CHAPTER ONE

DESCENTS TO THE UNDERWORLD

I INTRODUCTION

In most of the ancient world, as in many other cultures, the realm of the dead was located in the underworld (Hades, Sheol, sometimes Gehenna) and a descent to the underworld was a way of visiting the dead. There were also other locations for the dead. An old alternative to the underworld placed the realm of the dead at the furthest extremity of the world in the west, where the sun goes down. Sometimes the righteous dead were placed in an earthly or heavenly paradise, whereas the underworld was reserved for the wicked dead, as their place of punishment. During the early centuries C.E., there was a tendency among pagans, Jews and Christians to relocate even the place of post-mortem punishment in the upper atmosphere or the lower heavens. Thus journeys to the world of the dead were not always descents. While this chapter will focus on descents, it will not be possible to avoid referring sometimes to other kinds of journeys to the world of the dead when they are closely related to descents to the underworld. The regular descent to the underworld by all who die (without returning) will not be discussed, but only cases of those who descend alive and return still alive, or who descend in death but escape death and return to life.

Descents to the underworld occur in the myths and traditions of many cultures. They may be attributed to the gods and heroes of myths and legends. Attitudes to the loss of loved ones in death may find expression, for example, in stories of those who braved the terrors of the underworld in order to rescue a relative who had died. The cycle of the seasons may be represented in myths of gods who periodically descend to and return from the underworld. Myths of heavenly gods descending to the world ruled by the infernal deities may serve to emphasize the power of death which cannot be overcome or alternatively to define the limits of the power of death. Descents may also occur as unusual psychological experiences, in trance, vision or temporary loss of consciousness, when the soul seems to leave the body and finds itself in the other world as described in the traditions of the culture. Such descents may be chance occurrences, or they may be deliberately cultivated and undertaken, as by the
shamans of central Asia. Very often accounts of descents to the underworld, either attributed pseudonymously to great heroes or seers of the past, or else actually reported by those who have experienced visions and trances, serve as revelations of the secrets of death and the life to come, preparing their hearers or readers for the journey of death, or seeking to influence their lives by warning of the future rewards and punishments consequent on behaviour in this life. Descents of all these kinds and more are found, to varying extents, in the various cultures of the biblical world. The following survey will show, by contrast, how remarkably lacking they are in the biblical literature itself, though the particular forms which descents to the underworld took in the environment of the biblical tradition will also illuminate aspects of it.

II Mesopotamia

Several Sumerian myths include descents to the netherworld by divine or human beings, which are the oldest known examples of such stories. All make clear that a descent to the world of the dead is extremely perilous. The netherworld is ‘the land of no return,’ guarded by seven walls, each with a gate and a gatekeeper whose role is to let only the dead enter and to let noone leave. To descend and to return to the land of the living is possible only on exceptional terms. Indeed (as the story of Inanna’s descent will make clear) even a god cannot descend without dying.

In the myth of Enlil and Ninlil, the god Enlil is banished to the netherworld by the gods as punishment for his rape of Ninlil. Ninlil, who is pregnant with Enlil’s child Nanna-Sin, the moon god, follows Enlil. Since the moon god belongs in the sky, Enlil does not want his child doomed to live in the netherworld. He adopts a remarkable stratagem to prevent this. As Ninlil leaves the city of Nippur and travels to the netherworld, Enlil disguises himself three times: first as the gatekeeper of Nippur, then as the gatekeeper of the netherworld, then as the ferryman who rows the dead across the river in the netherworld (the Sumerian equivalent of the Greek Charon). On each occasion he makes love to Ninlil and fathers a child. These three new offspring, who become three of the gods of the underworld, are exchanged for the moon god, who is thus free to take his place in heaven. Enlil thus conforms to an inflexible rule of the netherworld: noone who enters can leave except by providing a substitute. (For a much later survival of this idea, see Lucian, Catapl. 10.).

The same rule comes into play in the fullest account of a descent, that of the goddess Inanna, the morning star. This is known both in