

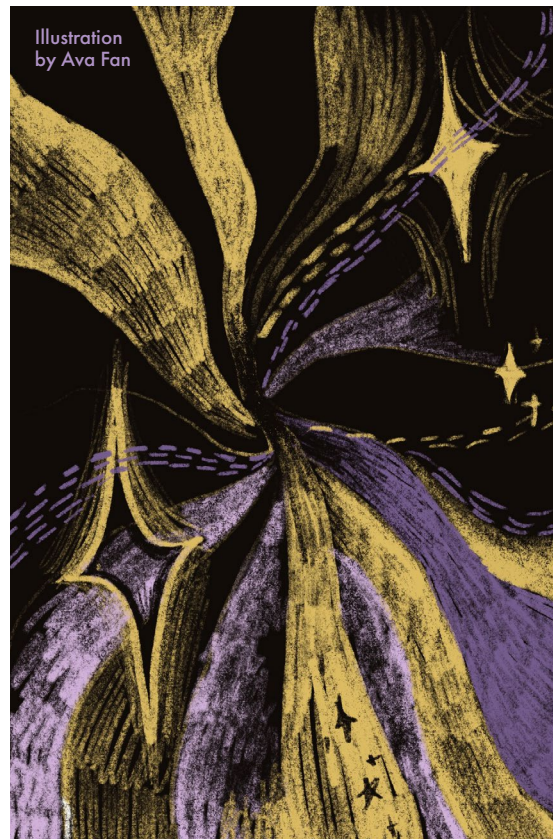
The Convergence of Death and Rebirth in Orphic Cosmogony and Christianity

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Abstract:

Orphism is a somewhat obscure Greek religious movement from the Hellenic world of antiquity which existed somewhat concretely from the fifth century BC to at least the third century AD. Within the Orphic cosmogony, the birth of the universe radically alters from the typical Greek creation story, often involving a cosmic egg and god of creation, Phanes or Protogonus, instead of the ambiguous genesis in Hesiod's Theogony. Having been a mystery cult, Orphism's exact doctrines and practices remain elusive, and there is scholarly debate about whether it should even be classed as a separate religion. However, with the survival of a number of texts, it is somewhat less grasping for primary sources than the Eleusinian Mysteries. Through the interpretation surrounding several hymns, poems, and the Derveni papyrus, death and rebirth's connection with the Orphic cosmology and theogony is clearly purposeful, as well as intersecting with typically Christian narratives to a great extent. At the same time, many of the comparisons with Christianity beyond the superficial are frankly overwrought, and one must be careful not to conflate the two as independently influencing one another in a significant sense of either doctrine or content.



Introduction

With any aspect of Orphism or the Orphic religious movement, the primary concern is a startling lack of consensus on essentially any point of data and even whether scholars find Orphism to be a separate religious identity or rather a religious current. While there is much specific theological material in comparison to other Greco-Roman mystery religions, a large portion of this information conflicts with other portions in the extreme. In one instance, Larry Alderink finds no less than 8 different cosmogonies within a variety of sources identified as Orphic, from poets, playwrights, philosophers, all traditional forms of theology, and the famous Derveni papyrus (30; 36-39). Of particular interest is this papyrus; discovered in 1962 and dating from the fourth century BCE, it is the oldest surviving manuscript from Europe, yet also contains some of the first genuine Orphic theology, interpreting a poem attributed to Orpheus by allegory (Alderink 26).¹ Genuine discrepancies occur between which gods created the universe and how they did so, in all being labelled "Orphic" there are commonalities which unite them and allow scholars to draw meaning from collating them. Accordingly, one of these prevalent themes is death and rebirth, *metempsychosis* in the case of mortals, the transmigration of the soul after death into a new being but also with ultimate highest god of Orphism, Dionysus, himself reincarnated from the previous Zagreus. This name, Zagreus, is itself a point of contention, as it does not appear in any Orphic fragments, the hymns, or references by Neoplatonists (West 153). In any case, some sources which contain Orphic content do contain the name, such as Nonnus of Panopolis' *Dionysiaca*.² The absence of a name in fragments does not preclude it from use, and for simplicity's sake the firstborn Dionysus, crucial to Orphic theology, will be referred to as Zagreus. Through this particular myth runs the central conceit of Orphism, the framework of its world, the basis of its existence, and, important on a comparative measure, the most elemental connection to Christianity. In general, the influence of mystery religions on Christianity as an idea gained ascendance in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by mainly German scholars,

