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Sleep, Bread, and Death: Evolving Conceptions of Mortality from the Epic of Gilgamesh and Homer to Genesis, John, and Paul

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Sleep, Bread, and Death:
Evolving Conceptions of Mortality from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Homer to Genesis, John, and
Paul

Senior Project submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature and The Division of Social Studies
of Bard College

by
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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Introduction

During the second semester of my freshman year, I took Daniel Mendelsohn's Classical Epic survey course. My midterm paper, titled, "Sleep, Bread, and Mortality in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey*," contained the seeds of this project. In over-eager freshmen fashion, I aimed to cover three epics in an eight-page paper and to demonstrate that sleeping and eating were used similarly in all three epics as markers of mortality.

As I continued my academic journey, I began seeing these themes in everything I read. In Marisa Libbon's class on *Paradise Lost*, I saw them in Raphael's long dialogue on digestion and Milton's ideas about censorship as food in *Areopagitica*. These themes again caught my attention in Karen Sullivan's Arthurian Literature course in Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Vitae Merlini*, Chrétien de Troye's *The Knight of the Cart*, and the Prose *Lancelot*. And again, I noticed them in Bruce Chilton's course on the New Testament. However, when it came time to begin thinking of my senior project, a kind of academic amnesia came over me and I had no idea what to write about. That summer, I was reading Nietzsche's *Beyond Good and Evil* when I came across the aphorism, "The belly is the reason why man does not mistake himself for a god,"¹ and at once realized what my senior project was going to be about.

In this project, I explore the symbolic web that connects eating, sleeping, reproduction, and mortality—a nexus of associations that runs through the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Homer, Genesis, and the writings of John and Paul. First, I aim to demonstrate that these texts use a shared symbolic language of bread and sleep, eating and sleeping, in their discussions of mortality and to reveal the texts' implicit definitions of mortality and godhood. Second, I aim to demonstrate the tension between the Mesopotamian and Greek texts' conclusions that man cannot achieve

¹ Chapter IV, aphorism 141

immortality and the notion presented in the biblical texts, particularly the New Testament, that immortality, and even godhood, could be open to man.

The first three chapters of this project discuss the symbolic logic of sleeping and eating in relation to mortality in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, and the *Odyssey*. The fourth and fifth chapters, on the *Hymn to Demeter* and Genesis 3, discuss death, mortality, and godhood specifically in relation to the themes of eating, agriculture, and marriage. The final two chapters discuss John and Paul's reversal of the symbols of bread and sleep in their discourses on eternal life and resurrection.

From the oldest surviving epic poem, Gilgamesh, king of Uruk, calls out to us in despair, "A thief has taken hold of my flesh! / For there in my bed-chamber Death does abide, / And wherever I turn, there too will be Death" (Tablet XI, 243-246). Having failed to obtain immortality, he laments that he will be reminded each night that he will one day be taken by the eternal sleep of death. Perhaps more than 2,000 years later, Paul deploys the same symbolic language when he writes, "Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed... For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality" (1 Corinthians 15:51-53). Though they are separated by culture and time, Paul sounds almost as if he could be replying to Gilgamesh in conversation; a conversation which I hope to make possible in this project.

Chapter 1

The *Epic of Gilgamesh*: Sleep, Bread, and Death

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*,² the tension between animal, man, and god plays a central role in the text's effort to understand what it is to be human and mortal. In the beginning of the epic, Enkidu is introduced into the world of men by the harlot Shamhat, and Enkidu in turn brings Gilgamesh into the world of mortals and forces him to confront his own mortality. These transitions from animal to man and man to god are marked by the symbolism of sleeping and eating, which stand as markers of mortality.

In Tablet 1, Enkidu is created by the gods to be Gilgamesh's equal and restrain his tyrannical mistreatment of the people of Uruk. Enkidu lives at first like an animal in the woods.

All his body is matted with hair,
He bears long tresses like those of a woman:
The hair of his head grows thickly as barley,
He knows not a people, nor even a country.

Coated in hair like the god of the animals,
With the gazelles he grazes on grasses,³
Joining the throng with the game at the water-hole,
His heart delighting with the beasts in the water.
(Tablet 1, 105-112)¹

Enkidu's animal state parallels that of Gilgamesh. While Enkidu behaves literally as an animal, Gilgamesh's behavior is metaphorically compared with that of a "savage wild bull" when the women of Uruk pray for the gods to stop Gilgamesh's abuse of their daughters: "A savage wild bull you have bred in Uruk-the-Sheepfold, he has no equal when his weapons are brandished"

² We have received several fragmented versions of the text which date as far back as 2100 BCE, but the Standard Babylonian Version of the complete epic is dated to circa. 1200 BCE.

³ George, A. R. *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian*. Penguin Books, 2020.

(Tablet 1, 181-182). Both Enkidu and Gilgamesh are living in states apart from humanity—Enkidu, apart from them as an animal, and Gilgamesh, over them as a god. Like an immortal, Gilgamesh does not even even need to sleep by day or night as he goes about his tyranny (I, 239 page 9).

Enkidu is removed from this animal-like state and cut off from his animal companions through intercourse with the harlot, Shamhat, lasting seven days. “Enkidu had defiled his body so pure, / his legs stood still, though his herd was in motion. / Enkidu was weakened, could not run as before, / but now he had reason, and wide understanding” (Tablet 1, 199-202). Though Enkidu gains reason and understanding by entering the world of men, he loses some of the strength, grace, and freedom which he had when he wandered the woods as an animal. Enkidu’s coming to consciousness is accompanied by a loss of innocence and a corruption of his “pure” body. Enkidu’s entry into the world of mortals is completed when Shamhat brings him to dine with the people of Uruk and he takes part in both the food and company of mortal men for the first time.

Bread they set before him,
Ale they set before him.
Enkidu ate not the bread, but looked askance.
How to eat bread Enkidu knew not,
How to drink ale he had never been shown.

The harlot opened her mouth,
Saying to Enkidu:
Eat the bread, Enkidu, essential to life,
Drink the ale, the lot of the land!
(Tablet II, 46-97)

By eating the food of men, “essential to life,” Enkidu symbolically becomes a man and a mortal. Thus, Enkidu passes from the world of animals, who are ignorant of death, to the world of mortal men, who must eat bread to live.

Enkidu, finding Gilgamesh's treatment of the women of Uruk unjust, wrestles Gilgamesh, and they become friends. Enkidu's friendship with Gilgamesh humanizes Gilgamesh. Gilgamesh, two thirds god and one third human (Tablet 1, 48), is twice referenced as being "like a god" (II 195 & 110, page 16) when he claims the first night with the bride in Tablet II. Though this may seem to contrast with the mothers' description of Gilgamesh as a "savage wild bull" when complaining about the same behavior to the gods, both serve to reinforce the fact that Gilgamesh is not behaving in a way fit for mortals.

For Enkidu, the wilderness represents a state of animality, as he does not behave as a human and does not take part in the company of men. Enkidu lives in a state of ignorance without the burden of knowledge, and thus understanding death, which characterizes mortals and the world of men. When Enkidu and Gilgamesh meet, Enkidu is described as "as yet so ignorant of life" (I, 133) and Gilgamesh is described as "a man happy and carefree" (I, 134). Gilgamesh, like Enkidu, behaves as an animal—"a wild bull." He has no companionship with his fellow men, and rules over them cruelly and carelessly, doing what he pleases. Gilgamesh, therefore, like Enkidu, does not participate fully in the world of mortals. Both are in states of ambiguity as to whether they are man, animal, or god. When Enkidu and Gilgamesh fight, they both leave their carefree, inhuman states and enter the world of mortals. Gilgamesh will no longer tyrannize over the people of Uruk like a "savage wild bull" and Enkidu will no longer wander the wild like an animal.

Although Gilgamesh is humanized by his companionship with Enkidu, his true entry into the world of mortals comes when Enkidu dies and Gilgamesh is forced to confront the inevitability of his own death. In Tablet II, Gilgamesh expresses his desire to "establish forever a name eternal" (II 187, page 20) for himself by slaying the monstrous Humbaba, protector of the

cedar forest. Gilgamesh says to Enkidu, “As for man, his days are numbered, / and whatever he may do, it is but wind...” (tablet II, 234-235). Gilgamesh is aware of his mortality and desires a partial immortality through fame. However, his understanding of his own mortality and desire to live beyond his life are both superficial.

As Gilgamesh and Enkidu approach the cedar forest, Enkidu has nightly dreams foretelling disaster and his own death. This is the first concrete association between sleep and death in the epic. When Enkidu sleeps—something which is just as essential to life as bread—Enkidu’s death draws near. After Gilgamesh and Enkidu slay Humbaba, as well as the Bull of Heaven, the gods fate Enkidu’s death as punishment for Gilgamesh’s transgressions, fulfilling the curse which was placed upon Enkidu by the dying Humbaba. As Enkidu lies ill, he dreams of his own death (VI, 179-183, 54) which follows the next morning.

Enkidu’s death is indirectly a result of Gilgamesh’s desire for immortality through fame. Gilgamesh becomes terribly distraught at the death of his companion and seems at last to fully comprehend his own mortality. Consumed by grief, Gilgamesh flees into the wilderness and lives as a wild animal, like Enkidu at the beginning of the epic. “For his friend Enkidu Gilgamesh / did bitterly weep as he wandered the wild: / ‘I shall die, and shall I not then be as Enkidu? / Sorrow has entered my heart!’” (Tablet IX, 1-4). Gilgamesh’s entry into the wild marks a departure from the world of the mortals and an attempt to flee death. Like Enkidu before his introduction into the world of men, animals live in a state of ignorance—without “reason” and “wide understanding”—and are therefore unaware of the eventuality of their own death. Gilgamesh is attempting to return to the beginning of the epic, when Enkidu lived as a wild animal and both Enkidu and Gilgamesh were both ignorant of the brotherhood which would humanize them and bring about their respective confrontations with mortality.

As Gilgamesh wanders the wilderness lamenting his own mortality, sleep is again collocated with death: “After roaming, wandering all through the wild, / When I enter the Netherworld will rest be scarce? / I shall lie there sleeping all down the years!” (IX, 9-12, page 71). Gilgamesh stays up through the nights like he did before his companionship with Enkidu. Gilgamesh’s avoidance of sleep is a symbolic rejection of death, which he notes he will have plenty of when he inevitably goes to the Netherworld to sleep “all down the years.”

In hopes of escaping the “doom of mortals (X, 234) Gilgamesh sets out in search of the immortal Utnapishtim, survivor of the world-flood, who lives in the land at the end of the deadly sea with his wife. When Gilgamesh arrives, Utnapishtim comments on Gilgamesh’s dreadful appearance, saying,

‘Why are your cheeks so hollow, your face so sunken,
Your mood so wretched, your visage so wasted?
Why in your heart does sorrow reside,
And your face resemble one come from afar?
Why are you features burnt by frost and sunshine
And why do you wander the wild in lion’s garb?’ (Tablet X, 213-217)

In his state of mourning, Gilgamesh resembles the dead or a wild animal. In the wild, Gilgamesh is attempting to lose his humanity and therefore escape his mortality, but instead of escaping his fear of death, Gilgamesh becomes a wretched, filthy, and barely human creature. When Gilgamesh expresses his desire to be immortal, Utnapishtim challenges his right to godhood: “But you now, who’ll convene for you the gods’ assembly, / So that you find the life you search for? / For six days and seven nights, come, do without slumber!” (Tablet XI, 208-210).

Utnapishtim challenges Gilgamesh to go without sleep for six days and seven nights in order to prove that he is worthy of immortality. The number of seven days corresponds with the duration of Enkidu’s intercourse with Shamhat, which marked his departure from the wilderness and his

entry into the world of men. Gilgamesh is now in a similar state of ambiguity, behaving and dressing as an animal and seeking to escape the knowledge of death which burdens him.

The seven-night duration of the trial, which corresponds to the number of the weekdays, could also be thought of as representing a complete cycle of time. This would make sense in the context of the trial's greater symbolic meaning, which maps the cycles of waking and sleeping onto the cycles of life and death. Gilgamesh staying awake for the entire cycle of the week is symbolically equivalent to him being able to "stay awake" his entire life without death.

Gilgamesh, as the King of Uruk, is a master of the material world. With Enkidu, Gilgamesh killed Huwawa, and cut down the cedar forest for the gates of Uruk. However, Gilgamesh cannot gain mastery over time—that is, the eventuality of his own death—with his physical prowess.⁴ The seven-day duration of Gilgamesh's test reveals that he is not only attempting to master death, but more generally, time, represented by the complete time-cycle of the week.

