

Liberty University

What Christians Should Expect: Life Immediately After Death

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Problem Statement

Seventy-three percent of Americans and ninety-two percent of Christians say they believe in *heaven*.¹ Most Christians believe they will go to heaven when they die, but do not have a clear understanding of what happens immediately after death. Preachers usually testify at funerals and celebrations of life that the deceased has gone to heaven, regardless of their lifestyle on earth. Most followers of Jesus Christ have high hopes for the departed but are confused as to the reality of life eternal. Christian beliefs about a believer's life immediately after death (afterlife) range from "falling asleep" to being resurrected.

Many American Christians believe *heaven* is the place of the afterlife. As Segal writes, "For the majority of Americans, heaven has become a virtual democratic entitlement."² A Gallop poll reveals that Americans believe the afterlife will be a good and better life without problems, pains, trials, troubles, tribulations, worries, or cares. It will be peaceful, happy, and joyful with love between God, Christ, and the people. Friends, relatives, and spouses will live there forever. Those in the afterlife will grow spiritually, enjoy humor, and have responsibility.³

Turning to the Scriptures, in the Old Testament, the place of the afterlife was *Sheol* (cf. Isa. 38:10, 18).⁴ *Sheol* was considered the place of the dead and may have originally referred to

¹ "Views on the afterlife," Pew Research Center, accessed October 1, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2021/11/23/views-on-the-afterlife/>.

² Alan F. Segal, *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in the Religions of the West* (New York: Doubleday, 2004), 11.

³ George Gallop, Jr. and James Castelli, *The People's Religion: American Faith in the 90's* (New York: Macmillan, 1989), 54, quoted in Segal, *Life After Death*, 11.

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are taken from the New King James Version (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

“all of the dead,” but later may have become specialized to refer to “hell.”⁵ In the New Testament, Jesus described the place of afterlife as *Paradise* (Luke 23:43) and *Abraham’s bosom* (Luke 16:22). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus described *heaven* as the place of destiny for the righteous believers, “Great is your reward in *heaven*” (Matt. 5:12).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this paper is to research the Word of God and other scholarly sources to understand what the Word of God teaches and what modern Christians believe about life immediately after death for believing Christians. I will not explore the resurrection at the end of the age or those who are alive at the Coming of the Lord. This paper will focus only on life immediately after death for Christian believers. This is important for all Christian believers in order that they may understand the correct and pure foundation of the afterlife in the Gospel of Jesus Christ and not be led astray by secular philosophies. The research for this paper from primary, secondary, and tertiary sources will be examined and explained, and the conclusions drawn will identify the passages in Scripture and other scholarly sources that explain life immediately after death for believers. An understanding of the afterlife is important for all Christians as it strengthens their faith, increases determination, encourages steadfastness, and motivates them toward excellence as followers of Jesus Christ.

Personal Motivation

My motivation to write this thesis is due to a personal experience—a life-like dream that I had several years ago. I did not have any thoughts or read any materials about this subject before my dream. It began with me driving my truck and stopping to pick up an unknown passenger. Then I drove up a narrow winding mountain road. The road narrowed until the truck

⁵ R. Laird Harris, “*Ἅδης*,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 892.

fell off the road and over a steep embankment, almost a cliff. The truck rolled over several times and landed upright. I immediately rose out of the truck and into the air, several feet above the truck. My lifeless body and the unconscious body of the passenger were still in the truck. People ran to the truck and attempted to get my lifeless body out. They had much difficulty due to the damaged door and frame. I was screaming frantically that I was safe and sound and they needed to extract the passenger who was unconscious. Oblivious to my screams, I began to grab them and shake them. To my dismay, they did not feel me, see me, or hear me. I knew the passenger was alive, but unconscious, so I continued my efforts to get their attention, hoping to save the passenger's life. Amidst my screaming and pulling, I determined that I was deceased. My dead body was in the truck and I was very much alive, above my body in the air. I watched as the people pried open the door with crowbars and dragged my lifeless body out. A person began CPR while I was screaming, "I am OK! Get the other man out: he is alive!"

Finally, I realized that whatever I did, it would not be recognized by the living people. They had no ability to recognize that I was alive and hovering over my body. I then noticed myself. I was alive, I was hovering in the air, and I could move about wherever I wanted. I realized that I was the same person, married to the same woman, the father of the same children, and that I still had the knowledge and memory of what was transpiring on the earth. Nothing had changed since I died except that I no longer had a body. I did not see God, Jesus, angels, or ancestors. I did not see a light. I did not see or experience any of the things that I had read about and been taught. I only knew that I no longer had a body and could not communicate with those that did. When I awoke from my near-death experience, I realized that what seemed like an entire night had transpired in only a few minutes. This dream had a significant impact on my life

but does not take precedence over the Bible as an inerrant source of truth. I have included this personal story so you can understand my motivation to write this paper.

Near Death Experience

There are thousands of stories of people who have had near-death experiences that are more dramatic than my dream. I will recount only one of these stories.⁶ It is the story of Janelle Woofford, who had a heart attack and died while the EMTs attempted to bring her back.⁷ At the point of death, she described a white cloudy veil, followed by a bright place overwhelmed with joy, peace, and happiness. She described it as a place of comfort, like a familiar place, with people who loved her and without pain or fear. Next, Ms. Woofford twice heard her name being called. When she answered, she was right back on earth with the EMTs and no longer in “heaven.” The EMTs told her she had had a heart attack and that they had performed CPR, shocked her heart, and that she had been dead and without a heartbeat for two- to two-and-a-half minutes. Ms. Woofford later said, “Whatever you go through on this earth...it’s worth it to know Jesus as your Savior and to trust God with all you’re going through.”⁸ A near-death experience may or may not mirror an actual afterlife experience. I have included this story as it may be meaningful for the reader, encourage an open discussion of the afterlife, and be spiritually motivating for someone searching for answers concerning the transition from earth life to death.

⁶ Many people have experienced near-death experiences when they died for a short time and then came back to life. All of their stories are similar, yet different. Did they go to Paradise or not? For further study, see Melvin Morse and Paul Perry, *Transformed by the Light: The Powerful Effect of Near-Death Experiences on People’s Lives* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1994).

⁷ Isaac Gwin, *Living Momentarily in Heaven*, accessed September 28, 2023, <https://www2.cbn.com/article/amazing-stories/living-momentarily-heaven>.

⁸ Gwin, *Living Momentarily in Heaven*.

Thesis Statement

I believe that the spirit returns to God at death. Ecclesiastes 12:7 tells us, “the spirit will return to God who gave it.” Jesus told the thief on the cross “today you will be with Me in *Paradise*” (Luke 23:43). In Matthew 5, Jesus outlines the beatitudes and announces *heaven* as the eternal reward for living a godly life. This thesis will examine the beliefs and views of people in the Old Testament, Intertestamental period, and New Testament. Theological documents, cultural interpretations, societal perspectives, as well as biblical teachings will be examined to establish understanding, reassurance, and guidance to those struggling to understand the immediate afterlife. Analyzing Christian thought and expectations of the afterlife leads to greater understanding of a Christian’s eternal destiny. By dealing with these end-of-life issues now, Christians will be better prepared to lead others to greater understanding of the values of faith and hope and their effects on salvation and eternal life.