and quickly lost traction afterward. However, the impact of each religion on the other is salient in terms of a formalizing aspect for each. Superficially, Orphism and Christianity share the same overarching story, the Son/son of God/a god dies and returns from death, thereby securing salvation for humanity in the afterlife for all those who believe and participate in the sacred sacraments or rites. Paralleling most comparisons of ancient religions to Christianity, such as Mohism in China, these complementary characteristics dwindle after initial juxtaposition.³ This thread of death and rebirth purposefully suffuses the various cosmologies in Orphism, along with its doctrinal structure, and annexes for itself space in the formation of Christianity through this mutually interrelated belief.

Cosmogony/Theogony

Generally, one discovers a few separate themes within the Orphic cosmogony, namely the kingship of the gods and the cycle of death and rebirth as it relates both to the gods and humanity. Central to the Orphic cosmology/theogony is the Orphic Egg. At least, this is what the Neoplatonists, who relate many Orphic beliefs in their writings, perceive as important to their creation story (Guthrie 93). Despite this, only three of the eight aforementioned cosmogonies that Alderink assesses contain any sort of egg, including the Derveni cosmology and

¹For a similar and more complete text written roughly 600 years later, see Porphyry's *De Antro Nymphaeum*, allegorizing a seemingly trivial scene in the *Odyssey* to contain information about the soul.

²Nonnus is quite an enigmatic figure in regard to his religious beliefs, having written both a major Christian work, his paraphrase of the *Gospel of John*, and a major pagan work, his *Dionysiaca*. The second, in my opinion, provides clear evidence Nonnus was at the very least an Orphic initiate, as it contains scattered details of what should be secret Orphic rites, however one should not state it to be an Orphic work, simply that it includes Orphic content.

³The relevance of Orphism and Mohism in relation to Christianity is an excellent resemblance; Mozi, the eponymous founder of Mohism, was supposedly a poor carpenter who preached universal love and peace. Beyond this the similarities diminish, but both religious movements occupy the same space regarding Christianity.

Rhapsodic Theogony the latter of which is certainly the most studied of these cosmologies. In this version, Chronos, the embodiment of time, and Ananke generate Aither and Chasm who in turn spawn the cosmic egg from which Protogonos emerges, creating the gods and subsequently ruling the world (West 70-1). Contrasting the typical presentation of the Hesiodic Greek theogony marked by various seizures of power, Protogonos, or Phanes, Dionysus, Metis, Eros, Bromios, Zeus, Ērikepaios, as sources variously name him, peacefully abdicates kingship to Night who abdicates for her son Uranos, which then picks up the thread of the familiar Grecian cosmology of godly sons castrating divine fathers (West 71-72).

Afterward, Zeus devours Protogonos and makes the world anew before begetting Zagreus, who is the first point in the world for rebirth, being torn apart by the Titans and then reconstituted as Dionysus (West 72-74). Thus, Zeus assigns this new Dionysus the role of teaching humans sacred rites in order that their souls may reach a better afterlife and cease *metempsychosis*, the cycle of reincarnation (West 75). Two deliberate themes emerge: the transfer of power and the death and rebirth of various gods, before transitioning to the mortal aspect of reincarnation and its proposed end through the application of pure living and the appropriate rites. There is a clear line in this version of the Orphic cosmogony and the succession of power, four in total before the ultimate ascendancy of Zeus. Interestingly, Zeus had appointed Zagreus as his own successor before the dismemberment, but after the *sparagmos* Dionysus finds himself demoted only to the propagation of rites as the high priest of Orphism.