In Utnapishtim's test, sleep acts as a stand-in for death. If Gilgamesh cannot evade the pull of sleep which comes at the end of the day, then he cannot evade the eternal sleep which comes at the end of life. Gilgamesh falls asleep immediately, demonstrating that he is in fact mortal. Despite being two thirds god, Gilgamesh is still bound by the physical necessities of mortals. After his long journey, he is physically exhausted. He cannot resist sleep and therefore cannot escape death. "See how this hero sleeps who asks for life" (XI, 76), says Utnapishtim, emphasizing the role of sleep as symbolic stand-in for death in Gilgamesh's test.

⁴ This observation was sparked by Abraham Joshua Heschel's writing on the meaning of the Sabbath, in *The Sabbath*: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2005.

As Gilgamesh sleeps, Utnapishtim's wife bakes bread loaves to mark the passage of time as Gilgamesh sleeps. In addition to their time-keeping function, the bread loaves display the aging process which all mortals must undergo. The aging bread may also serve to emulate the waning of the moon, to which Gilgamesh lamented about his immortality as he wandered the woods without sleep (IX, 9-16).

On the seventh day, Utnapishtim wakes Gilgamesh, who claims that he only shut his eyes for a moment. Utnapishtim, however, points to the seven loaves of bread, saying,

Come, Gilgamesh, count me your bread-loaves,
 Then you will learn the days that you slept.
 Your first bread loaf was all dried up,
 The second was leathery, soggy the third,
 The fourth flour-cake had turned to white,
 The fifth had a cast mold of gray,
 Fresh-baked was the sixth,
 The seventh still on the coals:
 And only then did I touch you. (Tablet XI, 235-242)

The food of mortals ages like them. As Gilgamesh's body is subjected to the passage of time, it will rot and shrivel up like the first bread loaf. Gilgamesh, though he may try, cannot deceive time and cannot escape death.

Said Gilgamesh to him, to Uta-napishti the Distant:
 'O Uta-napishti, what should I do and where should I go?
 A thief has taken hold of my [*flesh!*]
 For there in my bed-chamber Death does abide,
 And wherever [I] turn, there too will be Death.'" (Tablet XI, 243-246)

Gilgamesh's inability to resist sleep shows that, though he is two thirds god, he is bound by the laws of mortality and therefore must suffer the same fate as his friend Enkidu. Gilgamesh's lament, "in my bed-chamber Death does abide, / And wherever [I] turn, there too will be Death" shows that he will be reminded of his mortality each night. Sleep is the little death that comes at the end of the day, and just as his days end in sleep, his life will inevitably end in death.

Having failed his test, Gilgamesh must return to the world of mortals. Utnapishtim again comments on Gilgamesh's dreadful appearance and orders his ferryman to wash Gilgamesh.

'His body is tousled with matted hair,
The belts have ruined his body's beauty.
Take him, Urshanabi, lead him to the washtub,
Have him wash his matted locks as clean as can be!' (Tablet XI, 251-254)

Gilgamesh is cleaned, oiled, and given fine robes. This mirrors the process which Enkidu underwent when he was tamed by Shamhat and brought into the company of men, and therefore marks Gilgamesh's parallel return to a state of humanity and mortality. The ambiguity about Gilgamesh's state—animal, man, or god—is resolved. This marks a turn from hostility between Utnapishtim and Gilgamesh to hospitality.

As Gilgamesh departs, he is given a consolation prize. Utnapishtim's wife prompts him to give Gilgamesh a gift for his long journey and not let him return to Uruk empty-handed (Tablet 9, 276-282). In response, Utnapishtim reveals "the mystery of gods" (282) to Gilgamesh: a plant at the bottom of the sea which will restore his youth. Gilgamesh's descent into the depths of the sea parallels his twelve-day journey through darkness as he traveled into the lands of the gods and serves as a symbolic descent into the Netherworld. Once Gilgamesh retrieves the plant, he sets off on the journey home with the boatman Urshanabi.

'Its name shall be "Old Man Grown Young",
I will Eat it myself, and be again as I was in my youth!
At twenty leagues they broke bread,
At thirty leagues they stopped for the night. (Tablet XI, 299-302)

These last two lines are repeated, punctuating Urshanabi and Gilgamesh's journey. Though Gilgamesh possesses the plant of immortality, the text points to Gilgamesh's mortality as he returns to the world of mortals, still bound by the necessity of eating and sleeping.

The “Old Man Grown Young” plant is a consolation prize for Gilgamesh. It would return Gilgamesh to his youth, as it appeared to do with the snake, but this would not prevent his ultimate confrontation with death. When Gilgamesh stops by a watering hole, a serpent carries off the plant of immortality, shedding its skin as it goes. It was at a watering hole where Shamhat seduced Enkidu (Tablet I, 163) and introduced him to the world of mortality, and it is at a watering hole where Gilgamesh definitively and irreversibly returns to the world of mortals.

Chapter 2

The *Iliad*: Nectar and Ambrosia

The symbolic association of sleep with death and the use of eating and sleeping as markers of mortality is also present in the *Iliad*.⁵ Achilles, like Gilgamesh, is a demigod who must ultimately confront his own mortality. Throughout the epic, Achilles is described as being divine and godlike. In the opening lines of the epic, Achilles is described as δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς (book I, VIII). The Greek δῖος means “divine” or “godlike,” sometime translated more literally as “shinning” or “brilliant.” This epithet is repeated throughout the epic, reminding us of Achilles’ semi-divine nature. Other noteworthy phrases and epithets used to describe Achilles’ are διογενής (“god-sprung,” “sprung from Zeus,” or “of the gods”) δαίμονι ἴσος (“equal to a god”) θεοῖς ἐπιείκελ’ Ἀχιλλεῦ (“god-like Achilles,” or “Achilles, resembling the gods”). Though Achilles is ultimately a mortal, this language serves to remind us that he is the son of King Peleus and the goddess Leto, and therefore a demigod.⁶

Like Achilles’ twofold nature, Achilles also has a double fate which frames the dramatic action in the *Iliad*. In book I of the *Iliad*, Agamemnon, the leader of the Achaean army which is laying siege to Troy, seizes Briseis—a young woman given to Achilles’ as a war prize—after he is forced to give up his own concubine. To take vengeance on the Achaeans for his wounded pride, Achilles departs from the war effort to sulk by his tent, refusing to fight alongside

⁵ Circa 800-700 BCE

⁶ “Homer, *Iliad*.” *Homer, Iliad, Book 21, Line 1*, <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu>.

Achaean. Without their best fighter, the war soon turns in favor of the Trojans and a despairing Agamemnon sends Odysseus, Telamonian Ajax, and Phoenix to appease Achilles and beg him to re-join the fight. Achilles rejects the prizes which Agamemnon offered him, saying,

Cattle and fat sheep can all be had from the raiding,
tripods all for the trading, and tawny-headed stallions.
But a man's life breath cannot come back again—
no raiders in force, no trading brings it back,
once it slips through a man's clenched teeth.

Mother tells me,
The immortal goddess Thetis with her glistening feet,
That two fates bear me on to the day of death.
If I hold out here and I lay siege to Troy,
My journey home is gone, but my glory never dies.
If I journey back to the fatherland I love,
My pride, my glory dies...
True, but the life that's left me will be long,
The stroke of death will not come on me quickly.
(IX, 498-505)

Achilles urges the emissaries and the other Achaeans to sail home, citing the fact that material possessions can always be won “but a man's life breath cannot come back again.” He then speaks of the two potential fates which his mother revealed to him: either he will die at Troy but gain immortal glory,⁷ or his glory and pride will die but he will live a long life at home. Achilles says that he will return home, choosing the second option, and urges the Achaeans to do the same.

Since Achilles will not join the fight, his dear companion Patroclus puts on his armor, hoping to strike fear into the Trojans and drive them back, but is killed by the Trojan Hector. The companionship between Achilles and Patroclus in the *Iliad* plays a similar role to that of Gilgamesh and Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. Patroclus' death, which comes as a result of Achilles' selfishness, forces Achilles to confront his own mortality and sets off a chain of events

⁷ The Ancient Greek word κλέος (kleos) referred specifically to glory gained in battle.

which ultimately leads to Achilles' death. Seeing Achilles grief-stricken at the death of Patroclus, his immortal mother comes to check on him.

...Thetis answered, warning through her tears,
 "You're doomed to a short life, my son, from all you say!
 For hard on the heels of Hector's death your death
 Must come at once—"

"Then let me die at once"—
 Achilles burst out, despairing—"since it was not my fate
 To save my dearest comrade from his death!"
 (XVIII, 110-116)

Achilles' desire to avenge Patroclus' death by killing Hector causes him to reverse his earlier position on his fate. Where Enkidu's death caused Gilgamesh to flee from death, Patroclus' death causes Achilles to rush defiantly towards it.

Mourning Patroclus, Achilles refuses to eat and drink with the other Achaeans as they feast in the preparation for the next day of fighting.

Achea's warlords clustered around Achilles,
 Begging him to eat. He only spurned them, groaning,
 "I beg you—if any comrade will hear me out in this—
 Stop pressing me now to glut myself with food and drink,
 Now such painful grief has come and struck my heart.
 I'll hold out till sun goes down—enduring—
 Fasting—despite your appeals. (XIX, 359-365) ⁸

Achilles' fast acts as a ritual of mourning, but also serves as a symbolic defiance of death. By refusing to eat, Achilles is rejecting the fact that he must rely on food and drink to keep him alive. Thus, Achilles seeks to resist the weakness which makes him mortal, just as Gilgamesh did in Utnapishtim's test.

⁸ Fagles, Robert, translator. *The Iliad*. Penguin Books, 1990.

As Achilles sits apart from the other Achaeans, fasting and mourning the death of Patroclus, he thinks of his aging father back in Phthia. Achilles laments that “there is no more shattering blow” that he could suffer than the death of Patroclus, even if he received word of the death of his father or son (19, 282-402). Achilles’ own mortality is on his mind as he thinks of his father.

Till now I’d hoped, hoped with all my heart
That I alone would die
Far from the stallion-land of Argos, here in troy
But you, Patroclus, would journey back to Pthia...
(XIX, 388-393)

In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Gilgamesh entered upon both a state of symbolic death and simultaneous denial of his mortality when he fled to the woods after the death of Enkidu. Similarly, Achilles’ wish that he had died in the place of Patroclus marks his entry into a state of semi-death and a denial of his—and Patroclus’—mortality, signified by his refusal to eat or sleep.

Looking down on the sorrowful Achilles, Zeus sends Athena to nourish him with the food of the immortal gods.

...the Father, filled with pity,
Quickly turned to Athena with winging words:
‘There he huddles before his curving, beaked ships,
racked with grief for his dear friend while others scatter,
settling down to their meal. He’s fasting, never fed.
Go. Run and instill⁹ some nectar and ambrosia
deep within his chest. Stave off his hunger now.’ (XIX, 404-413)

⁹ to drop, fall in drops, drip, trickle

Achilles' consumption of nectar and ambrosia¹⁰ marks his entry into a godlike state. By refusing to eat or drink, Achilles rejected his own mortality. Now, by eating of the food of the gods, Achilles temporarily becomes like the gods.

The nectar and ambrosia in Achilles' chest "staves off" the weakness of his body and its reliance on food which characterizes all mortals: "...she instilled / Some nectar and sweet ambrosia deep in Achilles chest / So the stabbing pangs of hunger could not sap his knees" (9, 417-419). Without hunger to "sap his knees," Achilles will retain his strength despite being fasted. With his body strengthened and clad in the armor which Hephaistos forged for him, Achilles becomes like an immortal god and embarks on a—partial and temporary—ascension to godhood.

In battle with the Trojans, Achilles appears as unstoppable and untouchable as a god.

Achilles now
like inhuman fire raging on through the mountain gorges
splinter-dry, setting ablaze big stands of timber,
the wind swirling the fireball left and right—
chaos of fire—Achilles storming on brandishing spear
like a frenzied god of battle trampling all he killed
and the earth ran black with blood. (XX, 554-559)

Achilles is often described as 'godlike' but here he is described as "equal to a god"

(δαίμονι ἴσος,) translated more liberally by Fagles as "like a frenzied god of battle." Achilles' rejection of his mortality and consumption of nectar and ambrosia has made him equal to a god, but without his divine armor and divine sustenance, Achilles is still mortal.

¹⁰ Ambrosia may be etymologically connected to *mortality* and the German *brot* (bread) via the reconstructed Proto-Indo-European **mért*, meaning *to die*. See Kloekhorst, Alwin (2008), "mer-^{zi} / mar-", in *Etymological Dictionary of the Hittite Inherited Lexicon* (Leiden Indo-European Etymological Dictionary Series; 5), Leiden, Boston: Brill, pages 667-668.

