

Life after Death in the Old Testament

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Thesis

While the language of the Old Testament is more concerned with community survival than individual immortality, there is nonetheless a strong consciousness that the person is not utterly annihilated at death, and that he or she will, in the end, return to life.

Abstract

The thesis will be demonstrated through a brief examination of the anthropology of the Old Testament under three headings. The first will be to consider the question of what happens to the person at death. This will include a discussion of the *basar*, *nephesh*, *neshamah*, *ruach*, and *azamoth*, and the role if any they play in the Hebrew view of life after death. The second heading will address the question of who has survived death in the Old Testament, and what this says about the OT's personal eschatology. It will include an examination of the key "supernatural" events of the Old Testament dealing with life after death, including the account of Saul and the medium at Endor, the resuscitation narratives of Elijah and Elisha, and the translation narratives of Enoch and Elijah. *Sheol* and the phrase "he was gathered to his ancestors" will also be discussed. The third heading will be a summary of a few theological trends in the studies of Old Testament personal eschatology.

Introduction

One of the foremost tenets of the catholic Christian faith is that the teachings of the Old Testament are in no way dissonant with those of the New Testament. What the apostles of the New Testament taught about theology was nothing but the fullness of what was taught by Moses and the Prophets. Lutherans have always held to Augustine's maxim, "the Old Testament revealed in the New, the New veiled in the Old," with no contradiction between the two.¹ If this is the case, what then of the destiny of the individual after death? Does the Old Testament teach, as does the New, a resurrection of all flesh to judgment, and a survival of the individual after death? There is perhaps no more controversial point in all of Old Testament biblical scholarship than this.

Those academics who hold to the theory of the development of religions cannot see in the Old Testament a consistent teaching of the Church's doctrine of individual eschatology. These would be able to say with one voice that "death appears in inspired Hebraic literature as a matter of comparative indifference, seldom a subject for philosophical reflection or regret."² Others who remain within the catholic Christian tradition and take that tradition seriously see no contradiction between the teachings of the Hebrew Scriptures and those of the Christian Scriptures. These latter scholars observe that "there is nothing intrinsically unorthodox about tracing a progressive unfolding of the heights, depths, and wondrous implications of the Holy Gospel" in the Old Testament regarding life after death.³ While the Old Testament writings seem to elucidate a clearer doctrine of life after death in later documents that does not imply that the doctrine was *in toto* a late development.

In fact, the entire Old Testament does have much to say about the life of a person after his or her death. First, there is the anthropology of the Old Testament, which in and of itself reveals a belief that humanity is not destined for annihilation at the end of this life. The earliest Hebrews, for all the emphasis placed on their philosophical materialism, did see a person as being more than mere "dust." Second, there are numerous narratives and texts in the Hebrew Scriptures which attest to the Old Testament belief that life could and did continue in some form after death. Lastly, there is the theology of Moses and the Prophets themselves, which points fairly clearly to a life after this one. John A.T. Robinson writes, "The final end of man, as of history, is an ultimate inference from the doctrine of God."⁴ To deny all of this material evidence and continue to hold that, for most of ancient Israel, a person had only this life for which to look forward, is to "take over that archaizing view of the Old Testament once found among the Sadducees, and claim that the Jewish Scriptures in themselves know nothing of either immortality or resurrection."⁵

¹ Philip Schaff, *The Nicene Fathers* (electronic ed.). (Garland, TX: Galaxie Software, 2000), Psalm 106:32

² Robert W. Gleason. *The World to Come*. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 52.

³ John R. Stephenson. *Eschatology*. (Dearborn, MI: The Luther Academy, 1993), 30.

⁴ John A.T. Robinson. *In The End God*. (London: James Clark, 1950), 71.

⁵ Joseph Ratzinger. *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*. Michael Waldstein, trans. (Washington DC: The Catholic University Press, 1988), 74.

The Composition of the Human: What Survives Death?

