DEATH AND AFTERLIFE

A Theological Introduction

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Contents

Introduction  9

1. Underworld, Soul, and Resurrection in Ancient Judaism  19
2. Death and Afterlife in the New Testament  35
3. Death and Afterlife in the Christian Tradition  55
4. Scientific Challenges to Afterlife  77
5. Near Death Experiences  91
6. On the Soul  113
7. Resurrection  135
8. Justification and Judgment  151
9. Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell  165
10. Dying Well  183

Notes  193

Index  213
INTRODUCTION

The last enemy to be destroyed is death.
1 Corinthians 15:26

A Good Death?

Diane died about twenty years ago. A member of our charismatic prayer group at church, she was in her mid-forties and left behind a husband and two teenage boys. We prayed for months that her leukemia would be cured, but in the end our prayers were not answered in the way we had hoped. Diane died young, but she died gracefully. She was convinced that she was going to a better life with God and that her family would be taken care of. She planned her own funeral, chose the readings, and asked that it be a joyful occasion. Before dying, she said good-bye to all those she loved and asked them not to be bitter about her death. Her funeral was more like a celebration than a lament. Even her family felt this. After her death, her family and friends also felt an inexplicable sense of peace and joy about her passing. About six months later her husband took a job in another city and eventually remarried, as Diane had hoped he would.

Did Diane die a good death? Many would say no. What could be worse than dying in the prime of one’s life and leaving behind a beloved family? This kind of event often leaves bitterness and lasting scars. But none of this happened in Diane’s case. Contrary to usual expectations, her passing was joyful. She was sure that her family would be taken care of and that she was going home to God. If one is going to die in the prime of life and leave behind a beloved family, one could hardly manage it more gracefully than did Diane. What
made her death different was her and her family’s certainty that she would continue to live on with God. All the prayers helped too. The months before her death were a time of letting go, acceptance, and preparation for death. When Diane died, she was ready to move on, confident that her journey into God would continue. This changed the whole quality of her death for her and for those around her.

Three things made Diane’s death joyful: she was confident about an afterlife with God, she was prepared emotionally and spiritually for death, and she died close to her loved ones and to God in an atmosphere of prayer.

Questions about Afterlife

Not many people die like Diane. Many people die unsure about God or any future life with God, unprepared to meet death, depressed, uncertain, afraid, and often alone. For example, a recent article in *America* magazine discusses the state of Christian belief in Sweden. About 9 percent of the population there is Christian; 3 percent actually go to church. The rest are described as agnostic. “They’re convinced you cannot speak about God. Is there a God? Is there not a God? I don’t know, they will say.” It is true that Christian belief is more widespread in the United States than in Sweden, but the same secularizing trends are at work here as well. For years I have been teaching a course titled “Death and Afterlife” at the University of St. Thomas. It is a popular course among students. Yet to my surprise, I often find in my students a deep uncertainty about afterlife and a fear of death. These are connected. People fear death because they have no positive vision of afterlife. Christian martyrs, who often died terribly painful deaths, did not fear death because they were convinced that they would be sustained by Christ and would be with him in heaven. But a cliché among students is: “No one has died and come back to tell us about it.” The typical opinion is that the best death is quick and painless, contrary to centuries of Christian teaching, which stresses the need to prepare for death. Even some practicing Christians are uncertain and troubled about death. Increasingly, pastors do not talk about afterlife. Often they simply offer brief slogans, such as “He is with God now.” I once asked a pastor in my athletic club what he told his flock about the soul after death. His response was, “Our theologians tell us not to talk about it.” This seems to be the case in mainline Protestant churches and is becoming true in some Catholic churches. It’s even more true in popular culture. I ask people if anyone ever brings up the topic of death and afterlife at a party. Of course not, they laugh; people don’t talk about it.
A consequence of the uncertainty about afterlife is that people don’t think about death and therefore don’t prepare for it. It’s easier to deny it—why dwell on what you can’t change? So people typically don’t think about death until it’s too late. They don’t prepare to meet death; rather, it runs into them like a truck.

So the question is, Why is there such uncertainty about life after death? After all, Christianity has taught for centuries that persons’ souls survive death and that in the end times their souls will be united with their resurrected bodies. In fact, throughout almost all of Christian history, people didn’t worry about whether they would survive death. Instead, they worried about their state after death, their ultimate salvation: would they make it into heaven or would they fall into hell? In medieval cathedrals like Chartres, the scene of the last judgment (Matt. 25:31–46) was sculpted over the entrance doors so that people would see in frightening detail the damned falling into the clutches of demons and the bodies of the saints rising from their tombs to be with Jesus and the angels in heaven. Augustine, Luther, and Calvin were greatly concerned about salvation and did not think that most people would be saved.

Furthermore, almost all world religions teach that one’s personal spirit or soul survives bodily death. One finds this belief in tribal and animistic religions around the world, such as those of American Indians and African peoples; in ancient Egyptian religion; in Hinduism; in most forms of Buddhism (e.g., Mahayana and Tibetan Buddhism); in Chinese religions; in traditional Judaism; in all of Islam; and in traditional Christianity. So why are contemporary Americans and Europeans so unsure about afterlife?