Achilles' near godhood is emphasized repeatedly throughout the descriptions of his battle with the Trojans. The text continually uses the language of godhood to describe Achilles, but always stops short of calling him a god.

And the god-sprung hero left his spear on the bank,
 propped on tamarisks—in he leapt like a frenzied god,
 his heart racing with slaughter, only his sword in hand,
 swirling in circles, slashing—hideous groans breaking,
 fighters stabbed by the blade, water flushed with blood. (XXI, 29-24)

The use of “god-sprung” (διογενής) reminds us that Achilles is, in fact, a demigod and therefore is partially divine, which, in combination with his divine sustenance, has granted him the ability to be “equal to a god.”

With his loss of physical weakness, Achilles also loses all the emotional softness and compassion with connects mortals. Why Lycaon, one of Priam's sons, throws himself before Achilles and begs for his life, Achilles kills the unarmed man without remorse (XXI, 11). As Achilles tosses Lycaon's lifeless body into the river, he says,

Make your bed with the fishes now,
 they'll dress your wound and lick it clean of blood—
 so much for your last rites! Nor will your mother
 lay your corpse on a bier and mourn her darling son...
 ... Die Trojans, die!
 Till I butcher all the way to sacred Troy—
 run headlong on, I'll hack you from behind!
 Nothing can save you now— (XXI, 139-149)

Achilles physical ascension towards godhood is accompanied by a total loss of mercy. Like a god, Achilles has no regard for the lives of mortals and disregards all the laws of common companionship and brotherhood with man. His behavior is so cruel that it seems to go even beyond the indifference of a god, and might be better compared with Gilgamesh's animalistic slaughter of the animals in the woods.

Achilles' power is so great that Apollo fears that he may storm the walls of Troy and slaughter the Trojans, "against the will of fate."

And now as the powers wrangled back and forth
 The lord god Apollo entered holy Troy,
 Filled with dread for the city's sturdy walls:
 What if the Argive forces stormed them down today—
 Against the will of fate? The rest of the gods
 Who live forever soon returned to Mount Olympus,
 Some enraged, some in their proud, new-won glory,
 And sat beside the Father, king of the black cloud.
 But Achilles slaughtered on and on, never pausing,
 Killing Trojans and skittish battle-teams at once.
 (XXI, 591-600)

Achilles' power has grown so great that, even after the "gods who live forever" have returned to Olympus, Achilles slaughters "on and on," never pausing. Apollo stirs Prince Agenor to stand against Achilles. Agenor ponders Achilles' immortality, reassuring himself that Achilles must be a mortal—able to be killed by spear or sword.

Achilles is far too strong for any man on earth.
 Wait... what if I face him out before the walls?
 Surely his body can be pierced by bronze, even his—
 He has only one life, and people say he's mortal:
 It's only the son of Cronos handing him glory.
 (XXI, 652-656)

Here, Agenor reminds us that Achilles, though he appears as an unstoppable god, is still a mortal with "only one life."

Achilles' near violation of the "will of fate" does not indicate that he nearly has the power of a god, for even the gods are bound by fate. Instead, it shows that Achilles nearly defies his death by sacking Troy, for it is the will of fate that Achilles will die before Troy is overtaken by the Argives. As Apollo carries off Agenor to safety, he speaks to Achilles:

And now Apollo turned to taunt Achilles:
 'Why are you chasing me? Why waste your speed?—

Son of Peleus, you a mortal and I am a deathless god.¹¹
 You still don't know that I am immortal, do you?—
 Straining to catch me in your fury. Have you forgotten?
 (XXII, 8-12)

Apollo makes it clear that the central issue here is not fate, but mortality. It is Achilles' mortality which prevents him from overtaking Troy, since he cannot stand against Apollo. As Apollo taunts, "You can't kill me— / I can never die—its not my fate" (22, 15-16). Ultimately, Achilles cannot sack Troy because he is a mortal—fated to die. Achilles knows that he is no match for a god, having earlier tested himself in vain against the river god Xanthus (21, 369-380). Achilles replies to Apollo's taunts in defeat:

Now you've robbed me of great glory, saved their lives
 With all your deathless ease. Nothing for you to fear,
 No punishment to come. Oh I'd pay you back,
 if only I had the power at my command!
 (XXII, 21-24)

Though Achilles has continued to fight on the battlefield even after most of the gods have retreated to Olympus, his energies are exhaustible. He does not have the "deathless ease" of the gods. Achilles is mortal and must rest and eat to replenish his energy.

Once Achilles has avenged Patroclus' death by killing Hector, and thus also sealing his own fate, he eats and drinks with the other Achaeans. For Achilles, this marks a return to a state of mortality. Yet Achilles is still resisting this mortality by refusing to bathe himself or bury Patroclus.

It's sacrilege for a single drop to touch my head
 Till I place Patroclus on his pyre and heap his mound
 And cut my hair for him—for a second grief this harsh
 Will never touch my heart while I am among the living...
 But now let us consent to the feasting that I loathe. (XXIII, 50-55)

¹¹ θεὸν ἄμβροτον

Though Achilles gives into the necessity to eat, his refusal to bathe shows that he is still in a state of denial about Patroclus' death—and symbolically, about his own mortality. Achilles' refusal to bathe echoes Gilgamesh and Enkidu's states of inhumanity and removal from the world of mortals in the wilderness. For Enkidu, bathing marked an entry into the world of mortals, and for Gilgamesh, it marked a return to a state of mortality after his time of morning in the wilderness and his failure to obtain immortality.

When Achilles gives into sleep for the first time since Patroclus' death, the ghost of Patroclus visits him, saying,

Sleeping, Achilles? You've forgotten me, my friend.
 You never neglected me in life, now only in death.
 Bury me, quickly—let me pass the gates of Hades. (XXIII, 81-83)

Sleep brings Achilles close to the world of the dead. Achilles' refusal to bury Patroclus has prevented him from passing into Hades, leaving Patroclus' ghost stranded between life and death, just as Achilles was stranded in an ambiguous state between mortality and godhood.

For Achilles, giving in to sleep marks his definitive return to a state of mortality. Just as Gilgamesh and Enkidu's dreams served as messengers of Enkidu's death in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, it is in sleep that Achilles finally gives in to his own mortality. Patroclus tells Achilles of his fate and asks to be buried:

Never, never again will you and I, alive and breathing,
 Huddle side-by-side, apart from loyal comrades,
 Making plans together—never... Grim death,
 That death assigned from the day that I was born
 Has spread its hateful jaws to take me down.

And you too,
 your fate awaits you too, godlike as you are, Achilles—
 to die in battle beneath the proud rich Trojan's walls.
 But one thing more. A last request—grant it, please.
 Never bury me bones apart from yours. Achilles,
 Let them lie together...

(XXIII, 90-101)

Patroclus tells Achilles that he will suffer the same fate as Patroclus, despite being “godlike,” (θεοῖς ἐπιείκελ’ Ἀχιλλεῦ) and asks Achilles to have their bones buried together. Thus, Patroclus associates his death with Achilles’ inevitable death. By agreeing to bury Patroclus’ bones alongside his own, Achilles accepts his fate. By allowing Patroclus to pass into Hades, Achilles accepts Patroclus’ death and resigns himself to his own mortality.

Chapter 3

The *Odyssey*: Inconvenient Naps

In the *Odyssey*,¹² the themes of mortality and the immortality are treated similarly as in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad*. However, where Gilgamesh and Achilles tested the boundaries between mortal man and immortal god, Odysseus strives to uphold them and rejects immortality in favor of mortality.

Throughout the epic, sleep serves as a herald of death and disaster. Each time Odysseus falls asleep, he is dragged farther from the world of the living and his memory continues to fade from the minds of mortals. Sleep also serves to mark Odysseus' transitions between the world of mortals and the chaotic world at sea. Due to the unchronological structure of the *Odyssey*, I will treat the themes of the story in their temporal order in the story, rather than the order in which they appear in the epic.

In Book X of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus and his crew at last see Ithaca on the horizon after a treacherous journey back from Troy. However, the exhausted Odysseus succumbs to sleep and his crew conspire to open the bag of winds which Aeolus gifted to Odysseus.

Nine whole days we sailed, nine nights, nonstop.
 On the tenth, our own land hove into sight at last—
 we were so close we could see men tending fires.
 But now an enticing sleep came on me, bone weary
 from working the vessels sheet myself, no letup,
 never trusting the ropes to any other mate,
 the faster to journey back to native land.
 But the crews began to mutter among themselves,
 sure I was hauling troves of gold and silver home,
 the gifts of open-hearted Aeolus, Hipotas' son.¹³ (X, 32-41)

¹² Circa 800-700 BCE

¹³ Homer, and Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles and Bernard Knox, Penguin Books, 2006.

Like Gilgamesh in his trial, Odysseus, exhausted from his travels, succumbs to sleep at the most crucial moment of his journey. However, it is not immortality which Odysseus forfeits in his sleep, but rather a return to civilization and the world of mortals—an escape from his state of semi-death and loss of identity out at sea. As Odysseus sleeps, his crew brings disaster upon them.

They loosed the sack and all the winds burst out
and a sudden squall struck and swept us back to sea,
wailing, in tears, far from our native land.
And I woke up with a start, my spirit churning—
should I leap over the side and drown at once or
grit my teeth and bear it, stay strong among the living? (X, 52-57)

Seeing the disaster which his lack of vigilance has caused, Odysseus contemplates suicide. For Odysseus, it would be easier to succumb to death than bear further suffering, yet he resolves himself to “stay strong among the living.”

Later, when appealing to Aeolus for further help, Odysseus cites “a mutinous crew” and “cruel sleep” as the causes of his undoing: “So they taunted, and I replied in despair, / ‘A mutinous crew undid me—that and cruel sleep. / Set it to rights, my friends. You have the power!’” (X, 73-75). Odysseus’ nine days awake, steering the ship, “Never trusting the ropes to any other mate” (X, 37) is like Gilgamesh’s seven-day trial. Just when he is in sight of his salvation, the weakness inherent in his mortality overcomes him.

When Odysseus encounters Achilles in the land of the dead in book XI, Achilles paints a grim picture of life among the shades. Upon seeing Achilles, Odysseus praises his dead companion, saying,

But was there ever a man more blessed by fortune
than you, Akhilleus? Can there ever be?
We ranked you with immortals in your lifetime,
we Argives did, and here your power is royal

among the dead men's shades. Think, then, Akhilleus:
you need not be so pained by death. (XI, 569-574)

Achilles was "ranked" among the immortals during his life and now lives as a king among the dead. For Odysseus, living as a king among the dead may seem preferable to his extended suffering at sea. But for Achilles, death is no restful slumber. Achilles says to Odysseus,

Let me hear no smooth talk
of death from you, Odysseus, light of councils.
Better, I say, to break sod as a farm hand
for some poor country man, on iron rations,
than lord it over all the exhausted dead. (XI, 577-581)

Achilles would rather "break sod as a farm hand" than be a king among the dead. For Achilles, death is a fate far worse than being "some poor country man" who lives a life completely antithetical to Achilles' life of heroic *kleos*. Here, Achilles' shade expresses a similar sentiment as Utnapisthim in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*: "The simple man and the ruler resemble each other. / The face of one will darken like that of the other" (Tablet X, 64). Both farmhand and king are made equal by death. Though Achilles' reversal of sentiment may seem sudden after the events of the *Iliad*, these sentiments are the same which he expressed to Odysseus, Ajax, and Phoenix in book IX of the *Iliad* before Patroclus' death drove him into a vengeful rage.

Odysseus' inopportune sleep causes disaster again when Odysseus and his crew stop their ships on Thrinacia. Calypso warned Odysseus not to let his crew harm Helios' immortal flocks and herds (XII, 137-142) lest they receive the wrath of the "...god of the sun who see all, hears all things" (XII, 348). For a time, the crew heeds Odysseus' warning: "As long as our food and ruddy wine held out, the crew, /Eager to save their lives, kept hands off the herds" (XII, 352-353). Yet as soon their food runs out, Odysseus' crew betrays his trust again.

