

Yonder World in the Atharvaveda*

In handbooks of Vedic religion and Hinduism life after death in the Veda, especially in the Ṛgveda Samhitā, is often represented in a rather simplified way. It is almost exclusively the heavenly continuation of life that receives attention. Realizing that this cannot have been the destination of all human beings, some scholars assume a belief in hell. However, the data on hell are rather scarce in the oldest Vedic text.¹ It looks as if the opposition of hell and heaven was a later development.

In other, comparable, cultures instead of heaven an underworld plays a role (van Baaren 1987, 118), e.g. in Greece. So a concept of a subterranean life after death might have preceded the later generally found idea of immortality in heaven. Some scholars have even assumed that originally annihilation was the ultimate destination of all beings (e.g. Converse 1971, 337), in spite of the fact that “Belief in some kind of existence after death is one of the more common elements of religion, as history and anthropology show” (van Baaren 1987, 116). The fate of the deceased might also be connected with the funeral customs. Since, however, life does not end with the funeral rites but with death, ideas on souls leaving the body should also be taken into account.²

In his handbook of Vedic religion Oldenberg (1917², 523ff.) accepted the opposition of heaven and hell for the Ṛgveda Samhitā, but assumed an underworld comparable to Greek Hades as the original ultimate destination of man. Since the traces of this situation as sketched by him were rather scarce and especially in later Vedism heaven represented the exclusive aim of the ritualistic texts, Oldenberg’s views were not generally accepted.³

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1 See Long (1987, 132) on “a genuine, if relatively undeveloped conception of hell in the Vedic literature” with a reference to RV 7, 104 (= AV 8, 4).

2 Bertholet (1985⁴, 265) “Das [Jenseits] unter der Erde zu suchen, ist aus der Sitte der Erdbestattung hervorgegangen.”

3 They were, however, overlooked rather than criticized or rejected. Keith (1925, 2:410f.) on the one hand observes that “there is little trace in the Vedic literature of the more simple and perhaps more primitive conception which regards the dead as dwelling in the earth, whether actually in the place of burial, or in the underworld,” on the other hand he gives an impressive survey of Oldenberg’s arguments in favour of it. On p. 413 he assumes that the only Indo-European “idea of the fate of the dead was that of a continued existence in a shadowy and imperfect condition, best represented to us by the Hades of Homer. Of this there may be seen

In a likewise surprisingly neglected article of 1927b–1928 Ernst Arbman tried to revive Oldenberg's theory. In the latest handbook on Vedic religion Gonda (1978², 98, 181) completely overlooked Oldenberg's and Arbman's views, though von Glasenapp in his concise handbook on Indian religions had correctly observed that originally the world of the forefathers was conceived as "ein unter der Erde liegendes Totenreich" and that this subterranean realm was shifted to "ein überirdisches Reich"; he added, "Die Vorstellung von der Unterwelt wird damit aber nicht aufgegeben" (1955, 84).

In 1994 I published an article on life after death in the *R̥gveda Saṁhitā* (see this vol. ch. 8) in which I continued the line of thought of Oldenberg and Arbman and tried to show that paradise in heaven was only found in the latest layers of this text. In the same year Klaus Butzenberger wrote a paper on this subject, which was published in 1996. It is evident that my article was brought to his attention in a very late phase. He refers to it, but does not discuss or criticize it, reserving his criticism for Arbman.⁴

Butzenberger (1996, 71 ff.) assumes that the Vedic concept of life after death in heaven developed in consequence of changing funeral customs. When burial was substituted by cremation the realm of the dead became situated in heaven. Butzenberger, however, does not accept the association of the earlier practice of burial with a subterranean world of the dead.⁵ The possible references to

traces in the Vedic conception of the future of the dead." The development of ideas on this subject in the Veda is not clearly sketched by Keith.

- 4 See Butzenberger (1996, 56, n. 1) "In the first paper, however, he resorts to some diffuse digressions into comparative anthropology, thus introducing concepts and ideas that are foreign to early Indian eschatology." This criticism is unfair and absurd and lacks any argumentation.
- 5 See p. 61, n. 17 "Thus, there is no evidence at all for assuming a collective subterranean realm of the dead." See also p. 64 "Likewise, it seems premature to understand the texts referred to above as descriptions of an underworld, a kind of Hades or even a hell." On the other hand, further on in his confusing article, which looks more like a puzzle than a well structured argument, the rise of the conception of an underworld seems to be accepted. See p. 78 "The *devayāna* leads into heaven, the *pitryāna*, however, into the world of Yama, which may also be a shadowy underworld"; p. 86 and especially p. 106, "In the later layers of the *R̥gveda*, we have already been able to detect a tendency towards distinguishing between two types of yonder world: a heavenly abode for the righteous, and a shadowy underworld for the mischievous and criminals. At first, this dichotomy seems to have been resorted to in order to deal with the positive and negative elites, while the majority of the deceased were supposed to join in a less spectacular destiny. With more time slipping by, however, the extraordinary was more and more considered common-place, and a 'two-valued' eschatology was about to form." However, since the idea of an underworld belongs to the oldest cultures and is well spread, the late development of a Vedic conception concerning this underworld is hardly acceptable. Moreover, the sketched development exists only in Butzenberger's thought and is not supported by evidence from the *R̥gveda Saṁhitā*. See Bodewitz (1994; this vol. ch. 8).