Challenges to Afterlife

There are several reasons for the uncertainty about an afterlife. Foremost is the challenge of philosophical naturalism or materialism. This is the (philosophical) belief that nature, or matter, is all that really exists. As the late Cornell astronomer Carl Sagan expressed it in his television series *Cosmos*, “The universe is all that is, all there ever was, and all that will ever be.” Sagan promoted this as the scientific worldview, and in fact naturalism is often associated with science but is not necessarily entailed by it. One can do good science while being a devout believer in God. Most of the great founders of modern science—Galileo, Newton, Robert Boyle, Christian Huygens, Michael Faraday, James Clerk Maxwell, Max Planck—believed in God. Conversely, many people who are naturalists or materialists are not scientists and know little of science. Thus naturalism is a *philosophical* belief, which may or may
Introduction

not be associated with science. Nonetheless, naturalism as a worldview has subtly pervaded the media, books, universities, and school classrooms so that it is now the atmosphere in which we live. As John Hick says, “Naturalism has created the ‘consensus reality’ of our culture. It has become so ingrained that we no longer see it, but see everything else through it.” Naturalism has gradually displaced the older Christian worldview, with its confidence in God and in a sacramental universe that exists in and expresses God. Instead, according to Sagan, we now live in a naturalistic, self-sufficient universe that is all that is and in which God is otiose—a vestigial memory.

Second, bodily resurrection, which is the central hope of Christianity (as well as of traditional Judaism and Islam) is hard to believe in today’s world. If the body is resurrected, where does it go? Into outer space? We all know that heaven is not “up there” and that hell is not “down there,” that is, in the center of the earth. Modern cosmology has taught us that the heavens are not the abode of God, gods, or angels, as people used to believe. It was easier to make a case for resurrection when everyone believed that heaven was up amid the stars and that hell was in the fiery interior of the earth. But now we know that the stars are fiery bodies that exist in empty space and cannot support life. There is no physical space for heaven (or hell) in today’s universe. This makes it hard to believe in the resurrection of the body and in traditional teachings about heaven and hell.

Nonetheless, many religious persons—Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus, and others—continue to believe that the souls of their loved ones go to be with God. But it is also becoming more difficult to believe in a soul. There is no support in science for the existence of a soul, or even for a mind, that survives bodily death. Neuroscience demonstrates that our thoughts and emotions are tightly correlated with states of the brain. CAT scans, for example, reveal that particular regions of the brain are active when people think, visualize, meditate, and so on. Strokes and head injuries that damage particular areas of the brain result in the loss of highly specific mental faculties, such as the ability to recognize familiar faces. Brain damage, including Alzheimer’s disease, can result in pronounced changes to one’s personality. So it is much more difficult to make the case that our personal consciousness is carried by an immaterial soul. Rather, our personality and reason seem to be a result of and depend on the development of our brains. The corollary of this is that when the brain dies, the person dies; there is no survival of the mind or soul after death. This is the message from neuroscience.

Finally, there are philosophical and theological challenges to traditional teachings on heaven and hell. For many people, heaven seems static and boring. What would we do in heaven? And hell as a place or state of eternal
Introduction

punishment seems hard to believe. What kind of a God would consign people to a place or condition of eternal torment? Interestingly, though many world religions, such as Hinduism and Mahayana Buddhism, do teach the existence of hell and portray it dramatically in their art, they also teach that persons only reside in hell for a period of time until their karma or sin has been repaid; then they move on. Today the major religions that teach an eternal hell are Orthodox Judaism (but not Reformed or Conservative Judaism), parts of Islam, and traditional Christianity. But even many Christians have begun to doubt the eternality of hell. For example, Hans Urs von Balthasar, an extremely conservative Catholic theologian, wrote a book titled Dare We Hope That All Men Be Saved? 

For all these reasons, and many others, people question the traditional pictures of afterlife and therefore many do not prepare spiritually for death.

Three Themes

In this book I will attempt to meet these questions and challenges. The book presents three main themes. First, I will argue that while scientific and philosophical challenges force us to rethink our conceptions of the soul, resurrection, and heaven and hell, we can still make a credible case for life after death with God, for a soul that survives bodily death, for bodily resurrection, and for heaven and hell. I will lay out this case in chapters 1 through 9. One of my principal concerns will be to respond to scientific and naturalistic challenges to the soul, the resurrection, and to heaven and hell.

My second main theme concerns the need to prepare for death (chap. 10). If we want to die well, to die into God, so to speak, we need to start working on our relationship with God (and with others) while we are young and healthy, rather than waiting until death is knocking at the door. Developing a relationship with God takes time and sacrifice, conversion and repentance, discipline and prayer—just as it takes time, discipline, practice, and self-sacrifice to reach proficiency in a sport, in music, or in a profession. Of course, God is always present, closer to us than our own jugular vein, as the Qur’an says. But the problem is that usually we are not tuned into God. To use an analogy: we are surrounded by radio and television waves, but if we do not tune in a receiver we can’t hear the message. So also with God. God is always present, but without a tuned receiver we can’t communicate with God. Tuning in the receiver means tuning ourselves into God. And this means eliminating self-centeredness and moving toward God-centeredness. Jesus calls this move repentance or conversion, a total change of mind and heart. Usually this takes
years of prayer and discipline, not just weeks or months. I tell my students that dying is like graduation: if we have prepared well, it is the gateway into a brighter future. But if we have not prepared or have prepared poorly, it can be a terrible failure. So the second theme concerns the need to develop a relationship with God that will carry us through death. The earliest name for Christianity, “the Way” (Acts 22:4), captures this idea that the Christian life is a preparation and a journey into God that begins in this life but continues after death. For any journey, it is important to know where one is going to spend the first night, the second night, and so on. But it is also important to know the ultimate destination of the journey. Where are we going in the end? The end of the journey affects which way we turn even in the first stages of the journey. As with a journey, so with life; it is important to know the ultimate end and destination. The surprising thing is that many people do not know what is the ultimate destination of their lives. Like some of my students, they are uncertain about life after death, and so do not know how to prepare for death.