"...but as soon as I prayed to all the gods who rule Olympus,
down on my eyes they poured a sweet sound sleep...
As Eurylochus opened up his fatal plans to friends:

‘Listen to me, my comrades, brothers in hardship.
 All ways of dying are hateful to us poor mortals,
 true, but to die of hunger, starve to death—
 that’s the worst of all. So up with you now,
 let’s drive off the pick of Helios’ sleek herds...’ (XII, 363-370)

Again, Odysseus succumbs to sleep at the moment when he should be most vigilant. Eurylochus cites starvation—deprivation of the sustenance which is essential to mortal life—as the worst death a mortal can suffer. This, again, touches upon the earlier idea that mortality is characterized by the necessity to eat—a necessity which Achilles briefly transcended by eating the food of the gods. For Odysseus’ crew, however, eating the immortal cattle of the sun god marks a violation of the boundary between “mortal wretches” and the gods.¹⁴ It is also noteworthy that by eating up the food of their divine host, Odysseus’ crew is committing the same crime as Penelope’s suitors who are eating up Odysseus’ food back in Ithaca. After feasting for seven days, Odysseus and his crew flee again to the open sea to endure further hardships.

By book V of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus is the only one of his crew left alive and is stranded on Ogygia with the immortal Calypso. Odysseus is stranded on Ogygia for seven years—a time period which parallels Gilgamesh’s seven-day trial on Utnapishtim’s island in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*. But unlike Gilgamesh, Odysseus stays awake on the beach, longing for his home and his wife, Penelope. Calypso, isolated and lonely on Ogygia, offers Odysseus immortality in an attempt to keep her only company. Odysseus, however, desires only to return home to Ithaca and his mortal wife. Calypso compares herself to Penelope, saying,

Can I be less desirable than she is?
 Less interesting? Less beautiful? Can mortals
 compare with goddesses in grace and form? (V, 220-222)

¹⁴ The “Cattle of the Sun” may represent the days of the year—the sun’s “flock.” This interpretation would add an interesting element to why the cattle cannot be eaten and are still crawling and bellowing even when cooked (12, 423-427). Like Gilgamesh’s failure to master time, Odysseus’ men cannot consume time for sustenance.

For Odysseus, living his life in isolation on a secluded island, removed from the world of the living, separated from his kingdom, companions, and wife, is a fate as hateful as death. Further, if Odysseus chooses immortality with Calypso, he will remain dead to the world of the living, assumed to have died at sea. Though he will live on as an immortal, his memory and fame will fade from mortal memory.

Here, an interesting contrast arises between Odysseus and Achilles. For Achilles, becoming momentarily “godlike” and resisting his mortality as he rushed towards his death was his only path to immortality. If Achilles had left Troy and preserved his life, he would not have gained the immortal fame which accompanies the *kleos* he earned in battle. Odysseus’ choice on Ogygia is an inversion of this. For Odysseus, the preservation of his life and the affirmation of his mortality are his only path to ensuring the immortal fame of his memory. Again, we see Achilles striving to violate the boundary between mortal and immortal while Odysseus seeks to uphold it. Achilles sought immortality through death while Odysseus resists both death and godhood, seeking to preserve his mortal life.

With his mind set on returning home to Penelope, Odysseus refuses Calypso’s offer of immortality:

My quiet Penelope—how well I know—
 would seem a shade before your majesty,
 death and old age being unknown to you,
 while she must die. Yet, it is true, each day
 I long for home, long for the sight of home. (V, 225-229)

Odysseus acknowledges that Penelope must appear as “a shade” to the immortal Calypso, further emphasizing that to return to the side of Penelope, who “must die,” is to choose mortality over immortality. And yet, Odysseus longs for nothing more than to return home and live out the rest of his days among mortals. As with the incident with Helios’ cattle, Odysseus does not wish to

eat of the immortality meant only for the gods. When offered the gift of immortality, Odysseus chooses mortality.

In both the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Odyssey*, death and immortality are characterized by a separation from the world of the living. Calypso,¹⁵ like “Utnapishtim the Distant” (Tablet XI, 243) and his wife, lives a life of isolation. In the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, when Utnapishtim and his wife are invited into the company of the gods, they do not in fact get to join the gods in their halls. Enlil says to Gilgamesh,

... You were but human; now you are
admitted into the company of gods.
Your dwelling place shall be Faraway,
the place which is the source of the overflowing
of all the rivers of the world. (XI, 75)

It is only because of Gilgamesh that we get to hear Utnapishtim’s story and it is only through the mortal Gilgamesh that Utnapishtim and his wife make contact with the world of the living.

Without him, their story and memory would have been lost to the world, rendering them as good as dead. Furthermore, after Gilgamesh’s departure, Utnapishtim orders his boatman, Urshanabi, to never return:

Though your delight has been to cross the waters,
the harbor now is closed, the crossing forbidden.
The waters and the shore now shun the boatman. (XI, 78)

This seals Utnapishtim’s fate of eternal isolation—stranded with his wife on an island at the end of the sea, never again to make contact with the world of the living. Similarly, if Odysseus had stayed with Calypso on her “distant island” (V, 60), his story would never have reached his

¹⁵ According to etymonline.com, Calypso may be etymologically connected with Hell through the reconstructed Proto-Indo-European *kel-*, meaning “to cover, conceal, or save.” This introduced the possibility of reading Odysseus’ time on Ogygia as an entrapment in a metaphorical underworld of state of death. However, I could find no other sources supporting this etymological connecting.

home—or our ears—and he would have lived out eternity cut off from the world of the living, his story unheard and his memory forgotten.

When Odysseus is at last returning to Ithaca, ferried by the Phaeacians, he again succumbs to sleep.

At last, Odysseus climbed aboard himself
and down he lay, all quiet
as crewmen sat to the oarlocks, each in line.
They slipped the cable free of the drilled stone post
and as soon as they swung back and the blades tossed up the spray
an Irresistible sleep fell deeply on his eyes, the sweetest,
soundest oblivion, still as the sleep of death itself... (XIII, 86-92)

This time, no disaster strikes—“he slept in peace, the memory of his struggles laid to rest” (XIII, 104-105). Though he has escaped death at sea, Odysseus ultimately succumbs willing to his mortality just as he succumbs at last to a peaceful sleep—“still as the sleep of death itself.”¹⁶

¹⁶ νήγρετος, ἠδιστος, θανάτῳ ἄγχιιστα ἐοικώς

Chapter 4

The *Hymn to Demeter*: Marriage, Death, and Rebirth

The *Homeric Hymns* are a collection of hymns to the Greek gods traditionally attributed to Homer. Though the hymns share the same meter and dialect as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, modern scholars reject their attribution to Homer. The oldest hymns were composed circa the 7th century BC, but some may have been added to the collection later. The *Hymn to Demeter* is one of the older, and longer hymns in the collection, and serves as both etiological myth about the creation of seasons and the establishment of the Eleusinian Mysteries, and as an exploration of themes of grief, death, and godhood.

Demeter is the goddess of grain, the harvest, and agriculture. She and her daughter Persephone were key divinities in the Eleusinian Mysteries, which involved themes of fertility, death, and rebirth in their rituals. The *Hymn to Demeter* makes artful use of grain, fruit, and other fertility and agriculture metaphors throughout, and Demeter is referred to by various epithets evoking grain and agriculture, such as “rich-haired Demeter” (1), “...golden blade Demeter, who bears shinning fruit” (5), “who brings seasons, bears shinning fruit” (54), and “golden Demeter” (303).

In the *Hymn to Demeter*, Hades abducts Persephone to be his wife, with the consent of her father, Zeus, and brings her to the underworld. The loss of her daughter sends Demeter into a state of grief and rage, in which she makes the earth infertile, threatening to kill humanity. Due to this, Zeus allows Persephone to return to her mother, but since she ate of the fruit of the underworld, she must stay with her husband, Hades, for a third of every year, during which the plants will wilt and the earth will become infertile.

The *Hymn to Demeter* explores themes of grief and loss of identity, similar to those seen in the *Odyssey*, as well as themes of fasting and mortality, similar to those seen in the *Iliad*. However, this text primarily concerns these themes in relation to the gods and what happens when an immortal must contend with grief, infertility, and—to the extent that an immortal can—death.

When Persephone is abducted by Hades, Demeter hears her cry for help (38-39) and immediately enters a state of mourning.

Sharp grief seized her heart; with both hands
she tore the veil from her ambrosial hair,
threw a black cloak across her shoulders
and sped like a bird over the nourishing land and sea... (40-43) ¹⁷

It is as if Demeter has learned of her daughter's death, and though Persephone, as an immortal goddess, cannot die, she has indeed been taken by the god of death to the land of the dead, unbeknownst to her mother.

In her state of mourning, Demeter fasts and forgoes bathing.

Nine days queen Deo wandered
the earth, blazing torches in her hands,
nor did she eat ambrosia or sip sweet nectar once
while grieving, or wash her skin clean. (47-50)

Demeter refuses to eat nectar and ambrosia, the food of the gods, as well as her refusal to bathe, are symbolic expressions of grief which recall those of Achilles after Patroclus' death. Achilles' fast represented a state of mourning, and accompanied his entry into state of simultaneous godhood and animality—both super- and sub-humanity—as he forwent the necessities of mortals. Demeter's fast is representative of, and accompanied by, a movement in the opposite

¹⁷ Rayor, Diane J. *The Homeric Hymns*. University of California Press, 2014.

direction—away from immortality, towards mortality. In the loss of her child to Hades, Demeter feels the sorrow a mortal mother feels who loses her child to death. Therefore, when Demeter takes on the garments and rituals of a mother mourning death, she is also taking on the semblance of mortality.

Demeter soon learns from Helios that Zeus gave Persephone to Hades “to be called his budding¹⁸ wife” (79-80). Now, Demeter is not just mourning a lost child, but a daughter lost to marriage. Helios assures Demeter that, “Hades is not an unsuitable son-in-law among the gods” (83-84), but this does not comfort her. Angry with Zeus, Demeter withdraws from the company of the gods to wander among the mortals.

But a grief more dread and bitter came over her.
Then, furious at Zeus who darkens clouds,
she withdrew from the assembly of the gods and high Olympos
and wandered the cities and rich fields of humans,
disguising her form for a long time. Nor did any man
or woman recognize her when they looked,
until she came to the house of thoughtful Keleos,
who then was ruler of incense-offering Eleusis. (90-97)

As Demeter descends from the realm of the gods into the realm of mortals, she takes on the guise of an old woman: “She looked like an old woman born long ago, / Without a child or gifts of garland-loving Aphrodite...” (101-102). The description of the “rich fields” of mortals contrast with Demeter’s state of mourning and symbolic infertility. Demeter’s wandering among the mortals is like Gilgamesh’s grief-stricken flight into the wilderness, during which he assumes the visage and behavior of an animal. Among the mortals, she becomes temporarily like them; vulnerable to ravages of time and death. Hades—death—has taken her child, forcing the immortal Demeter to confront infertility, old age, and death, from which she has previously been

¹⁸ θαλερός

exempt. However, Demeter's disguise as an old woman, like her fast, is ultimately only a symbolic expression of mourning. She is not really an old woman and her daughter, though stolen away by Hades, is not really dead. Just as Achilles managed to briefly obtain near-godlike power by resisting his mortality and consuming nectar and ambrosia, Demeter gets a taste of what it is to be mortal and suffer the grief of death, old age, and infertility.

Appearing as an old woman (101-104,) Demeter comes to the house of Keleos, king of Eleusis, where she encounters Keleos' daughters.

The daughters of Keleos, son of Eleusinos, saw her
as they came to draw the well water and bring it
in bronze pitchers to their father's house.
Like four goddesses, they bloomed with youth... (105-108)

Keleos' young daughters, appearing "like four goddesses" in the bloom of youth, are a sharp contrast with Demeter and a reminder of what she has lost. Noting that she is "godlike," Keleos' daughters bring her to their mother, Metaneira. Though Demeter is disguised as an old woman, her divinity shines through: "the goddess set foot on the threshold, her head / touching the rafter, the doorway filled with divine light" (188-189). Metaneira, in awe of the goddess, asks Demeter, who is still "not laughing, not tasting food or drink" (200), if she'll nurse her infant son.

This offer seems to stir Demeter from her grief and she gladly takes up the task, promising to let no harm come to the child (227-228).

He grew like a god,
not eating grain, nor sucking mother's milk.
By day, Demeter anointed him with ambrosia as if god-born,
breathing sweetly on him, holding him to her breast.
By night she buried him in the fire's might like a brand,
in secret from his own parents. They were amazed
how fast he sprouted him; he was like the gods.
She would have made him unaging and immortal... (235-241)

This child acts as a substitute for Demeter's lost daughter and seems to temporarily subdue her grief. We are told that Demeter's fire ritual, along with the infant's abstinence from mortal food and treatment with ambrosia, would have made him an immortal if his mother had not intervened and pulled him from the fire, fearing for her child's life.