Limitations, Delimitations, and Biases

There is dispute between Western Christians and Eastern Orthodox Christians (including Roman Catholics) about which books constitute the canon of the Bible. Therefore, all books that are considered canon by either faction will be examined. This includes apocryphal writings that are considered canonical in some Christian churches and are referenced in Jude (vss. 9 and 14–15). I will also examine scholarly Christian authors, early Christian writers, pseudepigrapha, ancient Jewish writings, and Ancient Near Eastern (ANE) texts that have influenced Biblical writers. Several pseudepigrapha and ancient Jewish writings are referenced in the Bible (Num. 21:14; Josh. 10:13; 2 Sam. 1:18; 1 Kings 11:41; 14:19; 15:7; 1 Chron. 29:29; 2 Chron. 9:29; 12:15; 20:34). The Bible is the Word of God and the ultimate authority. Pseudepigrapha and other ancient Jewish writings, early Christian authors, and scholarly Christian exegesis and

commentaries are valuable references and lend understanding of biblical texts, although they are not infallible. ANE texts provide valuable cultural and historical information that may have influenced Jewish authors.

The impact of religious creeds and dogmas play a significant role in the exegesis of Scripture and lead to theological interpretations consistent with those doctrinal beliefs that may cloud the individual's ability to interpret alternative understandings. A person's presuppositions are the greatest factor in interpreting Scripture and ancient documents. A person's cultural, religious, and social background may influence the way he understands and relates to ancient writings and Scripture. For example, a person who has been taught all his life that at death the soul of a believer "goes to heaven" may find it difficult to accept that the thief on the cross went to *Paradise* with Christ or that a person who dies goes to *Sheol*.

My presuppositions are that I believe the Bible to be the Word of God. If the prophets of the OT wrote about *Sheol* being beneath the earth, it was because that was the dominant belief of the Hebrew people at that time (Num. 16:30–33; Isa. 14:9–11; Ezek. 31:15–17; Amos 9:2). Jesus referred to the afterlife as *Paradise* (Luke 23:43) and Abraham's Bosom (Luke 16:22) because that was how the Jews, including the Pharisees and their followers, viewed the afterlife.⁹

⁹ Flavius Josephus, "The Antiquities of the Jews" in *Josephus Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1973), 478.

CHAPTER 2: THE AFTERLIFE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND ANCIENT NEAR EAST

What the Word of God Says

The search for information about life after death began with the traditions of the ancient Near East (ANE). Beliefs about life after death among ancient Semitic peoples is reflected in the early books of the Old Testament (Pentateuch). Miller writes that the people and cultures of the ANE influenced the family of Abraham.¹⁰ People of the ANE, as well as the Israelites, believed that the dead existed in a sleep or comatose state, in the place of the grave called Sheol (שְׁאוֹל).

Early Hebrew theology saw *Sheol* as the place for all the dead, deep within the earth, not as a place of punishment (e.g., Job 26:6). Over time, Hebrew theology evolved into the belief that *Sheol* was the place of judgment (Prov. 15:11). By the end of the post exilic period the Israelites began to see life after death as the place of judgment (Isa. 14:9; Ezek. 32:21).¹¹ Ezekiel 37 teaches a corporate resurrection for Israel. Resurrection for the dead is expressed during the intertestamental period and dominates New Testament theology.

Cultures of the ANE shared a common belief in the underworld as a place where the dead reside in a shadowy existence cut off from the living. The Canaanites shared the belief in Sheol but considered the god, Mot, to rule over it.¹² In Mesopotamian mythology, the underworld was known as "Kur" or "Irkalla" and was considered a gloomy place where the dead exist in a shadowy form. The Egyptians believed in a mysterious underworld, known as "Duat," where the spirits of the dead journeyed. Lang writes, "The earliest Hebrew traditions develop out of the

¹⁰ Richard Miller, "The Theological Development of Death and The After Life," *Journal of Biblical Pentecostalism* 2, no. 2 (Winter 2021): 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17–25.

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

Mesopotamian and Canaanite mythologies.”¹³ These mythologies believed in three divisions of the universe: heaven, earth, and Sheol, the underworld.¹⁴ Barr writes that Sheol was not original in the Hebrew religion, but they inherited it from past natural religions of the ANE.¹⁵ Walton disagrees with Barr. He argues that Sheol was the Hebrew word for the place that the dead go to and has no known antecedent in other cultures or religions of the ANE.¹⁶ Regardless of which theologian is correct, the Bible was written by authors inspired by the Holy Spirit. If the Hebrew writers were influenced by the surrounding cultures, it is a matter of debate and discussion, as the afterlife in the ANE was similar in some aspects. The word ”Sheol“ was the ANE word for the place of the dead, often quoted in the Old Testament (OT), and was regarded as a state of sleep, confined to the depths of the earth.¹⁷ Segal writes that the existence of Sheol was a heathen concept, being deep within the earth that was developed by the Babylonians. Even the famous Gilgamesh Epic, the Mesopotamian narrative of loss, bereavement, and the afterlife was found in the land of Israel, at Megiddo.¹⁸

The Gilgamesh Epic predates the writing of the Pentateuch and shares common influences with the Old Testament. Both tell the story of the great flood and how one family survived after being warned by a god (or Yahweh). Both tell of a paradisaical garden and the serpent as being responsible for the loss of immortality. The quest of Gilgamesh for eternal life is

¹³ Bernard Lang, “Afterlife—Ancient Israel’s Changing Vision of the World Beyond,” *Bible Review* 4 (Feb. 1988): 12, as cited in Miller, “The Theological Development of Death and The After Life,” 18.

¹⁴ Miller, “The Theological Development of Death and The After Life,” 18.

¹⁵ James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), 30, as cited in Miller, “The Theological Development of Death and the After Life,” 17.

¹⁶ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 320.

¹⁷ Richard Miller, “The Theological Development of Death and the After Life,” 16-17.

¹⁸ Segal, *Life After Death*, 70–71.

comparable to biblical themes about the afterlife. The Hebrews were in contact with Mesopotamian cultures through trade, conquest, and exile. During the Babylonian Exile, Jewish writers would have had access to Babylonian literature, beliefs, and customs. The Epic of Gilgamesh and thousands of other tablets have been uncovered in geographic regions where there were extensive interactions between the Hebrews and surrounding nations, e.g., Nineveh in ancient Assyria.¹⁹ This supports belief in cultural exchange and justifies study of ANE texts in determining the beliefs of the early Hebrews about the afterlife.

Peoples of the ANE found the “sleep” metaphor an effective explanation of death, e.g., the Ugaritic text of Aqht:150f is translated, “They fly over the grave, my son, they violate him in his sleep.” The “sleep” concept softened the emotional side of death.²⁰ The OT authors did the same. The author of Job writes in 14:12, “So the man lies down and does not rise. Till the heavens are no more, they will not awake nor be roused from their sleep.”

According to the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, the KJV translates שְׁאוֹל thirty-one times as “grave”, thirty times as “hell”, and three times as “pit.”²¹ Biblehub.com shows eighty-one uses of Sheol שְׁאוֹל in the OT.²² Sheol also appears in the Jewish Elephantine papyri, where it is glossed as “grave” and always refers to the place of the dead, even though its etymology is uncertain.²³ The OT speaks of the afterlife, it just does not give a detailed account

¹⁹ “Ancient Clay Tablet Offers Insights into the Gilgamesh Epic,” accessed June 24, 2024, <https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/news/ancient-clay-tablet-offers-new-insights-into-the-gilgamesh-epic/>.

²⁰ Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality*, 30, cited in Miller, “Theological Development,” 17.

²¹ Harris, “lwøaVv,” 892.

²² “Sheol,” accessed May 14, 2024, <https://biblescan.com/search.php?q=sheol>.

²³ Harris, “lwøaVv,” 892.

of the Hebrew belief. Sheol is regarded as the place of the afterlife for the good (See Gen. 37:35) as well as the wicked (see Num. 16:30). This is not in harmony with the NT that teaches that faithful believers inherit eternal life with God, while the rebellious are cast out. However, the understanding of Sheol develops with OT theology through the exile and second temple periods.