There is little to no disagreement in the academy that the Hebrew view of the person was at variance with the views of Hellenism and other contemporary cultures. The disagreement among academics is over the extent of the variance. A further area of disagreement arises over the common meaning of Old Testament and New Testament terms. Are the Greek terms of the New Testament related to the Old Testament concepts they translate? Or do they in fact refer to Hellenistic concepts with little to no relation to their similar terms in the Hebrew Scriptures? ⁶ Whichever view one holds does seem to influence the way one understands the constituent parts of the human described in the Old Testament. Although other parts might also be included, such as the “bones,” the four consistently recognized elements of a human for the Hebrews were the *basar*, the *neshamach*, the *nephesh*, and the *ruach*. These four are usually translated into English as the flesh, the breath, the soul, and the spirit. ⁷

Basar

The flesh, or the body, of the person is that which gives him or her material presentation to the created world. It is strictly a part of the visible, created order, and has no extension into any kind of “spiritual” realm. *Basar* can, in fact, be used “indiscriminately of man and beast.” ⁸ Robinson believes that the *basar* “represents solidarity; and the denial of its redemption and restoration immediately upon death stands for the great truth that no one can fully be saved apart from his brother, or indeed apart from the whole of creation.” ⁹ In other words, the fact that the body is necessarily excluded from any immediate survival after death – the body is now obviously a corpse – is an indication that any future revival of that corpse must be tied to a significant change impacting the whole creation. Interestingly, the body was held in high reverence by the Hebrews and later Israelites. The idea that a body would be consumed by animals, left to the elements, or burned was unthinkable. This treatment of the body stands in stark contrast to the practice of other ancient cultures regarding dead bodies. ¹⁰

Neshamach

The breath of the body is taken by some to be another aspect of the spirit (*ruach*), and by others to be another word for the principle of life or the soul (*nephesh*). ¹¹ In Genesis 2:7, God “breathed into [man’s] nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.” ¹² This *neshamach* breathed into man made him a *nephesh*. The LXX translates *neshamach* with *pnoē*,

⁶ “The anthropology of the New Testament is not Greek, but is connected with Jewish conceptions. For the concepts of body, soul, flesh and spirit (to name only these), the New Testament does indeed use the same words as the Greek philosopher. But they mean something quite different.” (Oscar Cullmann. *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection from the Dead?* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1958), 32)

⁷ “When a man died, the four constituent parts of the living man – the body, the *nephesh*, the breath, and the spirit – fell asunder.” (Smith, 34)

⁸ W.O.E. Oosterley. *Immortality and the Unseen World*. (London: McMillan Company, 1921), 13.

⁹ Robinson, 97.

¹⁰ “The Hindu, despising the body, burns it; the Hebrew, valuing the body, kept it as long as might be.” (Smith, 39)

¹¹ Consider, for example, Smith who writes, “The other two elements in man, the ‘breath’ and the ‘spirit’ may, for the present purpose, be taken together, it being remembered that the ‘breath’ was drawn from the air and that the original meaning of *ruach*, the word for ‘spirit,’ was ‘wind.’ ” (Smith, 34) Yet Oosterley writes, “The breath is thus the principle of life which is the common possession of all living and is the same in every living creature.” (Oosterley, 18)

¹² *The Holy Bible: English standard version*. Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers, 2001.

and the word in both languages is very similar to wind, which is why some see this as a synonym for *ruach*. However *ruach* seems to have a different connotation. One can speak, for example, of the Lord's *ruach*. One cannot however speak of the Lord's *neshamach*. The Spirit gives the breath of life, and though the two are intimately tied together, the former is purely divine while the latter is an effect of the former in living creatures on this earth. "It seems that the underlying idea is that God has a kind of great fund of air and wind from which is gives men 'breath' and *ruach* while they live, restoring both to the same fund when He wills that men shall die."¹³ One might perhaps call this 'fund' the Holy Spirit of God.

Nephesh

The *nephesh* is commonly translated as "soul," but also as "life" as well as some other scattered interpretations throughout various English translations of the Scriptures. The LXX commonly translates the word as *psychē*. "The word is mostly used to denote the individual life as distinct from body or flesh; that is, the *nephesh* is the inner, while *basar* is the outer, part of man."¹⁴ It is sometimes seen to be identical with man's breath (see above), with life (Leviticus 24:18) and even with blood (Gen 9:4).¹⁵ The *nephesh* was often believed to leave the body with the spilling of a person's blood, or with his or her last breath. It is something that, in Old Testament thought, had an existence apart from the *basar*. For example, in Elijah's resuscitation narrative of 1 Kings 27:21, Elijah prays, "Let this child's *nephesh* come into him again." The *nephesh*, which departed at death, continues to exist. It has departed the *basar*, but has not thereby been annihilated. Furthermore, the *nephesh* has a distinct location to which it passes at death – *Sheol*.¹⁶ Whatever the *nephesh* is, it is on one hand an essential component of a human, and on the other hand something which might best be described simply as "non-corporeal."