Spread throughout this cosmogony is the interweaving of power and death, starting with the line of succession and how the current monarch uses their power for the rebirth of the world after its death. Each time a god hands on the sceptre of governance the world is remade in their own image, excluding Night who does almost nothing and subsequently spends her time meddling in the succession of every god afterward through

her gift of prophecy. There is something to be said about the causality of the situation; Night prophesies to Uranos his children shall overthrow him, and therefore he acts cruelly toward them, causing his overthrow, and later she will instruct Zeus how to overthrow his father, who in turn overthrew his father. Much of this follows the regular Hesiodic theogony, however the newly embedded Orphic elements hold greater significance. First, each god remakes the world in their own image, excluding Night, and the world seems to get worse, but there is “no suggestion of a fall or a defect in the world” and “birth and death, [...] are integral to the constitution of the world” (Alderink 50). Zeus consumes Phanes as a method to gain knowledge on how to govern the world, the world becomes one within him, and ultimately he reconstitutes the world in his own image. Following in the ambiguity of identity featured in this cosmogony, with its two Aphrodites, multiple Eros and so on, Zeus to an extent becomes Phanes reborn, similar to Dionysus’ dismemberment, consumption, and rebirth (West 71, 73-74). Secondly, from the Titans, whom Zeus blasts to soot via thunderbolt, comes a new race of mortals, returning to the typical Hesiodic cosmogony of the replacement of gold and silver humans with the modern iteration of lesser beings (West 75). Nothing of a god in Greek mythologies ever goes to waste, and in a sense the Titans find themselves dispersed and also reborn, however having consumed the flesh of Zagreus this spark of divinity exists in humanity as well. Lastly, and most obviously, is the death of Zagreus and rebirth of Dionysus, though in reality by the end point of Dionysus, he is “thrice-born”, born first as Phanes, then Zagreus, and finally Dionysus (*Orphic Hymns* 27; Guthrie 82). Essentially, through the performance of certain rites, humans may increase the levels of the purely good and divine spark within them by making clean and expelling the evil Titan portion. Therefore, there is no fall from which humans must recover or pay penance, rather it is the impure condition attached to their fundamental soul which Zeus requires Dionysus to attend, with Dionysus himself existing in a part of each person as the inherent purifying aspect.

Second to the Rhapsodic Theogony in scholarly prominence is the Derveni papyrus, significant not only for its content featuring a separate Orphic cosmogony, but also the exegesis of this cosmogony. With ancient Greece's lack of theologians, other writers such as poets provided religious material, and the material here is no exception. It is the treatment of religious content in close analysis which distinguishes the papyrus from others. Though not the first to interpret poetry in this philosophical manner to explain away inconsistencies and find new avenues of meaning, the commentator's focus on, and systematic interpretation of, a poem attributed to Orpheus is "something out of the ordinary" (West 80). In terms of the Derveni theogony and commentator themselves, philosophic influence is clear, Anaxagoras' idea of *nous* or the otherworldly Mind replaces Chronos as the progenitor of the universe's order, and the commentator weaves in other pre-Socratic philosophy, even quoting Heraclitus, in an "idiosyncratic and not [...] coherent fashion" (West 81). Other Greek religious movements, especially the Pythagoreans in aspects of purification ceasing the transmigration of the soul, hold syncretic views with Orphism, yet here the emphasis is on adapting the latest philosophic thought of the day into the cosmogonical substance of the world. With the Rhapsodic Theogony's concentration on a core Hesiodic theogony saturated in Orphic influence and theme, this alternate theogony couples philosophy to its religious matter, also reinforcing the continual refrain of philosophers sharing space as theologians in ancient Greece. In the mythology presented by the papyrus Protogonos "sprang into the aither", but Uranos was "the first to exercise kingly power" (West 86). An interlude following the Rhapsodic Theogony, occurs, peppered in with a persistent sexual element "as sexuality [...] afforded the means for speaking of cosmic processes" (Alderink 29). This is not to say that the standard Greek mythology is devoid of non-normative sexuality — castration and incest are regular standards among the gods — rather the language used to convey the creation of the universe has a specially sexual tinge that colours the whole cosmogony. Something different occurs again at the point in which Zeus consumes Phanes; not only does Zeus