Sheol, or realm of the dead is a feminine noun frequently used in Hebrew, but appears as a loanword in Syrian, Ethiopian, and Aramaic, but whose etymology is an old and widely discussed problem, without any final conclusion. Traces of the concept of the realm of the dead as a confining prison are found in the OT (2 Sam. 22:6; Ps. 18:5), as well as Babylonian writings.²⁴

One view of *Sheol* is that it refers to the place of the dead body, not the spirit. This interpretation is attractive as it avoids the issue of all souls, good and evil, going to the same place where they experience a dark and shadowy existence. This interpretation of *Sheol* as the grave is expressed thirty-one times in the OT, but does not explain the thirty times it is glossed as hell.²⁵ This interpretation is interrupted by pericopes like Psalm 139:7–8, “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend into heaven, you are there; If I make my bed in hell (*Sheol*), behold you are there.” In this verse *Sheol* specifically refers to the residence of the spirit: one could not believe that God is in the grave. Thus, *Sheol* must be considered the place of the spirit, as well as the body, as this is the primary Hebrew concept of the afterlife.²⁶

²⁴ Ernst Jenni and Claus Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 3, trans. Mark E. Biddle (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 1279–81.

²⁵ Harris, “lwøaVv,” 892.

²⁶ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 320.

Another Hebrew word for grave is קֶבֶר (qeber) which is used seventy-one times in the OT for grave and is also glossed as burial, burying place, sepulcher, or tomb. The verb קָבַר (qabar), translated as bury is used 132 times. Most of the uses of *Sheol* are poetic (all except eight) and the OT authors may have used *Sheol* as a poetic synonym for “qeber,”²⁷ *Sheol* belongs primarily to poetic language; half the instances occur in Psalm, Job, and Proverbs”²⁸ (books of *Writings* or Hebrew *Ketuvim*.) The concept of *Sheol* in the OT includes the concept of imprisonment and intrudes also into life before death (e.g., imprisonment, illness, or distress). In Psalm 18:5 and 116:3 the pangs of death and *Sheol* surround the author in his distress. This message of desperation is recorded in 2 Samuel 22:6 and Psalm 18:5 as David cried out to God, having been delivered from the hand of Saul. *Sheol* is used in place of “qeber” for the grave, for the entire place of the dead, both righteous and evil, as well as for the souls of the wicked.²⁹ The most significant theological factor for those dwelling in *Sheol* is exclusion from Yahweh’s cult and historical acts, e.g., Isaiah 38:18 reads, “for Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you,” and Psalm 6:5, “for in death there is no remembrance of you; in the grave (Sheol) who will give you thanks?” In the Greek Septuagint (LXX) *Sheol* is translated as ᾗδης (hades) and may refer to all of the dead, but in some translations may refer to the souls of the wicked.³⁰

In the OT the hope of the righteous is a life with God. The Psalmist writes in 30:3, “You brought my soul up from the grave (Sheol)” and in Proverbs 12:28, “In the way of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death.” This is evidence that the early Hebrews recognized

²⁷ Harris, “lwøaVv,” 892.

²⁸ Jenni and Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1280.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 1281.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 1281–82.

life as eternal. Resurrection for the dead is expressed in Job 19:25–26; Psalm 16:10; 49:15; 86:13; Isaiah 26:19; Ezekiel 37:1–14; Daniel 12:2–3; and Hosea 13:14.³¹

Heaven שָׁמַיִם (šā-mā-yim) is used 420 times in the OT and describes *heaven* as the realm distinct from earth and sea, in accord with the ANE worldview: heaven above, earth in the middle, and water all around and beneath. *Heaven* is conceived as God’s treasure house (Deut. 28:12), and often appears as the dwelling place of Yahweh and His hosts, so that He acts from *heaven*.³² Deuteronomy 4:39 tells us “the Lord Himself is God שָׁמַיִם בַּ (baš·šā·ma·yim) *in heaven* above and on the earth beneath,” and 26:15 “Look down from your holy habitation, שָׁמַיִם מִן (haš·šā·ma·yim) *from heaven*.” Heaven does not contain God, “Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the heaven of heavens cannot contain You” (1 Kgs. 8:27). He and His hosts can descend from heaven (Gen. 11:5; Deut. 33:2; Ps. 18:9–10; 144:5), and speak from heaven, as when Yahweh spoke to Moses from heaven in Exodus 20:22, “you have seen that I have talked with you from heaven,” and in Deuteronomy 4:36, “out of heaven He let you hear His voice.” *Heaven* שָׁמַיִם is translated in the LXX as οὐρανός (ouranos). Yahweh is called by the title “God of heaven” in Gen. 24:3, 7; Ps. 136:26; Ezra 5:11–12, 6:9–10, 7:12, 21,23; Dan. 2:18–19, 28, 37, 44, and in the Elephantine papyri. In Judaism, שָׁמַיִם (šā-mā-yim) *heaven* and οὐρανός (ouranos) *heaven*, describe the residence and place of God and may become a synonym for Yahweh (God).³³

³¹ Ezekiel 37 teaches of a corporate resurrection for the nation of Israel.

³² Jenni and Westermann, *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 1369–71.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1371.

Development of Ancient Hebrew Theology

The first recorded death in the OT was Abel, who was slain by his brother Cain (Gen. 4:8). No mention is made of his spirit, *Sheol*, or *Heaven*, but the Lord says, “The voice of your brother’s blood cries out to Me from the ground” (Gen. 4:10), indicating vengeance for the murderer. The rest of the chapter deals with Cain’s sin and does not describe the afterlife of the first recorded human death.

OT writers constantly developed the teaching that belief and commitment to the creator God, Yahweh, produced the ground for a happy future life after death, a rescue from *Sheol*. Psalm 49:15 says that “God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave, for He shall receive me,” but the ESV reads, “God will ransom my soul from the power of *Sheol*.” The Hebrew reads מִיַּד-לְיָשׁוּעַ שְׁאֹל-מִי מִיָּד מִיַּד-לְיָשׁוּעַ שְׁאֹל-מִי מִיָּד, literally “the hand of the grave.” Here *Sheol* is determined to be the place for the souls of the dead and not just a grave. That God will *ransom* him is a reference to the resurrection; that death and the grave is not a permanent state. Barnes writes, “The *hand* is an emblem of power, and it here means that death or Sheol holds the dominion over all those who are in the grave ... on the word *redeem* ... literally, He shall take me. That is either He will take me from the grave; or, He will take me to Himself ... that God would take control of him and save him from the dominion of the grave.”³⁴ This is confirmed in Psalm 73:24, “You will guide me with Your counsel and afterward receive me to glory.”

King Hezekiah wrote these words about *Sheol* after he recovered from a life-threatening illness, “I shall go to the gates of *Sheol*, I am deprived of the remainder of my years” (Isa. 38.10). Here, *Sheol* is considered the place of the dead for everyone, but not a place of punishment as the

³⁴ Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the Old Testament: Psalms*, vol. 2 (1870–72, repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 66.

righteous are rescued from Sheol (Ps. 49:15; Hos. 13:14). *Sheol* is translated as *grave* in KJV and NKJV but as *Sheol* in many recent translations. *Sheol* and *grave* are used interchangeably even though *Sheol* refers to death not only as a grave for the dead, but also as the place of the spirit after death. Hosea 13:14 reads, “I will ransom them from the power of the grave.” *Ransom* is glossed from ׀ַדָּם 'eḇ-dēm,, which is from the root, ׀ַדָּ׀ paw-daw', literally, a verb meaning to *ransom*, redeem, or buy back, e.g., to purchase a person out of slavery and set him free, or as used here, the *redeeming* by God. The root is used in Assyrian with the meaning “to spare” and in Ugaritic as “ransom.” The root with its derivatives is used sixty-nine times in the OT.³⁵ The word is used to depict God’s act of *redeeming* and is of great importance to Christianity as to Jesus’ redemption for the sins of mankind and is used with reference to redemption from sin,³⁶ in Psalm 130:7–8, “O Israel, hope in the Lord; for with the Lord there is mercy, and with him is abundant redemption. And He shall redeem Israel from all his iniquities.” The redemption that Christ offers is abundant and even though numberless millions have been saved by it, it is still as available and as rich as in the beginning; just as the light of the sun has shone on the planets for ages, so it continues to provide light with “undiminished splendor.”³⁷ The promise to redeem Israel from all iniquities includes the church today and will be fully accomplished in heaven only; “there and then the bliss will be complete.”³⁸

³⁵ William B. Coker, “׀ַדָּ׀,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 716.