What are the properties of the *nephesh*? Some would argue that the *nephesh* in the Old Testament is also subject to mortality since it is part of fallen humanity. Robinson, for example, writes, "Whereas for Platonism the *psyche* was on the godward side of the line, for St. Paul and the Hebrews it is quite definitely not. It is neither divine nor immortal, but as subject to corruption as the flesh."¹⁷ Others would argue that the continuing existence of the *nephesh* in *Sheol* shows that it is of a different order than the body, which no longer has life at death. The argument here hinges on the spectrum in which the effects of sin are permitted to operate. If the *nephesh* is a substance on a different order than the created order, then can sin and the Fall also impact its existence? Cardinal Ratzinger, to give one example, says no. "Man (cannot) cancel God's creative act or put it in reverse. The result of his sin is not pure nothingness. Like every other creature, man can only move within the ambit of creation. Just as he cannot bring forth being of himself, so neither can he hurl it back into sheer nothingness."¹⁸ In the end, "However varied the conceptions of the soul were, both the popular and the official beliefs [of ancient Israel] agreed in this, that the *nephesh* continued to exist after the death of a man."¹⁹

¹³ Smith, 35.

¹⁴ Oesterley, 13.

¹⁵ Oesterley, 14.

¹⁶ "The *nephesh* passed to Sheol, as appears, for instance, in the following texts (Isaiah 38¹⁷, Psalm 16¹⁰, and Psalm 86¹³). There are four such passages in one passage in Job (33¹⁸⁻³⁰)." (Smith, 34)

¹⁷ Robinson, 85.

¹⁸ Ratzinger, 156.

¹⁹ Oesterley, 17.

Ruach

The last constituent part of man to be considered is the *ruach*. The *ruach* is that component which activated man's *neshamach*, gives the *basar* life, and calls into existence the *nephesh*. Catholic Christian doctrine has traditionally viewed the *ruach* as related, and sometimes identical, to the Holy Spirit of God. For this reason, the *ruach* of a human is seen by many as being intimately related and connected to the *ruach* YHWH. The *ruach* does not pass to *Sheol* at death – there are no 'spirits' there. The *ruach* returns to God who made it (Ecclesiastes 12:7). It is worth noting Robinson's understanding of this relationship:

For the Hebrew, "spirit" is not a part of man's makeup as such. It is the Spirit of God which comes upon, enters and dwells in the personality, bestowing on each man the possibility of a supernatural life of which as part of nature he is incapable...In the Hebraic doctrine of man...the principle of individuation lies in man's existence as a spiritual being, in the relationship of each man to God...The Spirit is not here an undifferentiated substance or universal nature, of which the individual partakes; it is a highly differentiating, individuating Will of Love...²⁰

Death occurs when "God 'gathers unto himself the man's *ruach* and breath' (Job 34¹⁴). To lose 'the breath of the *ruach* of life' is to die (Gen 7²² J)." ²¹ From Robinson's perspective, as well as that of others, death is a profound schism – even termination – of the human's relationship with God. ²² Others disagree. Oesterley writes,

For, however small the divine part of man, it continued to exist even though the body returned to dust. For, however small the divine portion in man might originally have been, it was divine life, and this was immortal. It is also conceivable that in the Old Testament one or two faint reflections of a belief that at one time even the body itself continued to live indefinitely...²³

Conclusion

What is certain is that the Hebrews saw life on this earth and life in the next in relation to the Lord and his promises to both the individual and to the community. A self-centered conception of immortality, where something within the human is innately equipped to exist beyond physical death apart from the created order, is not found in the Old Testament. What is found is a belief that a human was more than his or her body. His or her essence lived on beyond death, although in the shadowy existence of *Sheol*. Since it was believed that God was the one who gave and took away life through his *ruach*, any hope for life after death must be tied to God's presence and promise. There was certainly no hope for a fulfilling "spiritual" life apart from this world.