remake the world, he actually "became one with him" (West 88). The world is not so much made anew. Rather, Zeus instead literally becomes one with the entire universe as well, "and with him all [...] became one [...] and everything else that then existed: he became the only one" (Derveni papyrus, qtd. in West 88). Like the ideal creator god, Zeus' conception is a "deliberation intelligence", his will is absolute, he is omnipotent, and he is the universe (West 92). After this point, and another briefly unfinished narrative, the scroll ends rather abruptly, without the birth of Dionysus, without the creation of humanity, and lacking many of the other points of analysis from the Rhapsodic Theogony. Obviously, this piques the scholar's interest. Finding such a treasured source only for it to be cut short begets speculation, yet both Alderink and West provide somewhat unconvincing and contradicting suppositions to supplement it. The Derveni papyrus is without doubt an invaluable resource and a great find, in spite of the abrupt end hindering a fuller evaluation of the text. Despite all differences, the theme of death and rebirth persists as one would expect it to in just another version of the Orphic theogony.

Discrepancies between the two major theogonies appear to be the result of the Heraclitean aspect. This monistic thread of cosmic unity pervades and overcomes the typical Orphic element. To an extent, the content of this papyrus is an attempt at modernization, in mythology and commentary, although the commentary itself is somewhat grasping in the typical manner of allegorical interpretation. Some linguistic analysis is also taking place on the part of the commentator, but there is contention: Alderink, in general, finds it to be sound analysis and based on the methods employed by other allegorists of his day, and at the same time West finds them to be the "least trustworthy of guides" and to have done some deeply shoddy examination of the work (28; 88). Overall, the same motifs of death and rebirth are present in the Derveni cosmogony, just in a separate configuration regarding the Rhapsodic Theogony and also due to the incomplete nature of the papyrus itself. Most important, and different, from the Rhapsodic Theogony is this new conception of Zeus which stems from the injection of pre-

Socratic philosophy into this theogony. There is always an ambiguous facet of names in any Orphic cosmogony, Phanes is Protogonos is Zeus is Dionysus is Eros and so on, while at once mystically maintaining separate identities. Instead, here the Derveni papyrus directly states that everything becomes one in the almighty Zeus, mirroring the Mind at the beginning. Zeus acts as a new Mind, *Nous*, and after ending the world by consuming it he must rebirth everything, even the other gods. To an extent this parallels the action of Kronos, who consumes his children and then vomits them forth with the world receiving a new order in that the Olympians succeed the Titans, however in the typical Hesiodic theogony the world itself is not entirely remade by them, they simply rule it. Ergo, the Orphic content layered onto the Hesiodic is clear. The writer of poem analyzed in the Derveni papyrus takes the base level of typical Greek mythology and adds onto it their own religious content, simultaneously approaching the birth of the world from a philosophical perspective. Particularly, this last feature, the inclusion of material philosophy, forms the underlying basis of worldview for the poem's writer, indicating that the specific mythology of Orphism may not have been as important as the rites which must be performed. In effect, the fluidity of cosmogonical doctrine may not be conducive to viewing Orphism as a united religion, though this may place emphasis on the common elements of the theogonies, death and rebirth, along with the actual practices of Orphic adherents.

Death and Rebirth with Regards to Salvation

Naturally, sources for these ancient Greek "religions" are fragmentary at best, and ancient Greek religious thought does not comprise a monolith, Orphism included. Similarly, most ancient Greek religious thought has different conceptions of the afterlife and that which it entails. According to the most mainstream sources, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the Greek afterlife is incredibly dreary, without any ability for better and alternate possibilities besides the whims of the gods in allowing