³⁶ Spiros Zodhiates, *Hebrew-Greek Keyword Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2013), 1876.

³⁷ Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the Old Testament: Psalms*, vol. 3 (1870–72, repr., Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 261.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

The people of the ANE saw *Sheol* as the place where their ancestors went after death and their proper burial assured them of the ability to communicate with their living relatives. Thus, communication with the dead was practiced by family members for the benefit of the family and was a private matter and not a national issue. Just as in life, people would seek the advice of their parents and grandparents, after death they would seek their departed ancestor's advice by rituals, making their departed ancestors a god to the rest of the family. The ancestor's position in Sheol was dependent on how they lived their life. A righteous person that was properly buried was better off than an evil person who did not receive a proper burial. Death meant changing one's place in the universe and proper burial was important as it allowed the deceased to come in contact with earth and become part of the underworld.³⁹ The Israelites followed the religious practices of their neighbors which brought them into opposition with the prophets.

God commanded Moses to instruct the children of Israel to worship Yahweh as the God of the living and rejected the practice of honoring/worshipping deceased ancestors. Leviticus 19:26–28 forbid divination, soothsaying, making cuttings in the flesh for the dead, or tattooing. Divination was the ancient practice of “calling up the dead” for the purpose to learning future events. Soothsaying was foretelling future events. Making cuttings in the flesh, disfiguring the beard, and tattooing were idolatrous ANE practices and symbolized idolatry, mourning for the dead, and indicated dissatisfaction and outrage with Yahweh's workmanship. Leviticus 19: 31 forbids mediums and familiar spirits which pretended to “call up the dead” by magical tricks and ventriloquism, where the medium, or wizard would speak as if the dead were speaking. The priests were forbidden to defile or make themselves unclean for the dead, except for close relatives (cf. Lev. 21:1–4). They were forbidden in Leviticus 21:5 and Deuteronomy 14:1 from

³⁹ Miller, “The Theological Development of Death and the After Life,” 19.

shaving their heads, shaving the edges of their beards, or making cuttings in the flesh; practices that honored the dead and were customary for idolaters and were not to be copied by worshippers of Yahweh.⁴⁰

The worship of Yahweh opposed the "cult of the dead" and forbade any inquiring of them, separating the Israelites from the religions of the surrounding nations that extended "sacral dignity" to the dead.⁴¹ The forbidden practice of "calling up the dead" was described as divining, spiritism, or necromancy. Kings Saul, Hezekiah, Josiah, and the prophets forbid the *calling up* and worship of the dead and worship of Yahweh required complete obedience. The invasion and captivity by Assyria and Babylon brought condemnation on those who failed to worship Yahweh and him only. These judgments on Israel were the result of idolatry and ancestral worship.⁴² The veneration and worship of ancestors led to necromancers, who would conjure up and supposedly create communication with the dead to learn about the future of the living.⁴³ Contact with the dead was forbidden by the God of Israel and often resulted in demonic spirits posing as the deceased.

In Deuteronomy 26: 12–14 the people were counseled to bring the first fruits of their produce to the priests, as a tithe, to be shared with the priests, the strangers, the widows, and the fatherless. They were not to share it with the dead (vs.14). This is a reference to the practice of giving drink and food to the dead at their graves and sharing food with the dead at the monthly

⁴⁰ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the Old Testament: Leviticus*, accessed July 29, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/leviticus/19.htm>.

⁴¹ Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1, trans. D. M. G. Stalker (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 389.

⁴² Miller, "The Theological Development of Death and the After Life," 20.

⁴³ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 322.

family meal of remembrance (kispu), in which the dead were invited to eat, as part of their ancestral veneration. This meal was usually provided during the new moon, the darkest times, before the new phase of the moon would begin to produce light. In return for the living providing food for the dead, the dead were consulted to help with the needs of the living. This is when the spiritist, medium, or necromancer was called upon. This reaffirmed the dependence of the living on the dead, which was in opposition to total dependence on Yahweh, the God of Israel.⁴⁴

King Saul, after forbidding mediums and spiritists, disguised himself and went to a spiritist at En Dor and asked her to bring up Samuel the prophet (1 Sam. 28:8), who had deceased (1 Sam. 25:1). The seance produced Samuel, who had not seen Saul since the day Samuel told him, “You have rejected the word of the Lord and the Lord has rejected you from being king over Israel” (1 Sam. 15:26). “When the woman saw Samuel, she cried out with a loud voice” (1 Sam. 28:12). Then she asked Saul, “Why have you deceived me? For you are Saul!” (vs.12). The woman was terrified. She was a medium that calls up the dead, but this experience was unique and different. She normally would interpret the sounds made by an appearing spirit that “whispers and mutters” (Isa. 8:19; 29:4). “In this case, however, the spirit appears not as a murmuring wisp or shadow but as the distinctly defined image of Samuel, in his prophet’s cloak, and the woman of En-Dor immediately realizes that it is only for the king that the prophet Samuel would have thus risen from the underworld in full body-image.”⁴⁵ She immediately recognized the spirit as Samuel and knew that her client was King Saul, who had forbid spiritists

⁴⁴ Ibid., 319–22.

⁴⁵ Robert Alter, *The David Story: A Translation with Commentary of 1 and 2 Samuel* (New York: Norton, 1999), 174.

and necromancers (1 Sam. 28:3). King Saul reassures her, “Do not be afraid. What did you see?” (vs. 13).

She described Samuel as אֱלֹהִים ('*ě-lō-hîm*) which is translated as “a *spirit* ascending out of the earth” (1 Sam: 28:13). The KJV translates אֱלֹהִים ('*ě-lō-hîm*) as “gods,” the NASB as “divine beings,” the NIV as a “ghostly being,” and the CJB as a “ghostly being.” We know that it was the spirit of Samuel as he was described as '*ě-lō-hîm* and 1 Samuel 15:35 tells us, “Samuel went no more to see Saul until the day of his death.” Samuel was described as “ascending out of the earth,” in accordance with the Jewish perception of the afterlife being deep within the earth.⁴⁶ Samuel was described as אֱלֹהִים ('*ě-lō-hîm*) which is plural, not אֱלֹהִי ('*ě-lō-hāw*) which is singular, and is used with the plural verb אָלַם ('*ō-lîm*) (coming up or ascending) so the correct gloss is plural, e.g., gods, or divine spirits “ascending out of the earth.” “While the woman seems to have represented the Canaanite or pre-Israelite religious traditions, the Israelite King Saul, who is still a seeker of the words of Yahweh, expects his prophet Samuel to appear with a message from their God and in vs. 14 asks her what his appearance is.”⁴⁷ She replied, “An *old man* is coming up, and he is covered with a mantle” (vs.14). Now the woman describes the spirit in the singular and Saul perceived the *Elohim* was Samuel.⁴⁸ Samuel told Saul that Saul would die the following day and then would be with Samuel (1 Sam. 28:19).