²⁰ Robinson, 83, 86.

²¹ Smith, 34.

²² A psalm often quoted in this regard is Psalm 6:5: "For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?" But consider also Psalm 139:8 "If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!" There is no doubt that a *philosophy of religions* approach will see here a progressive development in the understanding of the *nephesh*'s status in Sheol. The catholic Christian should not be concerned, for as Stephenson has written, the Holy Spirit continues over time to reveal the depth of God's love and the extent of his power. The rhetorical question of Psalm 6:5 is answered in Psalm 139:8, not contradicted.

²³ Oesterley, 199.

But there was certainly some form of life. Death was not, for the ancient Israelites, a complete end to all existence.

An Existence Beyond Death: Who has Survived Death?

The Old Testament, despite some who believe the contrary, is replete with narratives and passages dealing with death and a life beyond. Three narrative forms which stand out include the translations of Enoch and Elijah, the resuscitation narratives of Elijah and Elisha, and the story of Saul and the witch at Endor. In addition to these narratives one finds in the Hebrew Scriptures numerous passages discussing the hope of a life beyond the death of the body in this world.

Saul and the Witch at Endor: 1 Samuel 28:12-20

Whether one believes that Saul actually spoke with the *nephesh* of Samuel or to a demon, it is certain that both Saul and the witch, as well as those who directed Saul to Endor, believed that the souls of the dead continued to exist.²⁴ The Mosaic ban on communication with the dead is proof that many considered such communication possible and even under certain circumstances desirable (Leviticus 19:31). This is *prima facie* evidence that ancient Israel believed in at least some form of life after death.²⁵ “We have, therefore, to recognize two diametrically opposed sets of ideas regarding the dead: there were the primitive popular ideas that had existed from time immemorial... On the other hand, there was the official belief concerning the dead.”²⁶ There are two other interesting features of the story. The first is the opening comment by Samuel: “Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?” (1 Samuel 28:15). The Hebrew word translated as “disturbed” carries the implication of a perturbation hiding anger or displeasure. Samuel is annoyed at having been called up! One can interpret this annoyance two ways. The first is that Samuel is displeased at this final fall of Saul into depravity, much as a father would be disturbed by his son “hitting bottom” in his life. The second is that, wherever Samuel was, returning to the land of the living as a disembodied *nephesh* was not a substantial improvement in his state of affairs. He preferred to remain where he was. If this is the case, then *Sheol* is not a place of torment or anguish for all. Already at this early stage of Israelite history, then, there was a belief that God must somehow be present in *Sheol*, for one of the Lord’s greatest prophets found it preferable to be there than awakened to the surface of the earth.²⁷ Second, there is the reaction of the witch to the appearance of Samuel. One would expect her to see Samuel’s *nephesh*, yet she reacts at seeing an *elohim* – a god. This could be taken as an indication that the shadowy existence of the righteous in *Sheol* is not as shadowy as the ancient Israelites believed. Or it could be support for the traditional Lutheran view that this was not in fact Samuel, but a demon. In any case, this text is a primary narrative for asserting that the belief in a life after death existed in the earliest writings of the Old Testament.

The Resuscitation Narratives: 1 Kings 17:17-24, 2 Kings 4:32-36

²⁴ “He who assumes that in 1 Samuel 28 God Himself made an exception to His rule and actually has the soul of Samuel appear must at the same time teach that this exception does not abolish the clear rule enunciated by Christ that the spirits of the dead do not return to this world and that therefore Spiritism is devil worship and a fraud, for which God punished the Canaanites with extermination.” (Pieper, Vol. 3, 515)

²⁵ Schwarz, 38

²⁶ Oesterley, 70.

²⁷ Payne, 448.