The third theme of this book is hope. For Christians (as well as Jews, Muslims, and others), afterlife with God is the ultimate hope. Even the most successful earthly life cannot escape disappointments, mistakes, failures, losses, and estrangements. Thus this earthly life cannot serve as the basis for our ultimate hope. As we read in the book of Ecclesiastes: “I saw all the deeds that are done under the sun; and see, all is vanity and a chasing after wind” (Eccles. 1:14). Paul writes: “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people the most to be pitied” (1 Cor. 15:19). Reconciliation with God and the Blessed in heaven has sustained the hopes of Christians from the beginning. It is the great hope of heaven that carried Diane joyfully through death and can carry us as well. These three themes form the core of this book. It is intended as a kind of theological guidebook for dying well, which is to say, dying in the presence of God.

Outline of the Book

This book is comprised of ten chapters and this introduction. Chapter 1, “Underworld, Soul, and Resurrection in Ancient Judaism,” deals with the view of death and afterlife in the Old Testament and in the intertestamental writings. In early-Hebrew belief, the shades of the dead sink into the underworld. The belief in bodily resurrection begins to appear in later writings, especially in Daniel. And Jewish writings influenced by Greek thought (e.g., the book of Wisdom) state that after death the souls of the just are in the hands of God.
Introduction

We shall also consider Jewish apocalyptic writings concerning the judgment and the end of the world.

Chapter 2, “Death and Afterlife in the New Testament,” looks at the range of views in the New Testament. What did Jesus teach about the soul, bodily resurrection, and the end times? What was Paul’s idea of the resurrected body? What was the view of the end times and of judgment in the book of Revelation? This chapter considers all these questions and more.

Chapter 3, “Death and Afterlife in the Christian Tradition,” briefly surveys the ideas on death and afterlife in the Christian tradition from the early church to modern times. There is a much wider range of opinion among Christian thinkers across the ages on these topics than most people realize.

Chapter 4, “Scientific Challenges to Afterlife,” takes up challenges to the existence of a soul that survives brain death and challenges to bodily resurrection.

Chapter 5, “Near Death Experiences,” responds to some of the challenges in chapter 4 by considering some striking examples of recent near death experiences and what we can learn from them about afterlife.

Chapter 6, “On the Soul,” discusses the nature of the soul and whether it can survive bodily death (I argue it can). I hold that in this life persons are psychophysical unities (hence the brain influences the mind and vice versa) but that because of God’s personal relationship with each person, one’s soul—the subject of one’s consciousness, freedom, and intentions—will survive death.

Chapter 7, “Resurrection,” deals with the equally difficult question of bodily resurrection. How is such a thing possible? According to Christians, Jesus himself has been resurrected. Where is his body now? Is it physical like our bodies? Building on the biblical witness, but also considering scientific objections, I shall make a case that the resurrected body must exist in a spiritualized yet physical condition—a higher state of matter—or what N. T. Wright calls a “transphysical” state.

Chapter 8, “Justification and Judgment,” asks, How can we be righteous before God and therefore worthy of salvation in the judgment? In other words, How do we get to heaven? Through faith? Through works? Both? This has been a contested question since the Reformation. This chapter will lay out the basic arguments and offer some conclusions.

Chapter 9, “Heaven, Purgatory, and Hell,” considers how we can understand heaven, purgatory, and hell. Theologically, heaven is the state of being in perfect union of love with God: “In your presence there is fullness of joy” (Ps. 16:11). But is heaven a place? Is it a parallel universe? Is there time in heaven? Or is it a state of timeless eternity? My view is that heaven, if it is the fullness of joy, will
be not simply the sanctification of desire but also a dynamic, endless growth into the infinite love and understanding of God. Heaven will also include a resurrected creation (Rom. 8:18–23) and hence probably animals, for there is no point to a resurrected body if there is no environment for the body. Hell, by contrast, is simply the state of being cut off from God and others. God is still present even to those in hell, but those in hell have cut themselves off (or tuned themselves out) from God. Traditional Christianity has taught that hell is eternal, but this has been widely challenged in recent times.

Chapter 10, “Dying Well,” deals with death as the fulfillment of our journey into God and how we can prepare for death.

This is a short book and cannot present a comprehensive scholarly treatment of all the relevant material. Such a treatment of even a single topic, for example, Jesus’s resurrection, would be many times the length of this book, as N. T. Wright’s recent 817-page book on Jesus’s resurrection demonstrates. I shall therefore summarize much of the scholarly writing on various topics and refer the reader to more-extensive treatments in the notes. As much as possible, I will base my arguments directly on primary sources, especially the Bible, rather than appealing to a putative consensus of scholars, whose consensus may be wrong and, in any case, changes every decade or so.

I am writing from a Christian perspective and will appeal primarily to a Christian audience. But almost all the arguments in this book could apply equally well to Judaism, Islam, and other forms of theism. Although I believe that ultimately all who are saved are saved through the work of the incarnate Logos, Jesus the Christ, I emphatically do not believe that only professed Christians can be saved. As Peter says in his speech to Cornelius, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34–35).

Finally, I hope it is clear that in making a case for afterlife I am not saying that we should discount this present life. Our world, with all its beauty and blessings, is given to us as the creation of God, and we are obligated before God to care for it as stewards. To say that we can ignore our responsibilities for God’s good creation because the afterlife is coming soon (which we cannot know, see Mark 13:32) is to insult God. How can we expect reward in the afterlife if we abuse God’s gifts in this life? The same goes for our obligation to care for the poor and unfortunate: if we ignore them and their urgent calls for justice, how can we expect to share in the blessings of the world to come (Matt. 25:31–46)?

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Introduction

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Underworld, Soul, and Resurrection in Ancient Judaism

I called to the Lord out of my distress, and he answered me; out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.

Jonah 2:2

The writings of ancient Judaism—the Hebrew Bible and the so-called intertestamental writings—span a period of about a thousand years. Not surprisingly, there is a development in the understanding of death and afterlife during the course of these writings. In the earliest Hebrew texts, there is no notion of heaven or hell; rather, the souls of the dead are believed to sink into an underworld (usually called Sheol) where souls dwell as weak, dim shades with no consolation from God. The only real hope after death was to be remembered by one’s descendants. Thus Abraham was blessed by God in the promise of many descendants (Gen. 22:17–18).