Leviticus 19:31 warns, “Give no regard to mediums and familiar spirits; do not seek after them, to be defiled by them.” The word translated as *mediums* is derived from the root word

⁴⁶ Early Hebrews believed the spirits of the dead were in the earth with their deceased bodies.

⁴⁷ David T. Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 448.

⁴⁸ OT passages use אֱלֹהִים ('*ě-lō-hîm*) when writing about spirits of the dead. It is also used in Numbers 25:2 when the children of Israel worshipped the Canaanite god of fertility, Baal, and the spirits of the dead.

meaning necromancer,⁴⁹ who is a person that calls up spirits of the dead for the purpose of revealing the future or influencing the course of events. *Familiar spirits* is glossed from the word which means “knowing and wise about the secrets of the unseen world” or a soothsayer.⁵⁰ Saul ignored this Scripture. The punishment for consulting with mediums and familiar spirits was being cut “off from his people” and having Yahweh set His face “against that person” (Lev. 20:6). Deuteronomy 18:10–11 reads, “There shall not be found among you anyone who makes his son or daughter pass through the fire, or one who practices witchcraft, or a soothsayer, or one who interprets omens, or a sorcerer, or one who conjures spells, or a medium, or a spiritist, or one who calls up the dead.” King Saul’s punishment is described in 1 Chronicles 10:13–14, “So Saul died for his unfaithfulness which he had committed against the Lord, because he did not keep the word of the Lord, and also because he consulted a medium for guidance. But he did not inquire of the Lord; therefore, He killed him, and turned the kingdom over to David the son of Jesse.” Samuel told Saul, “tomorrow, you and your sons will be with me” (1 Sam. 28:19), meaning Saul would enter the community of the dead, *Sheol*, which was considered the place in the afterlife for the righteous and the wicked.⁵¹ In early Jewish theology, *Sheol* included all people,⁵² and shows the early Hebrews did have a concept of the afterlife, even before the Prophets and Psalms were written.

Saul disobeyed the Lord and his own decree (1 Sam. 28:3) not to go to mediums that consult the spirits of the dead. These passages reveal that God allowed Samuel to see Saul’s

⁴⁹ Strong’s Concordance, accessed March 15, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/178.htm>.

⁵⁰ F. Brown, S. Driver, and C. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 396.

⁵¹ Tsumura, *The First Book of Samuel*, 450.

⁵² Miller, “The Theological Development of Death and the After Life,” 26.

future and to warn him, one last time, of his disobedience. This brings up the question, Can persons living in the afterlife see future events in the land of the living? Or, was this just a privilege God granted to Samuel to give Saul one last warning? God forbade spiritists/necromancers to reveal information about the future to living persons. God instructed Moses to write that such persons should be put to death (Lev. 20:27). No mention was made of Saul's spirit after his death, only that his body was burned and his bones buried (1 Sam. 31:12–13). After Saul's bones were buried, they fasted seven days to honor the fallen king.

David writes in Psalm 6:5, “in death there is no remembrance of you (Lord).” This is a lament and does not contain a strict theological statement. Here, David is pleading with God for deliverance from his enemies and identifies death as a place where he cannot worship God as he does in earth life. In vs. 6 he expresses his desire to worship Yahweh and give thanks, as he asks, “In the grave who will give you thanks?” David is expressing his desire to escape the wrath of his enemies, continue to live, and worship Yahweh. Similarly, in Psalm 88:5, “the slain who lie in the grave, whom you (Lord) remember no more.” These verses propose the grave does not offer any spiritual life or reward and simply refer to the anguish of a situation by one who respects and honors Yahweh. Verse 10 asks, “Will you work wonders for the dead? Shall the dead arise and praise You?” The Psalmist is asking if Yahweh's works are performed for the dead and if the dead can praise Him. OT belief was that the dead are cut off from the living and cannot see God's miraculous works. The Hebrews had limited understanding of the afterlife at this time, as *Sheol* was seen as a place where the dead could not actively participate in the physical worship services of the Israelites and were in a diminished period of existence where they could not praise God as they did in earth life. The lament expresses faith, *sola gratia*, salvation through God's grace alone,

where God’s grace and undeserved mercy, not human efforts, allowed salvation and happiness in the afterlife.⁵³

“Shall your loving kindness be declared in the grave? Or your faithfulness in the place of destruction? (Ps. 88:11). This verse reflects the writers’ perceived separation between earth life and death. He continues, “Shall your wonders be known in the dark? And your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?” (Vs. 12). The Psalmist is experiencing deep anguish and despair and compares it to his perception of the grave, where he sees the dead as not experiencing Yahweh’s love and miraculous works. Until Christ comes and introduces the fullness of His gospel, The OT prophets and scribes did not understand the depth of life eternal and saw *Sheol* as a place of diminished living. They focused their writings on the Law of Moses and the covenant relationship with Israel, not with the afterlife.

Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 7:1, “A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of one’s birth.” By juxtaposing death over life to a good name over precious items, he shows that death is important as it brings us closer to God.⁵⁴ Death is part of the state of progression, from birth to death and God’s presence (Eccl. 12:7).

Ecclesiastes 9:5 that tells us, “For the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.” Here, Solomon reflects on the inevitability of death and the fact that no one, regardless of their wealth or power, can do anything about it. That “the dead know nothing” is a reference that the deceased can no longer participate in the activities of the living. “They have no more reward” refers to earth life

⁵³ Walter Brueggeman, *The Psalms and the Life of Faith*, ed. Patrick D. Miller (Minneapolis: Fortress Press,1995), 71.

⁵⁴ Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the Old Testament: Ecclesiastes*, accessed May 2, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/ecclesiastes/7.htm>.

where people receive rewards for their accomplishments, and “the memory of them is forgotten” reminds us of how quickly the memory of a person fades after their passing.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 records that “there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave.” Jesus was well aware of this verse, when he said, “I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work” (John 9:4). Jesus was speaking of His death when he said, “the night is coming when no one can work.” Barnes writes that, “our works come to an end in the hour of death, when the soul enters a new sphere of existence.”⁵⁵

The Israelites considered the act of dying as an event caused by Yahweh Himself and meant that the dead were excluded from fellowship with Yahweh.⁵⁶ Moses wrote in the Song of Moses, “Now I see that I, even I, am He, and there is no God besides me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; nor is there any that can deliver from my hand” (Deut. 32:39). In Hannah’s prayer in 1 Samuel 2:6 is written “The Lord kills and makes alive; He brings down to the grave and brings up.” In the prayer for divine help, the Psalmist writes, “I am like a man who has no strength, adrift among the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave, whom You remember no more, and who are cut off from your hand” (Ps. 88:4–5). Here, the Psalmist laments that he is completely helpless, exhausted, and at the brink of death and feels he is not remembered as those in *Sheol* are not remembered by the living. This is one of the most somber verses in the Bible where the Psalmist expresses complete abandonment and despair and emotional, spiritual, and physical anguish, comparable to those souls living in *Sheol*.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, 2:349.