It is certainly true that resuscitation and resurrection are on a different order, and that a belief in resuscitations does not confirm a belief in life after death. However the resuscitation narratives of Elijah and Elisha do provide some insight into the Old Testament's view of the afterlife. There is in these stories, first of all, support for the existence of the *nephesh* after death apart from the body. Elijah specifically prays that the boy's *nephesh* return, not simply that his body return to life (1 Kings 17:21). "*Nephesh* is here explicitly distinguished from the dead body of the widow's son, whose *nephesh* returns to quicken his remains at the prophet's intercession."²⁸ Second, the belief that God could return the dead to a life in this world opens the way for a belief that even the long dead could be returned to life. "It probably had always been believed that God could raise the dead if he wished, for there are stories of resuscitations here and there in the OT...and the belief provides the background for Ezekiel's vision of the dry bones."²⁹ The power of God, then, was not limited to the land of the living, but he also had power over the dead. Furthermore, this shows that the ancient Israelites were not impassive toward death. There was a hope that those who died could rise again.

The Translation Narratives: Gen 5:24, 2 Kings 2:11

Two other narratives that also reveal the Old Testament worldview regarding death are the translations of Enoch and Elijah. They reveal, first of all, an Old Testament hope for immortality. The possibility of living forever exists, even if only for the righteous few – or two. Enoch did not merely live a long life with many descendants, which many Old Testament scholars would consider to be the ultimate hope of the righteous Hebrew of the Patriarchal age. He was taken, bodily, to be with God and was no more. Even if written at a later date, as some liberal scholars would hold, this account must at least be based on an ancient story. It is therefore very early proof of a belief in a bodily immortality, and a life that evades death. Likewise with Elijah, who did not go down to *Sheol*, but was taken, *basar* and *nephesh*, to be with the Lord. Even Moses did not have such a fate! Another who would go on to be a great prophet in his own right, Elisha, also witnessed this translation. "His ascension to heaven took place not so much for his own sake, but [that his fellow prophets] might be even more firmly established in their calling by the miraculous glorification of their master."³⁰

Second, in both of these accounts, the emphasis is placed on the quality of the relationship between God and Enoch or Elijah. It is not simply that they lived blamelessly or righteously, but that they walked with God. They had fellowship with the Lord. Twice in the Genesis account Enoch is said to have "walked with God," as did Adam and Eve in the cool of the evening in the Garden (Genesis 5:21-24). Elijah, too, had a special relationship with God. Immortality, then, is intimately tied to communion with the Lord as shown in both these translation accounts.

Third, the translation narratives reveal that the Hebrew hope for immortality included both body and soul. *Sheol* could not be the ultimate hope, for those in *Sheol* had no corporality, and corporality was a key part of existence in the Old Testament. Therefore the ultimate Old Testament hope was not for an immortal spiritual existence, but in an immortal corporeal existence. Elijah and Enoch were not merely granted immortality; they were granted an endless

²⁸ Stephenson, 42.

²⁹ Gowan, 91.

³⁰ C.F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of the Kings*, James Martin, trans. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B Eerdmans, 1950), 293

bodily existence with the Lord. Again it is seen that in the Old Testament life after death, as for life in this world, is focused on the relationship with God and his promises.

The Resurrection Verses

There are a multiplicity of verses in the Old Testament which speak of the possibility of life after death and, specifically, of bodily resurrection. Many of these verses have become staples at funeral services, to the point of being heard recited on television at the burial of a fictional character. Consider, for example, the following verses:

You are my Lord; I have no good apart from you...For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption. (Psalm 16:2, 10)

Your dead shall live; their bodies shall rise. You who dwell in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and the earth will give birth to the dead. (Isaiah 26:19)

And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. (Daniel 12:2)

Ratzinger, for one, sees in all these passages fairly obvious statements of a belief in the resurrection. No other reading makes sense to him.³¹ One or another passage may be argued away as referring to something other than individual resurrection, for example Ezekiel 37:1-14 or Job 19:25-27.³² But take all these passages together, and a definitive pattern exists. While the most complete unfolding of the belief of resurrection may not be as present in Genesis as it is in Daniel 12:2, this is not due to a radical shift in belief, but rather a more full explication of a doctrine already held in an embryonic form. Job may not have fully understood the mechanics of how his flesh would see God even after death, yet clearly he believed that somehow this would be so. “For a moment Job is consoled with the thought that perhaps when he is in his grave he will be permitted a vision of God standing at his side and vindicating him.”³³