Over time, however, the Jewish prophets developed the idea that God would reward or punish each person for his or her own sins, not for the sins of his or her ancestors (“A child shall not suffer for the iniquity of a parent,” Ezek. 18:20). In later Jewish Scriptures, the belief developed that God would not abandon the righteous to the netherworld. Rather, the righteous individuals would be rewarded and the wicked punished by God in a resurrected life after death, as seen in the book of Daniel (ca. 150 BCE). In the book of Wisdom,
about a century later, we find a vision of the souls of the righteous living on with God (Wis. 3:1–9). Both these views of afterlife continued and influenced the thought of Jews and Christians in the time of Jesus.

There was, therefore, a wide range of beliefs about death and life after death in ancient Israel. We will consider specific texts that express these views of afterlife and then summarize our findings in a conclusion.

The Underworld

In earliest writings, the dead were thought to sink into the underworld, which was associated with the grave or a place of darkness. The shades (rephaim) of the dead survive but with no strength, vitality, hope, or worship of God.

For my soul is full of troubles, and my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the Pit; I am like those who have no help, like those forsaken among the dead, like the slain that lie in the grave, like those whom you remember no more, for they are cut off from your hand. . . . Do you work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise up to praise you? (Ps. 88:3–5, 10)

Another text describing the underworld is given in Isaiah, in which the prophet issues a taunt against the king of Babylon:

Sheol beneath is stirred up
to meet you when you come [i.e., die];
it rouses the shades [rephaim] to greet you,
all who were leaders of the earth;
it raises from their thrones
all who were kings of the nations.
All of them will speak
and say to you:
“You too have become as weak as we!
You have become like us!” (Isa. 14:9–10)

The most natural reading of this passage is that the shades retain personal identity in the underworld. They are portrayed in physical terms (as speaking, for example), and this might cause some interpretative problems with the passage, but they certainly are not resurrected. I agree with Robert Gundry that the shades are portrayed in physical terms by way of analogy—how else could the writer portray them?

There are many other passages in the Old Testament that indicate personal identity continues after the death of the body: “But God will ransom my soul
from the power of Sheol” (Ps. 49:15); “You will save his life from Sheol” (Prov. 23:14 RSV). Isaiah 38 gives a moving piece attributed to King Hezekiah, composed after he recovered from an apparently lethal illness. Hezekiah writes:

In the noontide of my days
   I must depart;
I am consigned to the gates of Sheol
   for the rest of my years, . . .
But thou hast held back my life
   from the pit of destruction, . . .
For Sheol cannot thank thee,
   death cannot praise thee;
those who go down to the pit cannot hope
   for thy faithfulness. (Isa. 38:10–18 RSV)

The most striking account of contact with a dead spirit from the underworld is given in the story of Saul visiting a medium at Endor (1 Sam. 28). Though Saul had previously expelled mediums and wizards from the country, he was fearful of an impending battle with the Philistines and sought the advice of the dead prophet Samuel. Saul disguised himself and went to consult a medium, asking her to summon the spirit of Samuel. She did so and said: “I see a divine being [elohim] coming up out of the ground.” He [Saul] said to her, ‘What is his appearance?’ She said, ‘An old man is coming up; he is wrapped in a robe.’ So Saul knew it was Samuel, and he bowed with his face to the ground, and did obeisance. Then Samuel said to Saul, ‘Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?’” (1 Sam. 28:13–15). Saul told him that the Philistines were warring against him and that God did not answer him by dreams or prophets, so he summoned Samuel to tell him what he should do. Samuel’s reply was devastating. Tomorrow, he said, “the LORD will give Israel along with you into the hands of the Philistines; and . . . you and your sons shall be with me” (v. 19). And indeed Saul and his sons were killed on Mount Gilboa the next day.

The underworld, then, is like the grave where the dead survive as shades (rephaim) of their former selves. True, Psalm 139:8 declares that God is even in the underworld (Sheol): “If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.” But even if God is present in the underworld, there is no indication that this provides any comfort for the dead, who dwell in darkness, not in the light of God. All who die go to the underworld and do not return; there is no indication of reward for virtue or punishment for misdeeds there. Even the great prophet Samuel dwells in the underworld with the rest of the dead. The underworld, then, is not the fulfillment of human hope.
The identity of the dead apparently survives (as can be seen in the episode in 1 Samuel), but their spirits are not comforted by the presence of God nor are the righteous rewarded and the wicked punished. All go to the same place: “the same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil” (Eccles. 9:2).

The ancient Hebrew concept of the underworld is very similar to the conception of the dead found in the writings of Homer (ca. 850 BCE). Homer portrays the lot of the dead as dwelling in the underworld—Hades—as insubstantial “shades” who have lost their strength and life force. In a striking chapter of Homer’s Odyssey, Odysseus sails to the land of Persephone, goddess of the dead (see chap. 11). There he is directed to dig a small pit, sacrifice a black ewe and ram, and let their blood fall into the pit so the shades of the dead can lap it up and thereby have strength to speak. Odysseus performs the rites and addresses the “blurred and breathless dead.” Then the souls of the dead gather: “From every side they came and sought the pit / with rustling cries, and I grew sick with fear.” The lot of the dead is not enviable. The shade of the seer Teiresias tells Odysseus: “Any dead man whom you allow to enter where the blood is / will speak to you, and speak the truth; but those / deprived will grow remote again and fade.” Odysseus sees his own mother among the dead, speaks with her, and tries to embrace her: “I bit my lip, / rising perplexed, with longing to embrace her, / and tried three times, putting my arms around her, / but she went sifting through my hands, impalpable / as shadows are, and wavering like a dream.” The shade of the great soldier Achilles also appears to Odysseus, saying: “How did you find your way down to the dark / where these dimwitted dead are camped forever, / the after images of used-up men.” Odysseus replies to Achilles: “We ranked you with immortals in your lifetime, / . . . and here your power is royal / among the dead men’s shades. Think, then, Akhilleus: / you need not be so pained by death.” But Achilles replies: “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.”