Hopelessness after death does not persist in the lives of the Hebrews. Later Jewish accounts show a firm belief in a resurrection. Job writes in 19:25–27, “I know that my redeemer lives, and He shall stand at last on the earth; and after my skin is destroyed, this I know, that in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself.” David writes, “My flesh also will rest in hope. For You will not leave my soul in Sheol” (Ps. 16:9–10), and in Psalm 86:13, “For great is your mercy toward me, and You have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.” The Psalmist writes, “But God will redeem my soul from the power of the grave” (49:15). Hosea, writing in the eighth century BC prior to the captivity, recorded, “I will ransom them from the power of the grave; I will redeem them from death” (13:14). Hosea was writing of Ephraim in the previous verses, so this verse may refer to Ephraim and Israel, however it is consistent with other prophetic verses regarding an individual’s ransom from death, resurrection, and hope for eternal life. Isaiah, writing in the late eighth century BC, writes, “He will swallow up death forever, and the Lord will wipe away tears from all faces” (25:8). Here Isaiah proclaims that death will not have power in God’s coming kingdom and He will “wipe away tears” that were brought by death, sorrow, and the reproach of His people.⁵⁷ And again he writes, “Your dead shall live; together with my dead body they shall arise. Awake and sing, you who dwell in dust; for your dew is like the dew of herbs, and the earth shall cast out the dead” (26:19). This is Isaiah’s clear declaration of a bodily resurrection. Resurrection is seen as the answer to all of earth’s questions and demonstrates that a life of faith was not in vain.⁵⁸ Since Isaiah had already written about the

⁵⁷ Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah: a Historical and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007), 115.

⁵⁸ John N. Oswalt, *Isaiah*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 300.

swallowing up of death in the previous chapter, this proclamation of resurrection was the perfect corollary of God's victory over death.⁵⁹

Ezekiel, the sixth century BC prophet writes in exiled Babylon, "I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel...I will put my spirit in you, and you shall live" (Eze. 37:12–14). Here Ezekiel is speaking of a corporate resurrection, of the entire nation of Israel. Daniel, writing in Babylonian exile in the sixth century BC, writes "And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the firmament, and those who turn many to righteousness like the stars forever and ever" (Dan. 12:2–3). These writings tell of the Hebrews belief in the general resurrection, but do not speak of the moments immediately after death, when the spirit leaves the mortal body. The early Hebrews also believed in life immediately after death, as evidenced by Samuel's words to King Saul, "And tomorrow you and your sons will be with me" (1 Sam. 28:19), and David's words upon learning of his son's death, "Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me" (2 Sam. 12:23), and Jacob's words upon perceiving the death of Joseph, "For I shall go down into the grave to my son in mourning" (Gen. 37:35).

Solomon writes in Proverbs 4:14–18, "Do not enter the path of the wicked, and do not walk in the way of evil...their sleep is taken away...the path of the just is like the shining sun, that shines brighter unto the perfect day." Solomon also wrote in Ecclesiastes 12:6–7, "Remember your Creator before the silver cord is loosed, or the golden bowl is broken...then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it." These verses connect death with creation as a whole and 'Remembering your Creator' is key to preparing for

⁵⁹ Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah*, 116.

eternal life. Solomon has, “no detailed eschatology of hope and cosmic restoration as is found elsewhere in the OT and is fully revealed in the NT, but he has found firm ground in the fear of the Lord, in remembering his Creator rather than trying to play the role of God. It will take Jesus’s conquering of death in His resurrection and ascension to resolve the mystery of death.”⁶⁰ “Verse seven proclaims that the spirit returns to God after death, but it does not identify *heaven* to be the place of glory. However, Ecclesiastes 5:2 reads, “For God is in heaven, and you on earth.” Schultz writes, “One should avoid reading too much in ‘returning to God’ since Psalm 104:29 and Job 34:14–15 speak similarly of God gathering the spirits of both animals and humans.”⁶¹ In Job 34:14–15 Elihu counsels Job, “If He should set His heart on it, if He should gather to Himself His spirit and His breath, all flesh would perish together, and man would return to dust.” He continues in verses 19–20, “For they are all the work of His hands. In a moment they die, in the middle of the night; the people are shaken and pass away.”⁶² Elihu reminded Job in this verse that if God withdrew His spirit from the earth “all life would disappear and mankind would turn to dust again”⁶³ Psalm 104:29 is similar “You take away their breath, they die and return to their dust.” Life ends when God leaves them and they return to dust, “nothing remains for man but to die.”⁶⁴ Goldingay writes, “God is Lord equally of life and death. Only God has life in himself to give. If God gives living breath, creatures live; if God withholds it, they die.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Craig G. Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 342–43.

⁶¹ Richard L. Schultz, *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*. Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2019), 14.

⁶² The author, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, refers to the night of the Exodus from Egypt when the Lord struck all the firstborn at midnight. See Exodus 12:29.

⁶³ Bunny Murphree, *Job: A Book of Faith and Hope* (Cleveland, TN: Derek Press, 2006), 192.

⁶⁴ Barnes, *Psalms*, 3:91.

⁶⁵ John Goldingay, *Psalms for Everyone, Part 2: Psalms 73-150* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014), 38.

Psalms 116:15 reads, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints.” The NIV reads, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His faithful servants.” Precious is translated from יָקָר (yā·qār), which may also be translated as costly, rare, valuable, or splendid, and comes from a Semitic root “which conveys the idea of heavy, honor, or dignity.”⁶⁶ The use of the word *precious* to describe the death of one of God’s saints indicates that God does not happily accept the death of any faithful person, “but considers life the better alternative and counts each death as costly and weighty.”⁶⁷ “The same God who delivers us from death delivers us through death. And the death of even one of God’s saints is a precious thing, a ‘valuable’ thing, to Him. He values highly one’s death and sees it as a costly thing.”⁶⁸ Barnes writes that the death of a good man is of great importance and is connected with God’s plans, so that there are great purposes to be accomplished by the death, so much that God will not cause it to take place except in circumstances and at times and in a manner that “will best secure those ends.”⁶⁹ He opines that the death of a good man was so important that it could only happen when “the most good could be affected by it, and when the ends of life had been accomplished.”⁷⁰ Such an act required deep deliberation on the part of God and sometimes good, and sometimes great, ends are accomplished by it.⁷¹ If the death of a good and faithful saint is so important to God, then that

⁶⁶ John E. Hartley, “יָקָר,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 398–99.

⁶⁷ Nancy L. deClaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (Chicago: Eerdmans, 2014), 659.

⁶⁸ Tony Merida, Daniel L. Akin, and Johnny M. Hunt, *Exalting Jesus in Psalms 101–150* (Nashville: B&H, 2021), 17.

⁶⁹ Barnes, *Psalms*, 3:164.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

moment of transition from life to death must be an extraordinary experience. A faithful servant, sanctified by Christ, has received spiritual blessings and favor, so they pass from life to death without the sting and fear of death that accompanies unbelievers. Their passing is a glorious experience, as they are “precious” to God, and may be accompanied by angels, as was Lazarus in Luke 16:22. Faithful saints are sanctified by Christ and are called with a holy calling to leave this earth life; they are freed from the curse and sting of death but not death itself. Faithful believers are *precious* to God, so when they die, they have a hope and longing to be with Him. Because faithful saints are so precious to God, He will not allow their lives to be taken until His will and His purposes have been fulfilled.⁷²

Israelite Burial Customs

Just as death is precious in the sight of God, so also is death an important event to the Israelites. ANE traditions required that a deceased person be given a decent burial, along with meal and drink offerings; otherwise, “the deceased was doomed to an inferior after life death or no after life.”⁷³ Lang writes that the earliest Hebrew traditions were developed from Mesopotamian and Canaanite myths and centered on heaven, earth, and Sheol (the underworld),⁷⁴ and the earliest Hebrews accepted “Mot” as the god of Sheol, along with their family’s ancestors.⁷⁵ The Israelites would care for their ancestor’s body at death and a proper burial was important (cf. Gen. 23:19; 25:9–10; 35:29; 50:2–3, 13, 26; Exod. 13:19; Deut. 34:5–6; 1 Kgs. 14:31; 2 Kgs. 21:18).

⁷² Gill’s Exposition of the Entire Bible, accessed February 7, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/psalms/116-15.htm>.