In her wrath at the interruption of the ritual, Demeter reveals her identity and sheds her disguise. However, despite this loss of the outward semblance of mourning, her grief only deepens with the loss of this second child's immortality. As a mortal, he cannot be a substitute for Persephone and Demeter is again rendered childless. Thus, Demeter makes the earth become infertile like her—bearing no fruit

But golden Demeter
sat there, far away from all the blessed ones,
waiting, wasting away with longing for her daughter.
She made that a most dreadful and bitter year
for people on the land that feeds them, and the earth
sprouted no seed. Demeter, richly crowned, concealed it.
Oxen dragged the curved plows in vain through the fields
and the white barley fell fruitless to the earth. (305-309)

Demeter lets Zeus know her wrath by “concealing” the seeds of the earth, just as her own daughter has been concealed beneath the earth by death. Demeter intends to destroy mankind by keeping the earth barren and thereby depriving “those in Olympus / of the splendid honor of gifts and sacrifices” (3312-3313). This power which mortals have over the gods via sacrifice is better understood by a brief detour into the Prometheus myth.

In Hesiod's account of the Prometheus myth in *Theogony*, Prometheus attempts to trick Zeus into taking a sub-par offering of bones and fat covered in hide, thereby preserving the best cuts of meat for mankind. Zeus sees through Prometheus' ruse and deprives mankind of fire as

punishment, which Prometheus returns again to man, and is himself punished for this defiance of Zeus (Hesiod, 509-572).¹⁹

Aeschylus, however, gives us a different and more detailed account of the Prometheus myth in his play, *Prometheus Bound*. According to Aeschylus, Prometheus stole fire from Zeus and gifted it to mankind for the first time, thereby making mankind “intelligent and masters of their minds” (444).²⁰ Aeschylus tells us that Prometheus’ crime was not returning fire to mankind, but rather an initial theft of fire which denoted a misplacement of divine power and honor. Kratos attests this notion when, “So now, play the insolent; now, plunder / the privileges of the gods and give them / to creatures of a day” (80-83). Additionally, Aeschylus’ Prometheus taught mankind all the arts of civilization, including building, woodwork, agriculture, astrology, math, language, the domestication of animals, sailing, medicine, prophecy, augury, sacrifice, and metallurgy (442-454). Of these, sacrifice, carried out with the help of fire, is most important, because it makes the gods dependent on mankind. Prometheus says,

Also I taught of the smoothness of the entrails
and what color the bile should have to please the gods,
and the dappled symmetry of the liver lobe.
It was I who burned the thigh bones wrapped in fat
and the long shank bone... (493-497)

¹⁹ Hesiodos, et al. *Works and Days and Theogony*. Hackett, 1993.

²⁰ Aeschylus, Grene, D., Bernardete, S., Griffith, M., & Most, G. W. (2013). *Aeschylus I: The Persians, the seven against Thebes, the suppliant maidens, Prometheus Bound*. University of Chicago Press.

In Aeschylus' version of the Prometheus myth, Prometheus' establishment of sacrificial rites created a codependent relationship between the gods and mortals. Zeus had planned to "blot the race out and create a new one" (233), but now he cannot do away mankind since they have become a source of honor and nourishment for the gods. Prometheus is punished for his upset of divine power by himself being made a metaphoric sacrifice to Zeus' eagles.

From the Prometheus myth, we understand why Zeus fears that Demeter will destroy mankind and deprive the gods of their offerings and sacrifices. Mankind's destruction would "starve" the gods of a certain form of nourishment—honors—on which they are dependent. It is only due to this the threat of metaphoric starvation that Zeus orders Persephone to be brought up from Hades and returned to her mother. With Persephone no longer concealed beneath the ground by death, the earth blossoms and is fertile again.

Upon Persephone's joyful return to her mother, Demeter at once inquires as to whether her daughter ate while in the underworld, informing her that, "if you did, flying back into earth's hidden places, / you will live there a third part of each year, / but two seasons with me and the other gods" (30). Though eating of the food of the underworld would not make Persephone mortal, it would confirm her marriage with the god of death and compel her to return to the land of the dead each year, trapping her in a cycle of symbolic death and rebirth.

Persephone confesses that she did eat in the underworld, saying, "...secretly Kronos' other son / Put into me a pomegranate seed, honey-sweet food, / Compelling me by force to eat, most unwillingly" (31).²¹ Within the context of Persephone's arranged marriage with Hades, we can understand Persephone's consumption of the pomegranate seed as an allegory for her loss of

²¹ αὐτὰρ ὁ λάθρη ἔμβαλέ μοι ῥοιῆς κόκκον, μελιτδέ' ἔδωδῆν, ἄκουσαν δὲ βίη με προσηνάγκασσε πάσασθαι

virginity. Persephone cannot return to her mother because she has been deflowered by her husband and had a “pomegranate seed” forcefully “put into” her. Persephone’s loss of her virginity, and with it, the innocence of her childhood, marries her to death and traps all of nature in a cycle of seasonal fertility and infertility, death and rebirth, wilting and flowering. For Demeter, the permanent transformation of Persephone and the grief which Demeter will experience each season when she loses Persephone again to her husband is the closest thing which Demeter can experience to the loss induced by death.

The *Hymn to Demeter* closes with Demeter teaching her sacred mystery rites to the kings Triptolemos, Diokles, Eumolpos, Polyxeinos, and Keleos—“sacred things not to be transgress, asked about, or uttered: a great awe of the gods stops the voice” (478-479). Because of the vow of secrecy which Eleusinian initiates took, respected here by the narrator of the hymn, we do not know much detail about the mysteries and must rely on myth and archeological evidence to reconstruct them.

On the nature of the mysteries, the narrator says only, “Blest are earth-bound mortals who have seen these rites, / but the uninitiate, who has no share in them, / never has the same lot when dead in misty darkness” (33). Carl Kerényi expands upon the meaning of these sparse lines in his work, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*. He writes,

The existential emphasis lies on the blessedness. It was achieved through participation in a rite. Thus an inequality was created between the initiate and the profane, a division here and now, by virtue of which one group is blessed while the others go to their death in imperfection and uncertainty. The end of existence has taken on two faces. The one shines back on men, lending their existed a special radiance. The other—the end awaiting the vast uncharacterized multitude—is lusterless.²² (14)

²² Kerényi Karl, and Ralph Manheim. *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*. Princeton University Press, 1991.

From the mythological, archeological, and historical context, we can gather that the Eleusinian mysteries were celebrated with processions, dancing, and the consumption of a grain drink called *kykeon* and that initiates would receive a better “lot” in death. Kerényi writes,

The name Eleusis... refers to the underworld in the favorable sense and many be translated as “the place of happy arrival.” Grammatically, it is differentiated by accent and inflection from *eleusis*, “arrival,” but, like it, is related, according to the rules of Greek vowel gradation, to Elysion, the realm of the blessed. (23)

The grammatical connection between *Eleusis* and *Elysion* suggests that the “blessedness” which initiates received in the afterlife may have been access to Elysion, or something similar.

However, it is also possible that initiates received immortality and salvation from death, perhaps through some form of rebirth. This interpretation would fit thematically with the *Hymn to Demeter* (Kerényi, 16) and may be supported by the close connection between Demeter, Persephone, and Dionysus, who are often pictured and celebrated together (Kerényi, 34-35).

In the Dionysian Mysteries, Dionysus, “the liberator,”²³ offered an alleviation of the burden of mortality and life in civilization through intoxicating dance and drink. Dionysus is associated with wine and vegetation, fertility and orgiastic sexuality, and madness and theatre—all of which involved stepping outside of oneself and being freed from constraints. Dionysus was reborn from Zeus’ thigh after being torn to pieces by the titans, and following on this resurrection, it seems that his initiates were also offered some form of rebirth or immortality (Detienne, 1).²⁴ Kerényi argues that Dionysus plays a hidden role in the *Hymn to Demeter*, as

²³ Ελευθέριος

²⁴ Detienne, Marcel, et al. *The Cuisine of Sacrifice among the Greeks*. University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Persephone was abducted in the Nysan Plain, named after Dionysus, and Dionysus and Hades are sometimes conflated in Greek mythology. Kerényi supports the argument that Hades doubles as Dionysus in the *Hymn to Demeter* with the observation that Demeter tells Metaneira that it is “not right for her to drink red wine” (*Hymn to Demeter*, 207-208). Kerényi also notes that Clement of Alexandria remarked that “the pomegranate tree had spring from the drops of Dionysos’ blood” (139). Though the Dionysian connection is interesting and adds credence to the idea that Eleusinian initiates were offered some form of immortality, it is possible that this interpretation is influenced by our familiarity with Christianity.

Regardless of speculative reconstruction, Demeter’s last words to Persephone in the *Hymn to Demeter* seem to strike at the essence of the Mysteries: “When the earth sprouts with every kind of fragrant / flower in the spring, out of the misty darkness / you will rise again, a great marvel for gods and mortal folks” (401-403). Like Dionysus, Persephone represents the return of life from death and destruction, and in particular, the seasonal rebirth of vegetative life. Though Persephone, like mortals, is bound to death, through death, there is also rebirth, just as surely as spring follows winter.

Chapter 5

Genesis 3: The Farmer and the Life-giver

Like the *Hymn to Demeter*, Genesis 3 explores themes of mortality, sexuality, reproduction, and the loss of innocence. Discussions of Genesis 3 are often dominated by theological questions about the origin of death, sin, and evil. However, this sometimes obscures the text's most basic meaning as an etiological tale about why life is the way it is for man, the farmer, and woman, the life-giver. Genesis through the book of Joshua consist of two sources, the earlier Yahwist (J) and the later Elohist (E),²⁵ named for their different titles for and treatments of God. Since Genesis 1-3 was crafted out of the combination of these two sources, there are some inconsistencies, most notably, the duplicated creation of man. However, while we will discuss some of these inconsistencies, they should not distract from the simplest intentions of the text.

In Genesis 3, as in the *Hymn to Demeter*, eating fruit is the cause of a loss of innocence. For Eve, the fruit acts as the catalyst which causes her confrontation with mortality—the exact nature of which we will address later. However, for Adam, it is not the fruit, but Eve who brings him into the world of mortality, acting for Adam as Shamhat did for Enkidu. When Adam and Eve eat the forbidden fruit of knowledge, they undergo a similar transformation as that of Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* after his intercourse with Shamhat: “And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they *were* naked; and they sewed fig leaves together, and made themselves aprons” (Genesis 3: 7). Adam and Eve become self-conscious and lose the shameless, carefree grace enjoyed by animals in nature. They become acutely aware of their

²⁵ The Yahwist source was potentially first composed as early as 900 BCE, with the Elohist following shortly after. However, extensive redactions make dating hard.

nakedness—their vulnerability and mortality. The many parallels between Genesis 3 and the *Epic of Gilgamesh* reveal the biblical story's likely near eastern influence.

This emphasis on Adam and Eve's nakedness and the similarity to the episode of Enkidu's intercourse with Shamhat in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* makes one wonder whether the eating of fruit in Genesis 3 is a sexual metaphor similar to that of the pomegranate in the *Hymn to Demeter*. One would not necessarily need to establish a cultural precedence for such metaphors in the Hebrew tradition to speculate that the consumption of the fruit in Genesis 3 has implicit sexual meaning. Fruit, as the reproductive organ of a plant which contains its seed, is almost universally symbolic of reproduction and sexuality. However, establishing such a precedent would be useful.

In his paper, "Forbidden Fruit: Ancient Near Eastern Sexual Metaphors,"²⁶ Ronald A. Veenker discusses the extensive fruit, garden, and eating metaphors used for genitalia and intercourse in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Near Eastern poetry, the Song of Songs, and Proverbs in order to reveal the underlying sexual metaphors in Genesis 3 and the thematic similarities between Enkidu's coming to the consciousness and that of Adam and Eve. He writes,

When one analyzes ancient Near Eastern sexual metaphors with a view toward elucidating sexual references in the Hebrew Bible, new light is shed on the rhetoric of the Garden of Eden narrative in Genesis. The focus of this analysis will be sexual metaphors from the Bible and ancient Near Eastern texts having to do with fruit and sexual eating. It turns out that "eating fruit" in Genesis 3 is a simple metaphor for intercourse and, therefore, the biblical narrator wishes to tell the reader by means of this metaphor that Adam and Eve experienced sex for the first time in the Garden. That carnal knowledge is the first rung on the ladder of human "knowing" is not only seen in Genesis, but is found in the structure of the Gilgamesh Epic as well. A comparison of the two narratives results in clarification of the "ascent of knowledge" theme often neglected by commentators on the book of Genesis. (1)

²⁶ Veenker, Ronald A. (2000). Forbidden Fruit: Ancient Near Eastern Sexual Metaphors from <http://www.jstor.org>. *Hebrew Union College Annual*, Vol. 70/71, One Hundred Twenty-Fifth Anniversary (1999-2000)

I do not think Adam and Eve's consumption of fruit is solely to a sexual metaphor, as we have seen the importance of eating in relation to mortality, as well as eating forbidden food meant for gods, as in the Cattle of the Sun incident in the *Odyssey*. However, Veenker makes a compelling case for the reading of the forbidden fruit in Eden as having an underlying sexual meaning based on a precedence for such metaphors in Near Eastern and Biblical literature.