In both early Hebrew and early Greek thought, the shades of the dead, and something of their personalities, survive in the underworld. Odysseus speaks with his mother and she with him; he tries to embrace her, but her shade has no substance. He recognizes Achilles and talks with him. But the shades in the underworld have no life force or strength; they must imbibe blood to have the strength to speak. This seems strikingly similar to the condition of the dead in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Note that the shades of the dead are not immaterial souls. They retain their physiognomies and physical appearances and so are recognizable. Samuel,
for example, is described by the medium and Saul recognizes him from the
description. What survives is not an immaterial soul but a shade or ghost
that lacks the vitality and solidity of the fleshly person but retains personal
identity.9

For this reason, the hope of afterlife expressed in the early Hebrew Scriptures
was not one of individual survival in the underworld but of the continuance
of the people Israel, the land, and one’s descendants.10 Abraham, for example,
was blessed by God in his descendants, not by the promise of a happy afterlife:
“I will indeed bless you, and make your offspring as numerous as the stars of
heaven and the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess
the gate of their enemies, and by your offspring shall all the nations of the
earth gain blessing for themselves, because you have obeyed my voice” (Gen.
22:17–18). Anglican biblical scholar N. T. Wright summarizes:

For the vast majority in ancient Israel, the great and solid hope, built upon the
character of the creator and covenant God, was for YHWH’s blessings of justice,
prosperity, and peace upon the nation and the land, and eventually upon the
whole earth. Patriarchs, prophets, kings, and ordinary Israelites would indeed
lie down to sleep with their ancestors. YHWH’s purposes, however, would go
forward, and would be fulfilled in their time.11

Belief in Bodily Resurrection

Over time in Israel, the hope developed that God will not let his righteous ones
languish forever in the underworld but will raise them from the dead. One of
the earliest of these visions is found in the prophet Isaiah:

Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise.
O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!
For your dew is a radiant dew,
and the earth will give birth to those long dead. (Isa. 26:19)

Notice that the vision of afterlife here is not that of individual, disembodied
souls dwelling with God in heaven; it is a vision of a restored and embod-
ied afterlife. Israelite thought developed in a different direction than Greek
thought. Greek thought after ca. 500 BCE came to hope in the survival of the
individual soul, not the body.12 This is fully expressed in the writings of Plato.
In his great dialogue Phaedo, which recounts the death of Socrates, Socrates
is confident that his soul will go to a better state, comparing the body to a
prison. Hebrew thought, however, conceived of afterlife primarily, but not
exclusively, in terms of a reanimated and resurrected body living with others in a world of justice and peace that was governed by YHWH.

Another famous text that conveys this idea of an embodied afterlife (or renewed life) in company with the people Israel is found in the book of Ezekiel:

The hand of the Lord came upon me . . . and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. . . . He said to me, “Mortal, can these bones live?” I answered, “O Lord God, you know.” Then he said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them: O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you, and will cause flesh to come upon you, and cover you with skin, and put breath in you, and you shall live; and you shall know that I am the Lord.”

So I prophesied as I had been commanded; and as I prophesied, suddenly there was a noise, a rattling, and the bones came together, bone to bone. I looked, and there were sinews on them, and flesh had come upon them, and skin had covered them; but there was no breath in them. . . . I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they lived, and stood on their feet, a vast multitude.

Then he said to me, “Mortal, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They say, ‘Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.’ Thus says the Lord God: I am going to open your graves, and bring you up from your graves, O my people; and I will bring you back to the land of Israel.”

(Ezek. 37:1–12)

This was written when the people of Israel were in Exile (in Babylon, ca. 550 BCE). It anticipates teachings concerning the resurrection of the body but is actually an allegory of the restoration of the people of Israel to their own land. It prophesies the end of their exile, but it closely connects the language of bodily resurrection with the restoration of the Israelites. This theme will be echoed in the New Testament in Jesus’s teaching on the kingdom of God.

At the end of the Old Testament period, we find the clearest statement of the future bodily resurrection of the dead in the book of Daniel.

At that time, [the angel] Michael, the great prince, the protector of your people, shall arise. There shall be a time of anguish, such as has never occurred since nations first came into existence. But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the
sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. (Dan. 12:1–3)

This was written when Israel was under Greek control and Greek practices were being forced on the Jews. Antiochus IV Epiphanes forbade the Jewish practice of circumcision; replaced Jewish sacrifices with Greek sacrifices, which included sacrificing pigs; and even set up an altar to Zeus in the temple area. This led to the Maccabean revolt (167–164 BCE). The book of Daniel was written to encourage those Jews who were resisting Antiochus and suffering martyrdom for their faith. They would not simply sink into Sheol. Daniel envisages a great time of trial and a cosmic battle at the end of history. At that time the angel Michael will arise and fight for his people, the Jews. Then many of those who “sleep in the dust,” that is, the dead, will be raised from the dead. There will be a cosmic judgment; the righteous will be vindicated and the wicked punished.