⁷³ Miller, “The Theological Development of Death and the After Life,” 18.

⁷⁴ Lang, “Afterlife,” 12.

⁷⁵ Colleen McDannell and Bernhard Lang, *Heaven: a History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988), 1–22, as cited in Miller, “The Theological Development of Death and the After Life,” 19.

The Bible does not mention Mot, the Canaanite god of Sheol, by name, as being accepted by the Hebrews, however, there is ample evidence that the Israelites worshipped false gods. They did bow down to Baal, the Canaanite god of Peor and the Moabites (Num. 25:2–3; 1 Kgs. 18:18–40; 2 Chron. 33:3; Jer. 32:35; Hos. 9:10), worshipped all the hosts of heaven (Deut. 4:19; 17:3; 2 Chron. 33:3; Jer. 19:13), offered their children as sacrifices to Molech, the god of the Ammonites (2 Kgs. 16:3; 23:10; Deut. 12:31; Jer. 32:35), worshipped gods of the Sidonians, (i.e., Canaanites cf. Gen 10:15), Moabites, and Ammonites (1 Kgs. 11:5, 33), worshipped and offered their children as sacrifices to the Canaanite gods (Ps. 106:34–38; 1 Kgs. 11:5, 33; 2 Kgs. 16:3–4; 17:7–12; Jdg. 2:11–13; 3:7; 10:6; Isa. 30:33; 57:5–6, 7–8; Jer. 7:31; 19:4–6; Eze. 16:15–21; Zeph. 1:4–5). The OT is divine inspiration and condemned the worship of false gods and deceased persons (Exod. 20:3–4; 23:23–24; Lev. 18:21; 20:2–5; Isa. 8:19; Deut. 6:14–15; 7:1–5; 11:16; 13:1–4; 18:10–12; Josh. 23:7, 16; Jud. 2:11–12; 2 Kings 17:35; 23:3–15; 2 Chron. 34:25; Ps. 81:9; Jer. 19:12–14; 25:6; 44:2–6; Ezra 14:6; Hos. 13:4), eating sacrifices made to the dead (Deut. 26:14; Ps. 106:28), and the sacrifice of children to Molech, the Ammonite and Canaanite god (Lev. 20:2; 18:21; 2 Kgs. 16:3; 23:10; Jer. 32:35). It is obvious from these biblical verses that the Israelite’s religion and culture was greatly influenced by their interactions with the Canaanites. The prophets of Israel were anti-cultural and condemned idolatry, worship of false gods, sacrificing to other gods, eating sacrifices made to the dead and other gods, and promoted sole faithfulness to Yahweh (cf. Deut. 18:9–12; 26:14; Isa. 1; 2:6–8; 17:7–8; 27:9; 44:9–19; Jer. 2:5–13; 3:6–10; 7:7–19; 10:2–14; 16:18–20; 19:4–6; 25:6, 44:2–6; Eze. 14:1–8; Dan. 5:22–23; Hos. 4: 12–14; Amos 5: 26).

Abraham, considered the father of the Hebrew nation, died, and was buried in a cave with his wife, Sarah (Gen. 23:19; 25: 9–10). Isaac, Abraham’s son and heir, was buried by his sons

(Gen. 35:29). He was buried in the same cave as Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 49:31). His wife Rebekah and daughter-in-law Leah were also buried in the same cave (Gen. 49: 31). Jacob was buried in the same cave as Abraham (Gen 50:13). Joseph who was sold into slavery in Egypt, died in Egypt, and was embalmed and put into a coffin (Gen. 50:26) and was later buried in the land of Canaan/Israel (Exod. 13:19; Josh. 24:32). Even criminals who were sentenced to death were buried (Deut. 21:22–23). In Judaism it was considered degradation to man and an affront to God, in whose image man was created, not to bury a deceased person.⁷⁶

In 2 Kings and 1 & 2 Chronicles, there is a recounting of all Israel’s and Judah’s kings who died and were buried, including King Solomon (2 Chron. 9:31). All the kings were buried except two who were under a curse, King Jehoiakim of Judah (Jer. 22: 18–19) and King Ahab of Israel (1 Kgs. 21:24). Elisha the prophet was buried (2 Kgs. 13:20). King Josiah was buried, (2 Kgs. 23:30).

Burial was considered of great importance in ancient Israel, as well as Egypt and Mesopotamia. In Israelite burial practice, it was common to maintain contact with the community even after death, so it was common practice for the deceased to be buried in their native land and near one’s ancestors, (e.g., Jacob said, “I am to be gathered unto my people: Bury me with my fathers” Gen. 49:29).

To the Canaanites the worship of the dead involved families and was a private matter. Communication with the dead involved a person’s deceased ancestors and evidence that the Hebrews adopted this practice is found in the abundant references to mediums, spiritists, and necromancers found in the OT (Lev. 19:31; 20:6, 27; Deut. 18:10; 1 Sam. 28:3, 7; 2 Chron. 33:6;

⁷⁶ “Death and Bereavement in Judaism: Ancient Burial Practices,” accessed July 14, 2024, <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ancient-burial-practices>.

2 Kgs. 21:6, 23:24; Isa. 8:19, 29:4; Jer. 27:9). After death, the deceased ancestors became as gods to the family and only family members were involved in communication with the dead. The Hebrew's belief was that one's position in Sheol depended on how they lived their earthly life. Dying was a change of place in the universe so a proper burial was important.⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Lang, *Afterlife*, 15.

CHAPTER 3: THE AFTERLIFE IN THE INTERTESTAMENTAL LITERATURE

Enoch's Revelations

The Book of Enoch, or 1 Enoch, as it is also known, is one of the most important writings to survive the latter Second Temple period. It is a composite work that has acquired its present form over time. It was translated from Ethiopic that dates to the fifth or sixth century, but was originally written in Hebrew or Hebrew and Aramaic, dating to the third century BC or earlier. Five Aramaic fragments were found with the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁷⁸ It is a pseudepigraphal book, meaning the author is a ghost writer and not the true author as indicated. The Book of Enoch was recognized by early church fathers; Jude, Origen, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria. It is the only pseudepigrapha book mentioned in the NT. Jude writes, “Now Enoch, the seventh from Adam, prophesied about these men also, saying, ‘Behold, the Lord comes with ten thousands of His saints, to execute judgment on all, to convict all who are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have committed in an ungodly way.’” (Jude 14–15). Jude is paraphrasing 1 Enoch 1:9.

Jude was writing about Enoch's description of the Lord's judgment on ungodly people. Enoch knew life existed after death and expressed the dead's complaint with the violence and iniquity that was being perpetrated on the earth. He writes, “the souls of those who are dead cry out. And complain even to the gate of heaven” (1 En. 9:10–11).⁷⁹ In 1 Enoch 22, an angel shows Enoch where the spirits of the dead are kept and informs him that these are their appointed places which they shall occupy until the day of judgement (vs.3–4). Enoch sees the dead spirits and

⁷⁸ Michael Knibb, *Essays on the Book of Enoch and Other Early Jewish Texts and Traditions* (Boston: Brill, 2008).

⁷⁹ Richard Laurence, trans., *The Book of Enoch* (Radford, VA: A&D Publishing, 2008), 14. The Book of Enoch, also known as 1 Enoch, is a composite pseudepigrapha book and was used by the Essenes and early Christians. It is considered important by many scholars as it clarifies intertestamental Jewish thought and early Christian theology.

inquires about Abel, who was slain by his brother, Cain (vs. 5–7). After Enoch continues to inquire about Abel and Cain, the angel says, “Three separations have been made between the spirits of the dead, and thus have the spirits of the righteous been separated. Namely, by a chasm, by water, and by light above it” (1 En. 22:9–10). Enoch was justly aware of the spirits of the dead: “And I saw the spirits of the sons of men who were dead, and their voices reached to heaven” (1 En. 22:5).