Conclusion

Individual passages in the Old Testament may be argued as being late developments, corporate understandings, or having spiritual meaning. But taken as a whole, the translation narratives, the resuscitations, the witch at Endor, and the individual resurrection passages, all point to a certain Old Testament belief in a life beyond death. Furthermore, the belief is in some form of renewed corporeal existence. There is no looking toward a full and complete *spiritualized* existence beyond death apart from any created cosmos. Enoch and Elijah were taken up *bodily*. Samuel is raised from the dead, and is certainly not happy to be on earth *sans corps*. Passages that speak of

³¹ “Resurrection is objectively implied [in Isaiah 53:9-12]. Sheol does not hold the one who suffers in the way of the Servant...” (Ratzinger, 87). “One of the principal supports for the early Christian proclamation of the resurrection (is) Psalm 16...Even if the text expressed no explicit faith in the overcoming of death, we hear nevertheless the accents of a ringing certitude that Yahweh is stronger than Sheol.” (Ratzinger, 87) “[In] Daniel 12:2... we have the clearest formulation of resurrection-faith that the Old Testament contains.” (Ratzinger, 90).

³² Schwarz, for example, writes of Job 19:25-26 and Psalm 73:24 that “they hardly fit” in a discussion of the Old Testament hope of resurrection. (Schwarz, 39)

³³ Robert W. Gleason. *The World to Come*. (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1958), 91.

a full and complete life after death speak of it *with a body*, even though the *nephesh* certainly lives on after the body has died.

Between Life and Life: Sheol and Other Themes

At this point there is a need to discuss the in-between state of the human in Old Testament thought. The body is not yet resurrected, yet the human lives on. But in what way? What is this place called *Sheol*, and what was believed about it? What did it mean when a dead patriarch was “gathered to his ancestors?” What can the “in-between” state tell us about Hebrew belief in a life after death?

Sheol

The word *Sheol* is surrounded by controversy. In the Authorized Version *Sheol* is sometimes rendered ‘hell’ (31), sometimes ‘the grave’ (31), and sometimes ‘the pit’ (3).³⁴ The root of the word in Hebrew suggests the verb “to demand.” At least one Bible dictionary translates *Sheol* as “the all-demanding world.” The Greek equivalent, *Hades*, is simply “the unknowing region,” or “the invisible world.” Others see in the word a weakened form of the root for “hollow.” In that case, *Sheol* is “the hollow” or “the deep” place. It is the abode of both the evil and righteous, and is described as deep (Job 11:8), dark (Job 10:21, 22), and with bars (Job 17:16).³⁵ Those who hold to the philosophy of religions approach to the Old Testament believe the earliest Hebrews placed *Sheol* at the end of a Canaanite

The significant question surrounding *Sheol* is the Lord’s relationship to it. Is *Sheol* apart from God, or is God present also there? Many theologians see *Sheol*’s torment in the Old Testament as connected with God’s absence. *Sheol* can never be a good place because God is not there, and therefore it is not part of the Lord’s good creation. Cullman writes in this regard, “For whoever is in the hands of death is no longer in the hands of God, but in the hands of God’s enemy.”³⁶ Ratzinger says much the same thing. “The full extent of *Sheol*’s abyss of nothingness is seen from the fact that Yahweh is not there, nor is he praised there...Death is thus an unending imprisonment.”³⁷ These authors find their proof for such statements in Psalm 6:5: “For in death there is no remembrance of you; in *Sheol* who will give you praise?” Those who hold to this absence of God in *Sheol* in early Israelite thought are the same ones who hold to a late development of resurrection belief. Robinson shows this most clearly.

An eschatology of the individual became a possibility only at the stage when God was proclaimed as the Lord not only of all the earth but also of the regions under the earth...Once he was seen to be the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob *as individuals* and not merely as symbols of the People, then their personal destiny could not lie beyond his power.³⁸

³⁴ Smith, 40. He also writes, “The first two renderings are mistranslations. It is best to use ‘Sheol’ itself, as the Revised Version.” (Smith, 40).

³⁵ M. Easton. *Easton's Bible dictionary*. (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc, 1996, c1897)

³⁶ Cullman, 23.