The nature of the punishment of the wicked is not clear except that it will entail everlasting shame and contempt. Similarly, the nature of the risen state of the righteous is not entirely clear but rather is given in symbols. N. T. Wright thinks this means the righteous will be raised to a state of rulers in God’s new creation. “They will be raised to a state of glory in the world for which the best parallel or comparison is the status of stars, moon, and sun within the created order.” In ancient cosmology, though, stars were not believed to be composed of the same type of matter as the earth, so being raised to a status similar to that of stars probably connoted being raised to a different kind of materiality. Bodily resurrection, then, is not the same as simple resuscitation. Resuscitated persons will eventually die again and their bodies decompose. Resurrected persons, by contrast, will not die again. This alone indicates that the status of resurrected bodies must be different from our bodies here on earth, which age and finally perish. We will encounter this same idea again in the New Testament accounts of bodily resurrection.

Note also that the resurrection in Daniel’s vision is set in a context of judgment and vindication for all Jews who have been righteous. It is not simply an individual matter. Like Ezekiel’s vision of the dry bones being revived (Ezek. 37:1–12), Daniel’s vision involves the vindication of an entire people.

Where did the idea of bodily resurrection, so different from Greek thought, come from? A common explanation is that it was imported from the Zoroastrians in Persia when many Jews were exiled in Babylon (587–539 BCE). N. T. Wright, however, has a different interpretation. He thinks it developed out of the earlier belief in Sheol. Israel’s faith in a God of justice, who was committed to the goodness of the creation and to the covenant with Israel, eventually led...
to the belief that God would not allow the righteous dead to languish forever in Sheol separated from God’s presence. Rather, God would restore the dead in fully embodied form. “The belief [was] . . . not that humans are innately immortal, but that YHWH’s love and creative power are so strong that even death cannot break them. . . . It grew directly from the emphasis on the goodness of creation, on YHWH as the god who both kills and makes alive, and on the future of nation and land.”14

The Intermediate State

The belief in the resurrection of the dead both assumed and entailed the belief that the dead who were resurrected continued their existence in an intermediate state between their death and resurrection in the end times. As Wright explains:

Likewise, any Jew who believed in resurrection, from Daniel to the Pharisees and beyond, naturally also believed in an intermediate state in which some kind of personal identity was guaranteed between physical death and the physical re-embodiment of resurrection. . . . Unless we are to suppose that “resurrection” denoted some kind of newly embodied existence into which one went immediately upon death—and there is no evidence that any Jews of this period believed in such a thing—it is clear that some kind of ongoing existence is assumed.15

It is important to stress this point, because recently many biblical scholars argue that the Bible—particularly the Old Testament—teaches the resurrection of the body, not the immortality of the soul.16 These two have been seen as opposing each other: resurrection was the Hebrew belief while an immortal soul was the Greek belief.17 Wright’s comment on this is as follows:

Jews, it used to be said, believed in resurrection, while Greeks believed in immortality. Like most half truths, this one is as misleading as it is informative, if not more so. If the Bible offers a spectrum of belief about life after death, the second-Temple period provides something more like an artist’s palette: dozens of options, with different ways of describing similar positions and similar ways of describing different ones.18

Old Testament scholar James Barr offers a survey of this trend of thought, as well as a trenchant criticism of it, in his book The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality. Barr makes the same point, that there is a wide variety of beliefs about afterlife in the Old Testament. To insist that there is
only one, or only one authentic one, is to let ideology triumph over evidence. Barr claims that “much in the turn against the immortality of the soul was not a return to the fountainhead of biblical evidence but a climbing on the bandwagon of modern progress. . . . Nevertheless, the turn against the soul and its immortality continued, and to this day continues, to be represented as a move back towards the Bible.”

Another indication of belief in an intermediate state in the Old Testament period was the practice of necromancy, that is, of consulting the dead. Several passages in the Old Testament warn against this. For example Isaiah says: “Now if people say to you, ‘Consult the ghosts and familiar spirits that chirp and mutter; should not a people consult their gods, the dead on behalf of the living, for teaching and instruction?’ Surely, those who speak like this will have no dawn!” (Isa. 8:19–20). Several passages in the Israelite law forbid consulting the dead (see, e.g., Lev. 19:31; 20:6; Deut. 18:11). Obviously, there is no need to pass laws forbidding something unless people are actually doing it. Old Testament scholar Helmer Ringgren therefore concludes: “Belief in afterlife is also indicated by the practice of necromancy.”

John Cooper, after a long and careful analysis of the Old Testament conception of afterlife, concludes that the Hebrew idea of the dead is both holistic and dualistic. It is holistic because they did not think of the person as divided between body and soul but thought of the person as a psychophysical unity. But it is dualistic because “they believed that human persons continue to exist after death, though in a state far less desirable than earthly life.” He calls this belief “holistic dualism” and considers that it is similar in the Christian tradition to the belief of Thomas Aquinas (see chap. 3).

Hellenistic Judaism and the Immortality of the Soul

Near the end of the Old Testament period, in the latter part of the first century BCE, we find another belief concerning afterlife, namely, a fully developed belief that the souls of the righteous survive death not in Sheol but in the presence of God. This is expressed in the Wisdom of Solomon, a book written in Greek, probably in Alexandria, where there was a large community of Greek-speaking Jews. This book was included in the Septuagint, the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek, and was part of the Bible of the early church. The relevant passage from this book is worth quoting in full:

but the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God, and no torment will ever touch them.
In the eyes of the foolish they seemed to have died, and their departure was thought to be a disaster, and their going from us to be their destruction; but they are at peace. For though in the sight of others they were punished, their hope is full of immortality. Having been disciplined a little, they will receive great good, because God tested them and found them worthy of himself; like gold in the furnace he tried them, and like a sacrificial burnt offering he accepted them. In the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through the stubble. They will govern nations and rule over peoples, and the Lord will rule over them forever. Those who trust in him will understand truth, and the faithful will abide with him in love, because grace and mercy are upon his holy ones, and he watches over his elect. (Wis. 3:1–9)

This striking passage, which is regularly read at Catholic funerals, reflects Hellenistic (Greek) influence, specifically the influence of Plato and Middle Platonism. Plato taught that the essence of the person was the soul, that the soul was naturally immortal, and that the body was like a prison. Wisdom echoes this view of the body when it says: “for a perishable body weighs down the soul, and this earthly tent burdens the thoughtful mind” (Wis. 9:15).