Veenker summarizes his conclusion about the meaning of this sexual metaphor in Genesis 3 and its relation to the thematically similar seduction of Enkidu in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* as follows:

When we first encounter Enkidu, like Adam, he is in the company of beasts having as yet no knowledge of a woman. Both Adam and Enkidu experience the ascent of knowledge through seduction and sexual knowing. The experience results in wisdom, but it is bought at a great price: Enkidu may no longer enjoy communication with his gazelles and, as well, the days of Eden's talking serpent are brought to an end. Enkidu's and Adam's lives of innocence are lost to the past and there lies ahead for the both of them a painful and difficult road as each leaves the simplicity of nature for the ambiguous complexities of human culture. (17)

Veenker analyzes the shared symbolic imagery and meaning of these two separate texts well.

One might add that both Adam and Enkidu face not only difficulty and complexity in civilization, but also an elevated awareness of their own mortality, which Adam, Eve, and Enkidu, seemed to lack among the animals. This is why, when trying to escape the terrible knowledge of his own mortality, Gilgamesh's flees into the wilderness and dresses as an animal. Gilgamesh's symbolic mirroring of Enkidu's existence among the animals is an attempt to escape his acute awareness of mortality which animals lack.

The transition from an animal existence to a civilized one is more explicit in Enkidu's narrative but still present in Genesis with God covering Adam and Eve's shameful nakedness with the first makeshift clothing (Genesis 3:21), and if one extends their reading to Genesis 4, the

creation of war and cities, as Veenker notes (5). This interpretation is supported by Gerhard Von Rad's analysis of the meaning of "to know" in his Genesis commentary.²⁷ Von Rad writes,

So far as the knowledge of good and evil is concerned, one must remember that the Hebrew *yad* ("to know") never signifies purely intellectual knowing, but in a much wider sense an "experiencing," a "becoming acquainted with," even an "ability." "To know in the ancient world is always to able as well" (Wellhausen). (Von Rad 89)

Von Rad goes on to argue that the knowledge which Adam and Eve acquire is not a purely moral knowledge but rather a practical knowledge of the world.

For the ancients, the good was not just an idea: the good was what had a good effect, as a result, in this context "good and evil" should be understood more as what is "beneficial" and "salutary" on the one hand and "detrimental," "damaging" on the other. (Von Rad 89)

In this context, the knowledge which Adam and Eve acquire takes on a more Promethean appearance. Adam and Eve's disobedience of God has made them independent from him, just as in the Prometheus myth, humanity becoming "intelligent and masters of their minds" (443) allowed man to gain some power over the gods—or at least assurance from destruction—via the practice of sacrifice. Like mankind after Prometheus teaches them the arts of civilization, Adam and Eve go from being like animals, shameless in their nakedness and obedient to their master, to having power over themselves and the world around them. In this light, the knowledge of "good and evil" might better be translated into English as the knowledge of "good and bad" or of "good and bad things."

Though God said that Adam and Eve would die if they ate of the "fruit of the tree in the midst of the garden" (Genesis 3:3), the primary punishment for Adam and Eve's disobedience is not death but pain in agricultural and reproductive labor.

²⁷ Rad, Gerhard Von. *Genesis: A Comentary*. SCM Press, 1972.

Unto the woman [God] said, I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children; and thy desire *shall be* to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee. And unto Adam he said, Because thou hast hearkened unto the voice of thy wife, and hast eaten of the tree, of which I commanded thee, saying, Thou shalt not eat of it: cursed *is* the ground for thy sake; in sorrow shalt thou eat *of* it all the days of thy life; Thorns also and thistles shall it bring forth to thee; and thou shalt eat the herb of the field; In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return. And Adam called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living. (Genesis 3:16-20)²⁸

Outside of the garden, Adam and Eve must engage in the cycles of the seasons and of time, preparing food for when the earth becomes infertile and the plants die, and bearing children to carry on when they become infertile and die. Here, a parallel can be made to the *Hymn to Demeter* in which Persephone's entanglement with death is the cause of the earth's yearly season of infertility, although the hardship which this presumably causes mankind is not explicitly discussed in the hymn.

On the meaning of Adam and Eve's punishments, Von Rad writes,

These penalties are all to be understood aetiologically; in them the narrator gives a reason for disturbing enigmas and necessities, he answers elementary questions about life. These are the real goal and climax toward which the narrative is directed in its present form (92).

Genesis 3, especially in Christian contexts, is usually interpreted as a fall from paradise, in which Adam and Eve enjoyed immortality, into a world of death, which necessitates agricultural labor and childbirth to sustain life. However, when stripping away later developments in how Genesis 3 is interpreted, we see that the text does not seem to support the idea that Adam and Eve were immortal in Eden.

²⁸ *Bible: King James Version.*

We know that agricultural labor existed before Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden, since Genesis 2:15 tells us that God put Adam in the garden to "dress and keep it." And we also know that reproduction existed in the garden, since in the first account of the creation of man, God tells Adam and Eve to "Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth..." (Genesis 1:28). Thus, the only new developments are 1) Eve will experience great sorrow in childbirth 2) Eve will now be ruled over by Adam, bringing sorrow into their relationship for Eve 3) Adam will experience great difficulties in agricultural labor until he dies. Thus, God's punishments of Adam and Eve do not explain agriculture, childbirth, or marriage, which are explained by Genesis 2:15, 1:28, and 2:24, but rather the pain and difficulties involved in them.

Adam and Eve's punishments are not at all arbitrary. They are in alignment how they were created and what they were created for. The Hebrew "*adam*" means "man" and is etymologically connected with the Hebrew "*adamah*" meaning "red clay, and "*dama*," meaning "earth."²⁹ Eve in Hebrew is *Hawwāh* which is phonetically similar to *hāyā*, meaning "to live." Thus, it is fitting that Adam, who was created out of earth (Genesis 2:7) for the purpose of tending to God's garden (Genesis 1:28) must contend with the earth in toilsome agricultural labor until he returns to the earth in death. And Eve, who was made out of flesh (Genesis 2:22) as a helper for Adam (Genesis 2:20) must labor in the creation of new flesh in reproduction. In this context, it seems that when God says, "for dust thou *art*, and unto dust shalt thou return" (Genesis 3:19), it is not a fulfillment of his promise that Adam and Eve would die if they ate of the forbidden tree. Rather, it makes explicit that Adam's punishment suits his creation. This verse is a parallel to the verse, "and thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee" addressed to Eve (Genesis 3:16), which explains that her punishment comes from her

²⁹ Von Rad, 99

creation as a helper and wife. Adam the farmer, taken from the earth, labors to create bread and is bound to reunite with the earth, while Eve, the life-giver, taken from flesh, labors to bring forth children, and is bound to reunite with Adam's flesh in procreation. Though God does not follow through on his threat of death, in Adam and Eve's punishments, we get a description of what it means to be mortal.

Even so, the question still remains as to why Adam and Eve do not die when they eat the forbidden fruit. When the serpent says, "Ye shall not surely die" (Genesis 3:4), he is correct. Thus, we could either take the serpent at his word when he implies that God has made this empty threat out of jealousy or fear, or we can believe that God either took mercy upon Adam and Eve³⁰ or fulfilled his promise by sealing off potential access to the Tree of Life. Here we come to the implicit definition of immortality contained within Genesis 3, and the possibility that man might have had access to this immortality, or even godhood, in Eden. The serpent tells Eve that eating of the tree of knowledge will make Adam and Eve like gods, saying, "And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: / For God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil" (Genesis 3: 4-5). God seems to confirm this notion when he says, "Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil: and now, lest he put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever" (Genesis 3:22). God explicitly states that Adam and Eve have become like gods, as the serpent promised, and implies that if they eat of the tree of life and become immortal, they will assume full godhood.

One could imagine that Adam and Eve had been eating of the Tree of Life, and that their mortality is somehow intensified or ensured by their lack of access to this tree. This would be

³⁰ Von Rad takes up this interpretation (97), which might be supported by Genesis 3:21 in which Yahweh provides Adam and Eve with animal skin coats.

consistent with their other punishments which involve the introduction of pain into already existent forms of labor. However, the simpler explanation seems to be that they had not yet eaten of the Tree of Life and that God either overlooked banning them from it, or it only becomes pertinent to prevent their eating of it once they had acquired knowledge. Either way, the point seems to be that having both knowledge and immortality would make Adam and Eve “as gods,” which God seeks to prevent. The plural use of “gods” and “us” could refer to Yahweh and his heavenly host, as Von Rad notes (58), however, it must surely have also carried the more general meaning of “like divinities,” rather than strictly meaning “like Yahweh.” As with mankind in the Prometheus myth, Adam and Eve’s acquisition of knowledge gives them an agency more appropriate for divinities than animals.

Von Rad takes the interpretation that the key issue of the text is not God’s paranoia about Adam and Eve becoming gods, as the serpent implies, but rather the hubris of Adam and Eve’s aspiration to godhood (91). However, one cannot ignore the possibility that the serpent is in part correct about God’s jealousy or fear concerning the possibility of Adam and Eve obtaining godhood, which seems to be somewhat confirmed by Genesis 3:22. There certainly is a mythological precedent for gods displaying anxiety about mortals gaining too much power or usurping their place. Such anxieties are at the center of the Prometheus myth, especially in Aeschylus’ portrayal. But either way, the consequences of Adam and Eve’s aspiration to godhood is a separation both from that very godhood and from the animals. While once they wandered the garden naked and experienced relatively little pain in childbirth, like animals, they now must engage in painful labor to stave off their mortality. Yet we are left with a question: could man return to the garden of Eden and eat from the Tree of Life?

Chapter 6

John 16: The Bread of Life

The writers of the New Testament take up the question left open in Genesis 3 as to whether man can return to Eden and eat of the Tree of Life. While the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, Homer, the *Hymn to Demeter*, and Genesis 3 all discussed and defined mortality through the symbolism of eating and sleeping, this symbolism is made self-conscious in the writings of John and Paul, who seek to provide a path to immortality through a rethinking—and reversal—of sleep and bread as symbols of mortality. In John 6,³¹ John uses the symbolism of bread explicitly and purposefully to present the possibility for man to eat again of the Tree of Life. It is noteworthy that he, like the other authors of the New Testament, takes up the interpretation that Adam and Eve were immortal in Eden, which appears to have become the common interpretation by John's time.

Jesus' main discourse on bread and immortality in John 6 is anticipated by his proclamation at the end of John 5:

Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that heareth my word, and believeth on him that sent me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour is coming, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God: and they that hear shall live. (John 5: 24-25)³²

This passage sets the stage for the discussion of immortality in John 6 by establishing that the believers in Jesus have the promise of “everlasting life,” and that even those who are already dead will have access to the “resurrection of life” (John 5:29), which is discussed in greater detail by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15. Further, John 5 establishes Jesus as the inheritor of Moses’

³¹ Circa the late first century CE

³² *Bible: King James Version.*

legacy and the fulfillment of his word, when Jesus says, “For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me; for he wrote of me” (John 5:46). In the *International Critical Commentary* on John,³³ Archbishop J. H. Bernard notes that,

To appreciate the significance of this allusion to manna, it must be born in mind that there was a general belief, more or less explicit, that Messiah when He came would outdo Moses, the great national hero of Israel, in the wonders he would accomplish. (194)

When seeking to understand Jesus’ discourse on immortality at the end of John 6, one must keep in mind that it follows upon and is framed by the miracle of the multiplication of loaves at the beginning of the chapter. Bernard notes that when the people later question Jesus, saying, “What sign shewest thou then, that we may see, and believe thee?” (John 6:30), they are implicitly questioning the apparent insignificance of the multiplication of the loaves in comparison with the Miracles which Moses performed (194).