³⁷ Ratzinger, 81.

³⁸ Robinson, 71.

Yet this absence of the Lord from *Sheol* is denied by others, as well as by the Scriptures themselves. Psalm 139:8 reads, “If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!” The *New Bible Dictionary* writes regarding *Sheol*, “Throughout the ancient Near East, as elsewhere, the dead were pictured as existing in a subterranean realm known in Babylon as *aralu* and in Ugaritic as ‘earth’. But whereas these were ruled by their own gods, Yahweh was the ruler of *Sheol*.”³⁹ Luther certainly did not deny that the Lord also ruled over the abode of the dead. He speaks of the saints in the Old Testament dwelling in *Sheol* in this way: “For just as the body of Christ was not corrupted, so those souls were not destroyed into damnation, but hope and the spices of virtues sustained them [in Sheol] in the strength of God until the Redeemer should come.”⁴⁰ In fact, by the intertestamental period, the literature is clear that *Sheol* is divided into areas for the just and the unjust.⁴¹ That this is a radically new concept, and not merely an elaboration of a concept already implicitly understood, is denied by those who hold a high view of the inspiration of Scripture.⁴²

Gathered to His Ancestors

Another expression which sheds some further light on the Hebrew view of life after death is that associated largely with the Patriarchs of Genesis: “gathered to his ancestors.” There are, again, two views of this expression. The first is that it is no more than a synonym for “he was buried in the family plot.” Cardinal Ratzinger is representative of this view. He writes of the Patriarchs that “they knew a contented this-worldliness, a desire for fulfillment in the richness of a long life and continued existence in one’s children and their posterity.”⁴³ This is not to say that the Cardinal does not believe that the Patriarchs expected to survive death. Ratzinger believes that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in commonality with their contemporaries in other cultures, did expect to live on beyond this life. However, their hope was for a life in the created world, not some spiritual netherworld. The other view of this expression is perhaps best presented by Barton Payne, who writes regarding the phrase, “This reunion of the family therefore becomes the Bible’s first generalized revelation concerning the immortality of the soul.”⁴⁴ Payne sees in the phrase a statement of the belief that life will indeed go on beyond death. The Patriarch who dies will be present with those who have passed on before him. Luther understands the phrase the same way.⁴⁵ The expression “gathered to his ancestors” is not a euphemism for death, but an expression of belief in a life after this one.

³⁹ D.R.W. Wood. & I. H. Marshall. *New Bible dictionary* (3rd ed.) . (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1996)

⁴⁰ Martin Luther. *Luther's works, Vol. 11: First Lectures on the Psalms II: Psalms 76-126* (J. J. Pelikan, H. C. Oswald & H. T. Lehmann, Ed.). Luther's Works. (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1999, c1976.), Psalm 86.

⁴¹ “The book of Enoch...offers...an account of the abode of the spirits or souls of the departed...The world in which the dead are kept until the final judgment is no longer located simply in the earth’s interior, but, more specifically, in the West...The just and the unjust are now separated.” (Ratzinger, 121)

⁴² “Liberalism may blandly assert that ‘early Hebrew religion has no conception of judgment or salvation after death.’ But the Old Testament of David’s day sharply distinguishes between the fate of the wicked and of the righteous at death...” (Payne, J. Barton. *Theology of the Older Testament*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1962), 449)

⁴³ Ratzinger, 76.

⁴⁴ Payne, 446.

⁴⁵ “You have heard this manner of speaking above, namely, that Holy Scripture calls the death of the saints, even the death of Ishmael, a gathering to the people of their fathers. Thus in this passage it is not stated that Jacob died, but that he drew his feet into the bed, expired, and was gathered to his people. For the Holy Spirit wanted to describe these things with special zeal and care in order to assure us that the fathers died in faith in the promise and in the hope of future immortality. For if they had been papists, bishops, and cardinals, who laugh at the future life, both