The book of Wisdom does differ from Platonism, however, at some points that mark it as distinctly Jewish. First, the souls of the righteous are in the presence of God because of God’s “grace and mercy” (Wis. 3:9) and because “God tested them and found them worthy of himself” (Wis. 3:5), not because they are naturally immortal. As always, in Jewish thinking God is the source of all life and blessing, and a blessed afterlife can come only from God. Second, the text says the righteous will “govern nations and rule over peoples” (v. 8). This sounds like the text from Daniel and may refer to the resurrected state, not to a state of discarnate immortality. The curious phrase “in the time of their visitation they will shine forth, and will run like sparks through stubble” (v. 7) also requires interpretation. N. T. Wright argues that this phrase refers to judgment—the wicked are the “stubble” that will be burned in the judgment. On this reading, the passage does not refer to a permanent abode of disembodied souls resting in heaven but instead refers to the temporary state of the souls of the righteous resting in heaven (“in the hand of God,” v. 1) that will be followed by the resurrection and the
judgment, in which the righteous are vindicated and in the resurrected state given governance of peoples.\textsuperscript{24}

Wisdom, then, combines the Greek belief that the souls of the righteous are in the hand of God with the belief in an eventual bodily resurrection. This would become the central belief of Christianity as well.

### Jewish Apocalyptic, Eschatological, and Intertestamental Literature

The Greek word \textit{apokalypsis} (“apocalypse”) means “revelation.” Apocalyptic literature is concerned with the revelation of divine secrets or mysteries about heaven, the supernatural world, and the future typically given through visions to the seer by an angelic messenger.\textsuperscript{25} The language of apocalyptic literature is highly symbolic, and the authorship is usually attributed to a famous figure in the past (e.g., Enoch, Baruch, Ezra). Apocalyptic literature is radically pessimistic about the present, seeing evil powers in control of the world. It foresees a final cosmic battle between good and evil and a radical intervention by God in which he will destroy the present evil age. Then will come bodily resurrection and a cosmic judgment of all the dead and the living in which the wicked are punished and the righteous rewarded in a glorious new kingdom either in heaven or on earth. The Old Testament book of Daniel is an apocalyptic book, as is the book of Revelation in the New Testament. Individual sections of the New Testament that deal with the end times (e.g., Mark 13) and the last judgment (e.g., Matt. 25:31–46) are often classed as apocalyptic as well.

Apocalyptic literature is usually connected with eschatological visions, that is, visions of the end of history, when God will intervene to establish a kingdom of the righteous. But apocalyptic is not just concerned about the end times. C. K. Barrett writes:

> The secrets in which apocalyptic deals are not simply secrets of the future—of the Age to Come; they include secrets of the present state of the heavenly world. Indeed, these two mysteries, of heaven and the future, are very closely allied, since in apocalyptic the significant future is the breaking into this world of the heavenly world, and to know what is now in heaven is in consequence almost the same as knowing what will be on earth.\textsuperscript{26}

Christopher Rowland argues that apocalyptic, therefore, must be understood as revealing a “vertical dimension,” that is, the secrets of heaven now, as well as a horizontal, future dimension.\textsuperscript{27}

Apocalyptic is important to our study of death and afterlife because much of it is concerned with life after death. Indeed, an apocalyptic outlook per-
meates the New Testament, including the teachings of Jesus—especially his
teaching of the kingdom of God—and of Paul (see chap. 2). Intertestamental
apocalyptic literature is therefore a bridge between the last books of the Old
Testament (Daniel, ca. 165 BCE) and the New Testament. And in this litera-
ture we find a development of the ideas of the abode of the dead, of bodily
resurrection, and of the last judgment. Here I will follow D. S. Russell’s ac-
count of this subject.

We saw above that the underworld (Sheol) in the Old Testament writings
was the abode of the dead, who survived only as shades with no life force.
Everyone, the righteous and the wicked, sank into the underworld, where they
had no rewards and no comfort from the presence of God. This changed in
the intertestamental apocalyptic literature. Russell writes:

One change is that . . . the dead are no longer described as “shades” but as
“souls” or “spirits” and survive as individual conscious beings. . . . There is
seen to be a continuity between life on earth and life in Sheol in which the de-
parted . . . can yet maintain a life of fellowship with God whose jurisdiction is
acknowledged beyond the grave. . . . According to their . . . lot in the afterlife
they experience restlessness or repose, remorse or gratitude, fear or calm as-
surance (II Esdras 7.80ff.).

A second change is that moral distinctions become part of the afterlife in
Sheol:

As in life, so in death, men [sic] are separated into two distinct categories, the
wicked and the righteous, on the basis of moral judgments. . . . Men determine
their destiny in Sheol by the choice they make in this life: “For though Adam
first sinned and brought untimely death upon all, yet of those who were born
from him each one of them has prepared for his own soul torment to come,
and again each one of them has chosen for himself glories to come” (II Baruch
54.15, cf. 51.16).

A third difference is that “now Sheol is regarded . . . as an intermediate state
where the souls of men await the resurrection and the final judgment and in
which they are treated according to their deserts, i.e., Sheol becomes a place
of preliminary rewards and punishments.”

In some of these books, there is the possibility of the dead being helped
by intercessory prayer, especially by the prayers of prophets like Abraham
and Moses. In the majority of the books, however, the fate of the dead is
fixed at death: “Man’s destiny, both in Sheol and at the last judgment, is
determined by the life he has lived on earth. Once inside the gates of Sheol
no progress is possible for the departed soul either upwards or downwards (cf. 1 En. 22).”