Jesus’ discourse on immortality begins as follows:

And when they had found him on the other side of the sea, they said unto him, Rabbi, when camest thou hither? Jesus answered them and said, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Ye seek me, not because ye saw the miracles, but because ye did eat of the loaves, and were filled. Labour not for the meat which perisheth, but for that meat which endureth unto everlasting life, which the Son of man shall give unto you: for him hath God the Father sealed. (John 6:26-27)

Here, Jesus chastises the people following him not because of the miracle they witnessed, but because they were “filled” by the bread which Jesus multiplied. He then establishes a dichotomy between the “meat which perishes”—bread which rots, and is therefore a symbol of the mortal body—and the “meat which endures unto everlasting life.” This also establishes an implicit

³³ Bernard, J. H., and Alan Hugh McNeile. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to St. John*. T & T Clark, 1999.

dichotomy between the body and the spirit. Bread, which rots, feeds the perishable body, but the meat “which the Son of man shall give unto you” feeds the spirit. Jesus is not just highlighting the necessity of the mortal body to be nourished and the people’s preoccupation with carnal necessities. John is directly comparing the mortal body to perishable bread and establishing the possibility for an undying bread and an undying body.

When the people ask how they might fulfill the works of God and by what signs they might believe that Jesus is the Messiah (John 6:28-30), he replies,

Our fathers did eat manna in the desert; as it is written, He gave them bread from heaven to eat. Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Moses gave you not that bread from heaven; but my Father giveth you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is he which cometh down from heaven, and giveth life unto the world. Then said they unto him, Lord, evermore give us this bread. And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger; and he that believeth on me shall never thirst. (John 6:31-35)

Jesus is alluding to Exodus 16, when God provides bread for the Israelites in the desert and Moses instructs the Israelites on how to collect the “manna” which God sent them for bread. In the desert—a place of infertility and death—God provided the Israelites with life-sustaining manna. Jesus is positioning himself as “the bread of life” which is sent down from heaven by God to give the Israelites—and the world—life. Now, Jesus has become the “meat which endureth unto everlasting life” which John established in verse 27.

On the notion of “the bread of life” which John introduces in this passage, Bernard writes,

The “Bread of Life” means primarily, the Bread which gives life, as we see from v. 33. But for this phrase is substituted in v. 51 ὁ ἀρτός ὁ ζῶν, “Living Bread,” i.e., the Bread that has life in itself. This second, larger meaning is virtually involved in the first, for life can only proceed from life, *omne uiuum ex uiu*; and so that which gives life must itself be “living.” These is the same double sense in the similar phrase “the water of life” (Rev. 21 22), sc. the water which gives life, and is therefore “living water. (198)

Bread, which was introduced in verses 26 and 27 as a symbol of the mortal, dying body which is bound to consumption, now becomes a symbol of life. However, this bread is not that which will bring temporary substance to the dying body, but that which will bring “everlasting life” to the soul. More literally, flesh is “living bread.” Jesus, conceived of as bread, is living, as opposed to the perishable bread which Moses gave to the Israelites in the desert and which Jesus gave to the people in his miracle.

Jesus expands upon the idea of “living bread” as he continues his argument.

... Verily, Verily, I say unto you, He that believeth in me hath everlasting life. I am that bread of life. Your fathers did eat manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which cometh down from heaven, that a man may eat thereof, and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat of this bread, he shall live for ever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world. (John 6:47-52)

Unlike the manna which God provided for the Israelites in the dessert, “the living bread which came down from heaven,” which is Jesus, will not perish, and unlike the Israelites in the desert who are long dead, those who consume the manna which is the Messiah will live forever.

Bernard writes,

“The argument in vv. 49-51 is as follows: The manna which nourished the bodily life of the Israelites in the desert, did not secure them from physical death at last. In this it was like ordinary bread, although divinely given. The Bread of Life, which Jesus offers in His own Person, has not to do with the nourishment of the bodily life, nor does it secure those who believe in Him from the death of the body. But it is the appropriate divinely given nourishment of man’s spirit, and he who continually feed son it—that is, he who continually keeps in spiritual touch with Jesus—is secure against spiritual death; he shall live for ever, having assimilated the true Bread of Life.” (206)

In this contrast between dying bread, which is associated with the dying body, and living bread, which is Jesus’ living flesh, John is implicitly re-thinking Genesis 3. John is reversing the symbolic meaning of bread found in Genesis 3, which, being taken out of the earth like Adam, was associated with Adam’s mortality and suffering. After John’s use of Exodus 16 in Jesus’

discourse, bread becomes a symbol of the eternal life of the spirit rather than the mortality of the flesh. Implicit within John 6 is the notion that Jesus is providing the path to immortality which Adam and Eve were blocked off from.

As Jesus concludes his speech, he moves completely away from the language of bread in favor of the language of flesh and blood.

The Jews³⁴ therefore strove among themselves, saying, How can this man give us *his* flesh to eat? Then Jesus said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you. Whoso eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, hath eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is meat indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. He that eateth my flesh, and drinketh my blood, dwelleth in me, and I in him. As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me. This is that bread which came down from heaven: not as your fathers did eat manna, and are dead: he that eateth of this bread shall live for ever. (John 6:52-58)

As Bernard notes, the language of eating flesh and drinking blood would have been especially alarming to Jesus' audience, since eating the blood of an animal was forbidden under Old Testament law due to the notion that the blood contains the essence of life (Bernard 209). John was surely both developing and subverting that notion by picturing Jesus as the food and drink of immortality. Here, again, there is an implicit conversation occurring between John and Genesis 3 in the notion that one is fundamentally transformed by what one eats.³⁵ In Genesis 3:19, God asserts that Adam will share the same fate as the bread he eats, which like him, is a creation of the earth and bound to the earth. In yet another reversal, Jesus asserts that "As the living Father hath sent me, and I live by the Father: so he that eateth me, even he shall live by me." By eating and drinking the flesh and blood of the Messiah, which is the living bread which was sent down from heaven by God, the eater takes part in God, "the living father," and gains eternal life.

³⁴ More accurately, the Hebrews or Judeans.

³⁵ Milton plays with this notion in *Paradise Lost* when Raphael asserts that Adam and Eve would be slowly transformed into angels if they ate of the fruits in the garden of Eden over an extended period of time.

Due to John's use of flesh and blood, some scholars, such as Dennis MacDonald,³⁶ have postulated that the Gospels, especially John, were written in conversation with Euripides' *Bacchae*, which was popular in the Greek diaspora at the time. Following on the myth of Dionysus' dismemberment and rebirth, the Dionysian Mysteries may have involved notions of consuming the flesh and blood of the god, as the Titan's attempted to do before Zeus stopped them. However, it seems more likely that any connection between the figures of Christ and Dionysus would have arisen from an awareness of the Dionysian Mysteries, rather than directly from Euripides' *Bacchae*. Though it is clear that there was a wide awareness of the figure of Dionysus and his mysteries at the time of the authorship of the gospels,³⁷ no direct connection can be drawn from the text of John's Gospel. Similarly, John's Christ might be figured as an inverted Prometheus figure who brings the "flower of life" to man and is crucified for it, but who's crucifixion is an elevation and triumph, rather than a punishment. If these parallels indeed exist, the reader would have understood them implicitly.

Like John's Gospel, The Revelation to John,³⁸³⁹ rethinks Genesis 3 and provides an answer as to whether man can return to Eden and eat of the Tree of Life. In Revelation 22, a vision of a new Eden is shown to John by an angel.

And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, *was there* the tree of life, which bare twelve *manner of* fruits, *and* yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree *were* for the healing of the nations. And there

³⁶ MacDonald, Dennis Ronald. *The Dionysian Gospel: The Fourth Gospel and Euripides*.

³⁷ Plutarch's biography of Crassus recounts the story of Crassus' severed head being used as a prop for Pentheus' severed head in a performance of the Euripides' *Bacchae*. This is commonly cited as evidence for the widespread knowledge of the *Bacchae*, and more generally, the figure of Dionysus.

³⁸ Though many ancient sources conflate this John with the Apostle John, modern scholars generally identify them as separate authors.

³⁹ Circa the late first century CE

shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him... (Revelation 22:1-3)

The Messiah is pictured here as a lamb, furthering the notion of Christ as divine food put forward in John 6. A sacrificial lamb, which would customarily be intended to feed God or the gods, is now repurposed as food for his followers who will be restored to a godlike state of eternal life through its consumption.

The verse, “and there shall be no more curse,” almost certainly refers to the curse of mortality which God placed upon Adam. This shows that the author of Revelation assumes the interpretation that Adam and Eve were immortal in Eden. The fruit of the Tree of Life is made available again to man and “they which are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Revelation 21:27) will be restored to eternal life in this new Eden. The imagery deployed here is directly out of Ezekiel’s vision, in which God says to Ezekiel,

And by the river upon the bank thereof, on this side and on that side, shall grow all trees for meat, whose leaf shall not fade, neither shall the fruit thereof be consumed: it shall bring forth new fruit according to his months, because their waters they issued out of the sanctuary: and the fruit thereof shall be for meat, and the leaf thereof for medicine.
(Ezekiel: 47:12)

In Ezekiel, we can see the beginnings of an image of Eden as a place of bloom without death which John takes up in Revelation. By verse 2 of Revelation—“the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations”—John deploys Ezekiel’s imagery to suggest that the Tree of Life is a medicine which will heal the ailment of death. In Genesis, there was no suggestion that the rivers had any special properties, but in Revelation, through the use of Ezekiel’s imagery, the rivers become “a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb.” This river of life proceeding from God may recall the water flowing from Christ’s side in John’s Gospel (John 19:34), and suggest, as John does explicitly in John 7:37-38, that Christ is not only a source of the food of life but also the drink of life.

Bringing John's Gospel into conversation with Revelation reveals the implicit notion in both texts that the Messiah is a symbolic Eden whose flesh is the fruit of the Tree of Life and whose blood is the waters of life. In John's Gospel, John is not only reversing the symbolic meaning of bread, but also of the body itself. By associating the bread of life with flesh and the water of life with blood, flesh and blood—usually bound by mortality—become symbols of immortality in Christ.

Chapter 7

1 Corinthians 15: Sleep as Resurrection

1 Corinthian⁴⁰ is a letter addressed to the Church of Corinth which discusses various disputed theological issues. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul uses the language of sleep to speak of death and resurrection, doing with sleep what John did with the symbol of bread. In 1 Corinthians 15, death is replaced by a mere sleep which the dead will wake from on the resurrection day.

To begin his discourse on resurrection, Paul asks, “Now if Christ be preached that he rose from the dead, how say some among you that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (1 Corinthians 15:12). Paul then asserts that without resurrection of the dead, faith in Christ is in vain.

For if the dead rise not, then is not Christ raised: And if Christ be not raised, your faith is vain; ye are yet in your sins. Then they also which are fallen asleep in Christ are perished. If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable. (1 Corinthians 15:16-19)⁴¹

Here, Paul deploys his first sleep metaphor. Without the miracle of resurrection, those who “are fallen asleep in Christ”—those who have died in Christ—are “perished.” Paul’s use of “asleep” and “perished” introduces the notion that to die is not necessarily to perish. Paul writes,

But now is Christ risen from the dead, and become the firstfruits of them that slept. For since by man came death, by man came also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ shall all be made alive. But every man in his own order: Christ the firstfruits; afterward they that are Christ's at his coming. Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death. (1 Corinthians 15:20-26)

⁴⁰ Circa 55 CE

⁴¹ *Bible: King James Version.*

Paul now deploys both a sleep and harvest metaphor. In this metaphor, the sleeping dead are a crop waiting to be harvested on the day of resurrection. Christ is the “firstfruits” of this harvest—the portion which was traditionally offered up to God, in alignment with God’s claim of ownership over “all the firstborn” in Exodus 13:2. For Paul, since there is the promise of resurrection, the dead are merely asleep—their death is temporary. Christ will wake the dead when he conquers death and reverses the curse of mortality which was placed upon Adam.⁴²

Paul’s use of sleep in 1 Corinthians 15 depends on the common understanding of sleep as a metaphor for death. As we saw in the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the image of sleep as death is usually used to refer to sleep as a “mini-death” and a reminder of the eternal sleep of death which awaits at the end of life. Paul subverts this meaning by using the metaphor of sleep to point to the impermanence of death, which, in context of Paul’s doctrine of resurrection, can be awakened from. Thus, Paul effectively reverses the symbolic meaning of sleep. Once a symbol of the inevitability and eternity of death, sleep now becomes a symbol of death’s impermanence and the promise of eternal life.

Jesus uses similar language as Paul in Mark 5 when he restores life to Jairus’ daughter, and in John 11 when he raises Lazarus from the grave. In Mark 5,⁴³ Jairus, one of the “rulers of the synagogue” (22), asks Jesus to heal his sick daughter. Jairus’ daughter dies before Jesus can attend to her, but Jesus goes to see her anyway.