Conclusion: Thinking Old Testament Thoughts

The basic belief held by most academics discussing life after death in the Old Testament is that any belief in an afterlife is predicated on belief in God and his promises. If God is the God of the living, the one who “will be,” (Exodus 3:14) and he wills that his creatures should *be* as well, he will certainly not allow death to forever have the final word. Life will, indeed must, triumph over death if the Lord is who he says he is. “[God] cannot, being eternal Love, cease ever to hold [the faithful departed] dear, nor consent to scrap them after three score years and ten.”⁴⁶ Or, in the words of Ratzinger, the Old Testament is permeated with “the experience that communion with God means a life stronger than death.”⁴⁷ The God who delivered his people out of slavery in Egypt can surely deliver his people out of the bondage of *Sheol*. Those who study the Old Testament, then, divide themselves into two camps. The first hold that the earliest Israelites did not think of a life beyond this one, or at least it was little developed and mostly borrowed from other cultures. The second are those who see a gradual unfolding of a belief already held in the earliest times, that the *nephesh* lived on after death, and that eventually a new and full corporeal life would be granted to those who departed in a relationship to the Lord. To believe in all the promises of God, from Genesis 3:5 on, is to believe that God will return the dead to the land of the living.⁴⁸ Both camps, however, hold that Israel eventually came to an understanding of the next life that was unique. In Ratzinger’s words,

[The Old Testament] develops a really original idea about the overcoming of death which cannot be slotted into Greek or Iranian categories. It operates neither with the concept of soul nor with the idea of resurrection, being derived from the concept of God and the idea of communion, or rather, from the experience of communion itself. Looking on God, being with God: this is recognized as the point from which the ever-present, all-devouring menace of *Sheol* may be overcome.⁴⁹

While this passage is certainly influenced by Ratzinger’s Roman Catholic belief in the “beatific vision” in the afterlife, it does demonstrate the core Old Testament belief acknowledged by almost all academics, from the most conservative to the most liberal, that communion with God will eventually overcome the bonds of death. Even *Sheol* cannot be beyond God’s purview. The translation narratives, the account of the witch at Endor, the passages directly referring to resurrection and a life beyond death – all point to the Old Testament belief that there will be a life beyond this one. How one interprets all this data will, nonetheless, be heavily affected by

that of the righteous and that of the ungodly, and regard it as a fable, they would not have devoted such careful attention to having their funerals and burials at a definite place. The words “was gathered to his people” are truly splendid and full of meaning. This is a form of speech which belongs entirely to the saints and the godly, and for this reason I believe that Ishmael was also received into fellowship with the blessed; for it was also written concerning him that he “was gathered to his Kindred” (Gen. 25:17). Accordingly, this way of speaking should be pleasing to us; for it testifies that ever since the beginning of the world the saints fell asleep in faith and in the hope of the resurrection.” (Luther, Luther’s Works, Vol. 8, Genesis 50:1)

⁴⁶ Robinson, 79.

⁴⁷ Ratzinger, 91.

⁴⁸ “Accordingly, wherever in the Old Testament we find the divine promise of grace...the resurrection of the dead is taught.” (Pieper, Francis. *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. 3. (St.Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1953), 535)

⁴⁹ Ratzinger, 90.

one's presuppositions. Those who hold to the philosophy of religions worldview see in the Old Testament a gradually developing doctrine influenced by Israel's encounters with other more theologically sophisticated world cultures. Those who believe that the Scriptures record the Lord's true and genuine revelation of himself to his chosen people will see a development, it is true, but a development that is an unfolding of truths already held in nascent form at the beginning. In the same way the ecumenical councils unfolded a theology and Christology already in seed form in the messages of Peter and Paul.

Indeed, one can see from the New Testament perspective how the entire Old Testament is a story of death and resurrection.⁵⁰ The flood kills the human race, which is reborn from Noah and his family. Joseph "dies" in the well, is sold into slavery, but is reborn the viceroy of Egypt. The desert wilderness is the site of the death and rebirth of the Hebrew slaves. Either these patterns were written unconsciously into the narratives of the Old Testament, or their writers saw in the story of their people an eschatological hope of a life beyond death. Perhaps no more fitting conclusion can be found to an examination of the Old Testament view of life after death and resurrection than the words of our Lord in the 5th chapter of John's Gospel:

You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me...Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father. There is one who accuses you: Moses, on whom you have set your hope. If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe my words? (John 5: 39, 45-47)

⁵⁰ The author is clearly indebted to Dr. David Scaer for this insight.

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