lives are full of sufferings, and this fact is a demand for salvation. In the Orphic theogonic-cosmogonic myth, Phanes is the protagonist who suffers the first catastrophe b

because he and his whole creation are swallowed by his offspring Zeus (O. F. 167). [lxxxi] This first act of patricide symbolizes the violation of the domestic morality which brings sufferings to human family. Dionysos-Zagreus is the one who suffers in the anthropogonic myth. He is killed and devoured by the evil, gigantic Titans; but his rebirth symbolizes the rebirth of human beings. [lxxxii] Thus, he is the Orphic savior and the symbol of salvation. [lxxxiii] Humans are predestinated to suffer from the Titanic nature, which is analogous with the Christian doctrine of original sin. Although the Titanic nature causes sufferings and underworld punishment, the Dionysiac nature, in contrast, is the key to human salvation. [lxxxiv] Freedom of will is necessary for humans because they can choose to do good or bad without any interference from external forces. The concept of reincarnation is depicted in both pessimistic and optimistic aspects. Firstly, human beings are trapped in the continual cycle of rebirths in order to bear the consequences of their deeds in their previous lives. (O. F. 224b, 227). [lxxxv] Secondly, the notion of metempsychosis is optimistic because it “can allow for multiple opportunities to perform purificatory rites and to subjugate the body.” [lxxxvi] The long and pitiful cycle of rebirths is a precondition of final salvation. The image of underworld judgment is an exaggeration of mortal sufferings, which enables humans to demand salvation. The Orphic life is an ultimate or intrinsic end for which the Orphic followers performed for their own sake. It is not performed as a means to other ends but rather it is a means to salvation. [lxxxvii] As Andre Boulanger said, all the Orphic teachings lead to the idea of salvation as the final conclusion. [lxxxviii] The optimistic side of the Orphic life is that it asserts human beings are children of Earth and Heaven; the Orphic life enables us to eliminate the Titanic nature and cultivate the Dionysiac nature, so that we can go back to the divine realm, where we originally belong to, and become gods again (O. F. 228a). [lxxxix] As a result, the Orphic doctrines illustrate the sufferings of Phanes, Dionysos-Zagreus, and humans in order to evoke our awareness to demand a way of salvation. Orphism, then, becomes a religion which provides a sacred path towards salvation.

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[xix] Guthrie, *Orpheus*, 140.

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[xxxiii] Guthrie, Orpheus, 83.

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[xxxvi] Alderink, 59.

[xxxvii] Guthrie, Orpheus, 142.

[xxxviii] Guthrie, Orpheus, 83.

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[lxxii] Alderink, 81.

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