And he cometh to the house of the ruler of the synagogue, and seeth the tumult, and them that wept and wailed greatly. And when he was come in, he saith unto them, Why make ye this ado, and weep? the damsel is not dead, but sleepeth. And they laughed him to scorn. But when he had put them all out, he taketh the father and the mother of the damsel, and them that were with him, and entereth in where the damsel was lying. And he took the damsel by the hand, and said unto her, Talitha cumi; which is, being

⁴² Like John, Paul takes the interpretation that Adam and Eve were immortal in Eden and punished with mortality for their theft.

⁴³ Circa 70 CE

interpreted, Damsel, I say unto thee, arise. And straightway the damsel arose, and walked... (Mark 5:38-42)

Jesus' comment, "the damsel is not dead, but sleepeth," exactly mirrors Paul's rhetorical move in 1 Corinthians 15. Jairus' daughter has died, but Jesus turns her eternal sleep into a mere temporary one from which she awakes, healed.

Jesus uses the same language when speaking to his disciples of Lazarus' death.

...and after that he saith unto them, Our friend Lazarus sleepeth; but I go, that I may awake him out of sleep. Then said his disciples, Lord, if he sleep, he shall do well. Howbeit Jesus spake of his death: but they thought that he had spoken of taking of rest in sleep. Then said Jesus unto them plainly, Lazarus is dead. (John 11:11-14)

When reading these passages from Mark and John, both of which involve resurrections of the dead, one must wonder whether Mark and John had 1 Corinthians 15 in mind. This is certainly possibility, but it is also possible that all three writers' use of sleep arose from a shared symbolic language which Paul did not himself invent. This would remarkably suggest that the whole theology of resurrection in the New Testament is dependent on the notion of death as an impermanent sleep, just as the theology of eternal life seems to be dependent on the notion of Jesus as bread. As Bernard notes (clvi), this argument could be supported by earlier uses of sleep as death in relation to resurrection in the bible, the earliest of which is Daniel 12:2: "And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt."

Whether or not Mark and John had Paul in mind when writing of the resurrections of Jairus' daughter and Lazarus, the resurrection which Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 15 is of a different kind. The resurrections in Mark and John are bodily and temporary, whereas Paul speaks of a resurrection of the spiritual body which grants eternal life. In 1 Corinthians, Paul continues his argument with another rhetorical objection to resurrection.

But some man will say, How are the dead raised up? and with what body do they come? Thou fool, that which thou sowest is not quickened, except it die: And that which thou sowest, thou sowest not that body that shall be, but bare grain, it may chance of wheat, or of some other grain: But God giveth it a body as it hath pleased him, and to every seed his own body. (1 Corinthians 15:35-38)

In this grain metaphor, the body dies like a seed but something new is born from it—the resurrected body, which is the wheat. Here, one necessarily wonders whether, in his use of grain, Paul might be speaking in conversation with the Eleusinian Mysteries and Demeter, as John may have been with Dionysus and his Mysteries. Kerényi notes this connection in *Eleusis*, writing,

Nothing about the Eleusinian Mysteries was so striking as the initiates' awe of Demeter's gift, the grain, and their hope of life after death. In one Christian source the ear of grain is designated mockingly but also precisely as "the great, admired, and most perfect epoptic Mysterion" at Eleusis." Thus it was quite natural to recall the words from the Gospel of John (12:24). (106)⁴⁴

Kerényi uses Paul and John to give the reader the flavor of how the Mysteries may have used grain as a symbol of life and immortality (106-107). However, if Paul is in conversation with the Eleusinian Mysteries by his use of grain metaphors, it would seem that his use of grain seeks to contrast with the meaning of the Mysteries.

On the type of "eternal life" which grain provides in the context of the myth told by the *Hymn to Demeter*, Kerényi writes,

The Myth is related to the nourishment men derive from plants. The context can be characterized most suggestively with the help of Greek words: *zoe* means not only the life of men and of all living creatures but also what is *eaten*. In the *Odyssey* (XVI 249), the suitors wish to "eat up" the *zoe* of Odysseys. The same meaning attaches to *bios*, the characteristic life of men. Where men draw their nourishment chiefly from plants, the nutritive plants—not only grain but the tuberous and fruit-bearing plants as well—are individually perishable, destructible, edible, but taken together, they are the eternal guarantee of human life. (xxv)

⁴⁴ The Christian source which Kerényi refers to is Hippolytus, *Refutation* V 8 39 (cf. Legge, I, 138).

At the heart of the Mysteries is wonderment at the seasonal rebirth of nutritive, vegetative life out of the earth. Though beneath the earth is the house of death into which the dead are swallowed, this chasm of death births new life each season. In contrast, Paul uses his grain metaphor to point to a spiritual world beyond the impermanent, earthly world of vegetative life.

Paul continues his argument speaking of different types of “bodies and flesh” which correspond with different created forms—men, beasts, birds, “celestial and terrestrial bodies.” He thus sets up the argument that resurrection is not for the “natural body” but for the “spiritual body” and the remarkable claim that “flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God” (1 Corinthians 15:50). Paul writes,

It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body. And so it is written, The first man Adam was made a living soul; the last Adam was made a quickening spirit. Howbeit that was not first which is spiritual, but that which is natural; and afterward that which is spiritual. The first man is of the earth, earthy; the second man is the Lord from heaven. (1 Corinthians 15:44-48)

Again, Paul uses a grain metaphor to refer to the dynamic between body and soul in the miracle of resurrection. The seed of the soul is sown in the body, but “is raised” from the dead as wheat, the “spiritual body.” Paul then returns to the notion which he introduced in verse 22 that the theology of resurrection can be seen in the continuum and contrast between Adam and Christ.

In *I Corinthians: A New Translation* by William Orr and James Walther, Orr writes,

The separation of *the last Adam* thousands of years alter becomes the pattern of human experience: natural life in a flesh and blood body takes place first; after the death of this body the spiritual emerges. (348)⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Orr, William F., and James Arthur Walther. *I Corinthians: A New Translation; Introduction with a Study of the Life of Paul, Notes, and Commentary*. Doubleday, 1976.

In Adam, the seed of a “living soul” was placed in his mortal body, which was made of earth (Genesis 2:7). With Christ, the seed of the spirit sprouts into wheat and forms a resurrected, spiritual body which grows from the dying body. Adam is the dying body, the “flesh” of this earth, which brought the curse of mortality upon man, and Christ is the “spiritual body” come from heaven which brings everlasting life to man. Thus, Paul positions Christ as concluding the drama which began in Genesis by restoring immortality to man through resurrection.

Paul concludes his discourse on resurrection with a return to the metaphor of sleep and a triumphant declaration that death has been conquered.

Behold, I shew you a mystery; We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? (1 Corinthians 15:51-55)

In this final movement of the argument, Paul amends his sleep metaphor. While he previously used sleep to indicate that death was only temporary, he now says “We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed.” Paul asserts that death is not even like the temporary rest of sleep; it is merely a transformation. Thus, Paul achieves rhetorical victory over death by first using the language of sleep to portray death as temporary and then by replacing death completely with a transformation of the body into an immortal, spiritual one.

Conclusion

The foregoing investigation into the evolution of symbols and bread as vehicles for exploring the nature of mortality, from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* to John and Paul, demonstrates that the symbolism of eating and sleeping is integral to understanding discussions of mortality in the Mesopotamian, Greek, and biblical traditions.

The *Epic of Gilgamesh* introduced sleep as a symbol of mini-death and rotting bread as a parallel to the aging body; additionally, we saw in that text the notion that to be without knowledge of death is to be in an animal-like state. Gilgamesh's failure to achieve immortality at the end of the epic leaves us with the conception that men, and even demigods, cannot escape mortality. Eternal life is only for the gods—men must come to terms with death.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* take up the same stance on mortality, but Achilles and Odysseus react to their mortality quite differently. Achilles seeks to defy his mortality while Odysseus embraces his, rejecting Calypso's offer of immortality. Even so, both texts are committed to a figurative immortality through fame and memory. If Achilles had returned home to live a long and quiet life, he would not be remembered for his prowess in battle. In a similar, yet inverted equation, if Odysseus had chosen immortality with Calypso, his name would have been forgotten and the story of his adventures would have gone untold.

The *Hymn to Demeter* explores death in relation to marriage, agriculture, and the seasonal rebirth of vegetative life. Instead of focusing on mortal heroes like the epics, it explores the relation between the gods, man, and the natural world. The *Hymn to Demeter* also presents the possibility for an improvement of one's lot in death through the Eleusinian Mystery cult, and potentially a path to a form of immortality—not the immortal fame promised by heroic *kleos* in the Homeric epics, but a better lot in death available to all initiate.

Genesis 3 goes into greater detail about the relationship between agriculture, marriage, and mortality, putting forward the idea that the pain of man's mortality arises from being bound to the earth in agricultural labor, while the pain of woman's mortality arises from being bound to flesh in marriage and childbirth. Genesis 3 also presents the idea that man once could have had access to godhood, which it defines as possessing both knowledge and immortality.

John rethinks Genesis 3 by inverting the use of bread as a symbol of man's mortality, instead using it as a symbol of the eternal life offered by Jesus. Similarly, Paul inverts the use of sleep as a symbol of mortality by using it as a symbol of death's impermanence and the promise of resurrection. While the earlier texts used sleep and bread intuitively and symbolically to discuss the predicament of mankind's mortality, John and Paul self-consciously invert the meaning of these symbols, as established by the earlier texts, to argue their theologies.

The idea that man has access to immortality, presented in John and Paul, rests upon a presupposition which is fundamentally different than the ones underlying the other texts—that man was immortal in Eden and his mortality is a consequence of his sinful theft of knowledge. This interpretation posits death as an error—a sickness, a sin—rather than the default state of human existence, and thus allows for a “healing” of death and a return to the state of creation as God intended it.

This idea is an extension and innovation of the Near Eastern concept, found in both Genesis 3 and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, that man's existence was originally like that of animals, and that this state was a paradisaic one which exempted him from the suffering associated with the knowledge of death and life in civilization. In this conception, man's knowledge of good and bad things, and his resultant mastery of the natural world, make him like the gods, but his mortality keeps him from being divine.

The Greek view contrasts with both of these, as we can see from the Prometheus myth. It shares the conception that man began in an animal-like state, but for the Greeks, this state was not at all paradisaical. In *Prometheus Bound*, Prometheus says,

...hear what troubles
 there were among mortals, how I found them mindless
 but made them intelligent and masters of their minds,
 I'll tell you this, not blaming human beings,
 but to explain the goodwill of my gifts.
 For humans in the beginning had eyes but saw
 to no purpose; they had ears but did not hear.
 Like the shapes of dreams they dragged through their long
 lives and muddled everything haphazardly.
 They did not know how to build brick houses
 to face the sun; nor how to work in wood.
 They lived beneath the earth like swarming ants,
 in sunless caves. (442-454)⁴⁶

Man's original condition is not one of ignorant and carefree bliss like that of Enkidu among the animals or Adam and Eve in Eden. Their state is reminiscent of the existence of shades in the underworld as they "drag through their long lives" in "sunless caves," blind and deaf, like the "shapes of dreams." In the Greek view, then, this death-like state was the original condition of man, and it was only due to the arts of civilization which Prometheus taught to mortals that they could elevate themselves above this state. Prometheus also says that he "caused mortals to cease foreseeing death" by placing in them "blind hopes" (247-250). With the gift of knowledge in the form of fire, and the technologies it makes possible, comes also the gift of an alleviation of the knowledge of death, rather than the intensification of it seen in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Genesis 3.

⁴⁶ Aeschylus, Grene, D., Bernardete, S., Griffith, M., & Most, G. W. (2013). *Aeschylus I: The Persians, the seven against Thebes, the suppliant maidens, Prometheus Bound*. University of Chicago Press.

Hence, while all of the texts which we have discussed treat sleep and death similarly in their discussions of mortality, these discussions are nested within fundamentally different conceptions of the origin of man, which in turn set up fundamentally different solutions. Gilgamesh, Achilles, and Odysseus' struggles with mortality conclude with them succumbing to sleep—Gilgamesh unwittingly, Achilles reluctantly, and Odysseus happily—and thus accepting their mortality. In those texts, man can only hope to find immortality in fame or an improved lot in death. However, for John and Paul, immortality was the original state of man, and death is only a sickness which is healed by Jesus—a temporary sleep which is followed by resurrection and the promise of eternal life.

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