Finally, in these intertestamental apocalyptic books, Sheol is divided into compartments so that it is described as both the abode of the wicked and the abode of the righteous. For example, 1 Enoch 22 views the place of the dead as divided into four compartments: one for the righteous, where there is a spring of water; one for sinners who have not been punished for their sins in life and who therefore experience great pain; one for the righteous martyrs; and one for sinners who had already received punishment for their sins in their earthly life. Russell notes that “in this passage we have the first reference in the apocalyptic writings to the idea of Hell as a place of torment, although the actual word is not used here.”

In Jewish apocalyptic literature, a wide range of visions of the resurrection and the resurrection body can be found. In some texts a resurrection is imagined that occurs on earth with a physical, earthly resurrected body while in other texts a heavenly resurrection is envisioned with a spiritual resurrected body that corresponds to its heavenly environment. Russell writes:

These “spiritual” bodies are described in several apocalyptic books under the figure of “garments of light” (cf. II Esd. 2.39, 45, etc.) or “garments of glory” (cf. 1 En. 62.15, etc.). . . . Thus in the Similitudes of Enoch when the kingdom is set up in a new heaven (45.4; 51.4) and a new earth (41.2; 45.5) the righteous dead are clothed in “garments of glory” and dwell with the holy angels (39.4–5).

In a number of places, the resurrection body is described as a transformed physical body. This prefigures the idea of the resurrected body that is found in the New Testament (see chap. 2).

Finally, Jewish apocalyptic literature emphasizes the last judgment. Russell writes: “The doctrine of the last judgment is the most characteristic doctrine of Jewish apocalyptic. It is the great event towards which the whole universe is moving and which will vindicate once and for all God’s righteous purpose for men and all creation.” Typically the judgment is based on one’s deeds:

Every man [sic] is judged according to what he has done of righteousness or of wickedness. . . . In the Testament of Abraham . . . two angels record the sins and righteous deeds of the departed (chap. 13) whose souls undergo two tests, one of fire (chap. 13) and one by judgment of the balance in which a man’s good deeds are weighed over against the bad (chap. 12, cf. 1 En. 41.1; 61.8).
Again, this prefigures the strong New Testament emphasis on the last judgment, though in the New Testament it is Christ who will be the judge (Matt. 25:31–46; 2 Cor. 5:10).

Conclusion

There is, then, a spectrum of beliefs concerning death and afterlife in ancient Judaism: the underworld; the eventual bodily resurrection of the dead, associated with judgment; the souls of the righteous resting in the hand of God; and apocalyptic eschatological visions of the end times. All these options are carried forward in the Jewish Scriptures and in the intertestamental writings. Furthermore, different sects in Judaism espoused one or another of these various beliefs concerning the afterlife. Evidence for this is found both in the New Testament and in the writing of the Jewish historian Josephus. The Sadducees, aristocratic Jews who controlled the temple and collaborated with the Romans in governing Judea, denied the resurrection and (apparently) any form of afterlife and, according to the ancient Jewish historian Josephus, held “that souls die with the bodies.”37 The Pharisees, a party or sect concerned with the fine points of the law, taught the resurrection of the body and also the survival of the soul after death. Concerning the Pharisees, Josephus writes:

They also believe that souls have an immortal vigor in them, and that under the earth there will be rewards and punishments, according as they have lived virtuously or viciously in this life; and the latter are to be detained in an everlasting prison, but that the former shall have the power to revive and live again; on account of which doctrines, they are able greatly to persuade the body of the people.38

The Essenes, a group not mentioned in the New Testament but associated with the monastery at Qumran, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and an apocalyptic eschatological outlook, apparently believed that the soul survived the death of the body and expected an eschatological war and judgment in the near future. N. T. Wright argues that they may also have believed in the resurrection, but this is uncertain.39 Finally, the mass of ordinary Jews, the “people of the land,” probably did not belong to any of these sects. They likely hoped for the deliverance of Israel and for the resurrection in the last days.40 Wright surmises in summary:

The evidence suggests that by the time of Jesus . . . most Jews either believed in some form of resurrection or at least knew it was standard teaching. Com-
paratively few remained skeptical. Some held to a kind of middle position . . . in which a blessed, albeit disembodied, immortality awaited the righteous after their death. But there is widespread evidence that the belief which burst into full flower in Daniel 12 had become standard.41

There was, then, a long development and refinement of belief concerning death and afterlife in ancient Israel, from the oblivion of the underworld to the survival of the souls of the blessed and the resurrection of the dead in the last days. Resurrection meant judgment; it was not only a vindication of the righteous and punishment of the wicked but also a restoration of the righteous people of Israel.42 It was therefore both individual and communal, a feature we shall also find in the New Testament.

All these beliefs flowed from Israel’s basic belief that God, YHWH, was the creator and king of the world and that YHWH was faithful to his covenant with Israel. God would not abandon his faithful ones to the wicked or to the forces of death and the underworld. One day at the end of the age he would come again to restore a kingdom of justice, peace, and prosperity and would restore his (resurrected) people to their land. This would be the day of the Lord, and the beginning of the “age to come.” On that day, even the Gentiles would recognize that YHWH was God of all the earth and would stream to Israel, as to a teacher who was seen as the light of the nations (see Isa. 49:6). Wright notes, “All of this was concentrated, for many Jews, in the stories of the righteous martyrs, those who had suffered and died for YHWH and Torah. Because YHWH was the creator, and because he was the god of justice, the martyrs would be raised, and Israel as a whole would be vindicated.”43

All these ideas carry forward and, for Christians, are consummated in the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. To this we now turn.