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few to the Elysium and later the Isles of the Blessed. Even Achilles, the greatest hero of his generation, laments to Odysseus about his fate, all the glory he won in life being useless in the afterlife where souls largely forget their deeds in life. Essentially, for Homer death is the “negation of all the attributes that make life worth living” (Guthrie 149). Other religious groups, philosophers, and poets conceived of death in lighter terms. As previously mentioned, Orphism embraced *metempsychosis*, reincarnation, in a system which is almost Buddhist.⁴ Simply put, the aim of the Orphic system is to engage in purifying rites, to cleanse the portion of the soul engendered by the Titans and leave only the influence of Zagreus, and doing so will cause the soul to leave the cycle of reincarnation (Guthrie 164). Otherwise, the soul will spend its allotted time in the Underworld. The cycle continues once more, until the individual fulfills the proper observances and a life of purity. Connected to the Eleusinian Mysteries, Dionysus is really a god of the underworld and the afterlife when viewed through the Orphic lens, also exemplified by the fact his second incarnation, Zagreus, was born from Persephone. Additionally, the famous golden “Orphic” tablets present another means of analysis, despite their disputed attribution. Again, this returns to the debate which overshadows every detail of Orphism, whether it actually is a distinct religious identity, or merely a decentralized religious movement that does not meet the qualifications of a coherent belief system with adequately congruent doctrines. Edmonds in particular views these tablets without reservation as completely non-Orphic, finding them instead to have ignited the modern scholarly predilection of treating Orphism as a singular entity, the “catalyst for a redefinition” (55). Instead of being genuine Orphica, these tablets served the purpose of defining Orphism as a counter to early Christianity,

⁴Some interesting unions of thought have come from Buddhist influence in Greece, particularly the exponents of Pyrrhonian scepticism, which evolved after Alexander’s conquests in India. While Orphism clearly did not evolve from Buddhist doctrine, the similarities are worth remarking.

principally as the latter gained prominence in Roman society, and therefore these tablets are important in the “role of institutional religion in the modern nation state” (Edmonds 56). Regardless of their role, these golden tablets, as Edmonds would agree, have greatly shaped perceptions regarding the Orphic conception of the afterlife, especially as a physical guide. Multiple tablets give directions on where to go, what to do, what to not do, and what to say to the appropriate authorities. Again, by participating in sacred rites and receiving sacred knowledge in life, adherents may leverage these in the afterlife to break the cycle of reincarnation. Specifically, the tablets tell the reader to not drink from the River Lethe, rather the Lake of Memory, and after speaking the correct phrases they shall attain “lordship” next “among the heroes” (Qtd. In Guthrie 173). To accomplish this, they must say to the guardians of the Lake “I am a child of Earth and starry Heaven; / But my race is of Heaven (alone)”, reminding the guardians that humanity’s dual nature is overcome (Qtd. in Guthrie 173). From Ge, Earth, came the Titans, and the soul must speak of their spark of divinity originating in Zagreus. This also does appear to correlate with the hymn to Mnemosyne, owner of the Lake of Memory, in which she “gives coherence / to the mind and souls of mortals” and “for the initiates stirs the memory / of the sacred rite, / [and] ward off oblivion from them” (*Orphic Hymns* 61). Edmonds does present an exceptionally strong attack on the unified conception of Orphism, however one can equally perceive how many other scholars understand there to exist a doctrinally sound religion from a variety of Orphic fragments and other materials.

Orphism and Christianity

In the most unambiguous terms, Orphic doctrines resemble Christian dogma with such similarity even ancient writers commented on it, and some modern scholars focus on the formative effect this similarity had on Christianity and the modern conception of Orphism. A saviour who dies and is reborn for the salvation of humanity, which has both intrinsic good and inherent evil within for which they must spiritually purify themselves,

is surely reminiscent of the Christian narrative involving Christ. Even a sort of trinity exists in the previously stated triple nature of Dionysus, the creator/Father Dionysus-Protogonos, the Dionysus-Zagreus which resides in all of us as a Holy Ghost, and the last Dionysus who comes back to life in order to save the collective soul of humanity. Many Christians of the time recognized these aspects, with a large amount of surviving Christian art containing Orpheus as Christ, or otherwise in a Christian context in a positive depiction (Herrero de Jáuregui 118). At the same time early Christian apologists viewed Orphism with ambivalence, some using Orpheus as “representative of the whole Greek religious tradition” to attack paganism⁵, while others such as Clement of Alexandria both “produces a blend of condemnation and co-optation” (Edmonds 30). These characteristics are similar, yet the underlying principles of each religion’s cosmogony are quite different. There is no motif of death and rebirth in the Christian creation of the world; one may think of the Flood as a sort of death and its repopulation as rebirth, however this is certainly already after God created the world, whereas most Orphic cosmologies have a longer period of creation. Precisely because of this superficial affinity, early Christians were able to employ Orphism as a whole to the propagation of their own religious beliefs and Orpheus as a symbol of their own ascendance over paganism.

More important than this appropriation itself in its own time is the effect it had on modern scholars’ perception of Orphism as a religious movement. Undergirding every discussion of Orphism is a current on whether it constitutes a genuine religion or rather a religious movement without sufficient coherence to represent a belief system. In the views of the anti-Orphic scholars, the same Christian

⁵ “Pagan” and “paganism” certainly have negative connotations in their use as any religion which is not Abrahamic in a Christian context, though it is an excellent catch-all for the various strands of Greco-Roman religion. In general, the word is so useful that a writer must regret its inclusion and incorporate it all the same, despite the derogatory aspect

apologists who used Orpheus as symbolic of all Grecian paganism helped to crystalize Orphism and elevate it from the status of purely a mystery cult. By way of example, the Eleusinian Mysteries are a set of rites and a cult site at which pagans performed a number of rituals, layering onto their own religious beliefs. Therefore, it is not a religion in that it includes doctrines which are incompatible with the main Greek *polis* religion, whereas Orphism directly contradicts many of the diffuse Greco-Roman religious teachings. Upon elevating it to a faith, questions about Orphic doctrine and hierarchy emerge which seem incompatible to existing evidence (Edmonds 71-72). With a lack of publicly "Orphic" writers who openly explain their doctrine, owing the nature of a mystery religion, Neoplatonist and Christian apologists form the basis of modern knowledge of Orphic content, each side in this dichotomy seeking to "manipulate the authority of Orpheus and the prestige of his name for their own agenda" (Edmonds 27-28). Much of the written content considered Orphic from this perspective can then be called "things labeled with the name of Orpheus" rather than genuine "Orphic" material (Herrero De Jáuregui 130). In sum, because Orphism's theogony so greatly resembled the central conceit of Christianity in terms of death and rebirth, even though it lacked much of the cosmogonical significance in Christianity, and Orpheus held such weight among the Greeks as their earliest poet, it became a lightning rod each group to advance their own beliefs and gained prominence in the formation of early Christianity.

tenets of Dionysus as the high priest who must teach humanity specific doctrines and rites for their own salvation stayed fixed. Some cosmogonies reflect the trends of the time in which their author wrote them. The Derveni papyrus holds an evidently Heraclitean/monistic shape, which radically alters it from other established cosmogonies such as the Rhapsodic Theogony, but each maintain the equivalent salvatory feature. This salvation somewhat resembles original sin, the inherent evil inside humanity requiring purification through ritual ceremonies, perhaps in Christianity baptism and the eucharist. In the case of Orphism, practitioners combined various performances of these in life with knowledge of the passcodes of the afterlife. Concurrently, goodness and evil in the Orphic system were not the result of any singular Luciferian figure, and humanity itself had no part in a grand Fall of man. Similarities are abundant between the two to such an extent that ancient writers noticed and adopted Orphism for their own usage in the "culture wars" displayed by Christians and pagans, principally Neoplatonist, as Christianity prospered, and adherents of the Greco-Roman religious systems felt the necessity of defending themselves (Edmonds 56). Such theological debates preserved enough material so as to make Orphism the most well-documented mystery religion, while also enshrining its ambiguity as a religion.

Conclusion

Conceptually, Orphism's ambiguous religious identity changes with prevailing scholarly attitudes, however the main themes and cosmogonical motif of death and rebirth remain consistent throughout any interpretation, particularly in the salvatory purpose of the Orphics, and it was this facet of belief which influenced early Christian apologists to write on the Orphic doctrines. Enough Orphic cosmogonies survive to prove a constantly fluctuating worldview, though the

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