In 1 Enoch, Enoch has a vision in which he saw a fragrant tree with beautiful leaf, flower, and bark. Its fruit resembled the cluster of the palm. Michael, the angel, told him that no one could touch the tree

until the period of the great judgment. When all shall be punished and consumed forever, this shall be bestowed on the righteous and humble. The fruit of the tree shall be given to the elect ... then shall they greatly rejoice and exult in the Holy One. The sweet odor shall enter into their bones; and they shall live a long life on the earth as your forefathers have lived; neither in their days shall sorrow, distress, trouble, and punishment afflict them (1 En. 24:3–10).

In 1 Enoch 39:4 he describes his vision of the afterlife,

I saw the habitations and resting places of the saints. There my eyes beheld their habitations with the angels, and their resting places with the holy ones. They were entreating, supplicating, and praying for the sons of men; while righteousness like water flowed before them, and mercy like dew was scattered over the earth. And thus shall it be with them for ever and for ever.

The author of 1 Enoch states that the number of the elect was countless and in the presence of God forever, under the wings of the Lord of spirits, with the elect singing before Enoch and in appearance like a blaze of fire. “There I was desirous of remaining, and my soul longed for that habitation” (1 En. 39:8). 1 Enoch 103:3–4 tells us, “For all good things, and joy and honor are prepared for and written down for the souls of those who died in righteousness. Many and good things shall be given to you—the offshoot of your labors. Your lot exceeds even that of the living ones. The spirits of those who died in righteousness shall live and rejoice; their spirits shall not perish.”

The Book of Enoch expands on the limited view of the afterlife given in the OT and is authoritative enough to be quoted by Jude in the New Testament. 1 Enoch 22 details the separation of the spirits in the afterlife and removes the cloud of confusion about *Sheol* in the OT, where the righteous and the wicked appear to dwell in the same place. Verses 8–14 describe the separation of spirits in the afterlife so the righteous are separated from the wicked until the day of judgment. This provides a much clearer understanding of the afterlife and provides hope for Christians. Enoch rejoices at what he sees and describes four beautiful “corners” where the spirits of the righteous would assemble after death (22:1–4). Sinners also have reason to be fearful for Enoch’s description of the disobedient afterlife as “a chaotic and terrible place... like great mountains, and burning with fire” (21:2–4) and in 21:5–7, “These are among the stars of heaven which have transgressed the commandments of the Lord and are bound in this place until the completion of ten million years, (according) to the number of their sins.”

Maccabees

In the Apocrypha book, 4 Maccabees,⁸⁰ Eleazar an aged man, a leader and of a priestly family, was brought before the Seleucid tyrant Antiochus IV Epiphanes because he refused to eat unclean pork and food sacrificed to idols. When threatened with torture and death, Eleazar said, “You, O King, shall not defile the honorable mouth of my old age, nor my long life lived lawfully. My ancestors will receive me as pure, as one who does not fear your violence even to death” (4 Macc. 5:36–37 NRSV). Eleazar did not fear death or torture and believed that his ancestors would greet him upon his death. This was the Jewish belief of that time, that the

⁸⁰ 4 Maccabees is an early Jewish writing, accepted by Christians before Eusebius. Although not included in the Jewish Tanakh and most Protestant Bibles, it is included in RSV and NRSV translations as well as in the appendix in Eastern Orthodox and some Catholic and Protestant Bibles. See Martin Goodman, *The Oxford Bible Commentary: The Apocrypha* (2001, repr., Oxford: University of Oxford Press, 2013), 239–242

departed would meet their ancestors at death, as with Numbers 20:24, “Aaron shall be gathered to his people.”

In 2 Maccabees 7 the story is told of seven brothers and their mother who were tortured and martyred.⁸¹ The second brother at his last breath said, “the King of the universe will raise us up to an everlasting renewal of life, because we have died for his laws” (2 Macc. 7:9 NRSV). The fourth brother, near death said, “One cannot but choose to die at the hands of mortals and to cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by Him. But for you there will be no resurrection to life!” (2 Macc. 7:13 NRSV). The youngest brother said, “our brothers after enduring a brief suffering have drunk of ever-flowing life, under God’s covenant; but you, by the judgment of God, will receive just punishment for your arrogance” (vs.36). The mother, who saw her seven sons tortured and martyred, bore it with good courage and encouraging each one said, “the Creator of the world, who shaped the beginning of humankind and devised the origin of all things, will in His mercy give life and breath back to you again, since you now forget yourselves for the sake of His laws” (2 Macc. 7:23 NRSV).

Confirmation of the martyr’s faith and conviction is also recorded in 4 Maccabees 18:23 NRSV, “The sons of Abraham with their victorious mother are gathered together into the chorus of the fathers, and have received pure and immortal souls from God, to whom be glory forever and ever.” To ‘receive pure and immortal souls from God’ confirms the belief in immortality, afterlife, and eternal reward for faithfulness. This shows the faithful Israelites had strong beliefs and convictions, unlike the faithless that the OT prophets condemned for idolatry and wickedness.

⁸¹ 2 Maccabees is an apocryphal book, included in the LXX, Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox Bibles. It focuses on the Jewish revolt against the Seleucid Empire. It is a composite work written by Jason of Cyrene in the first or second century BC. See Goodman, *The Apocrypha*, 161–84.

It was written that Eleazar's belief was that his martyrdom, and others, were able to pardon the sins of all Israel and this was accomplished by not compromising their faith, living their lives in accordance with the law, and by reasoning through divine wisdom. The portrayal of the martyrdom of Eleazar was intended to be seen as a vicarious sacrifice along the lines of the Day of Atonement ritual. The shedding of blood being the guarantee of the Jews' purification and expiation. Most theologians opine that 4 Maccabees was written not for history, but for oral delivery at a festival, to highlight the memory of the Maccabean martyrs.⁸² We know that Eleazar's martyrdom was not vicarious, but it demonstrates the courage and faith of these Jewish martyrs and shows their steadfast belief in God and the afterlife. The second brother said they would be raised up to an "everlasting renewal of life" and fourth brother said, "cherish the hope God gives of being raised again by Him," followed by their mother, who said, "God will in His mercy give life and breath back to you again." I have included these stories from the Apocrypha to show the martyr's courage, based on their faith in God and his Word confirming their obedience would be rewarded in the afterlife and resurrection. Their faithfulness served to encourage others to remain faithful to God, as these stories demonstrate the resolve the obedient Jews had to His Word that promises happiness and eternal life for the faithful. May these stories inspire you to uphold God's teachings with courage and integrity.

⁸² Ibid., 242. For further information see Carson Bay, *Biblical Heroes and Classical Culture in Christian Late Antiquity: The Historiography, Exemplarity, and Anti-Judaism of Pseudo-Hegesippus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022).

CHAPTER 4: THE AFTERLIFE IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The New Covenant

Jeremiah writes of a new covenant in 31:31–34, “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah ... I will put my law in their minds, and write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people ... they all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them, says the Lord. For I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more.” Many expositors have claimed this is one of the most important pericopes in the OT and has had great influence on NT doctrine. Jeremiah proclaimed the new covenant is made with the followers of Jesus Christ and brings deliverance from sin and death through the blood of the Lamb of God. The death of Christ implemented the new covenant, not just for Israel and Judah, but for all people, for all time.⁸³ Henry writes, “now all shall or may know God by frequenting the assemblies of Christians... the things of God shall by the gospel of Christ be brought to a clearer light than ever.”⁸⁴ The followers of Jesus Christ are the people of God in the new covenant, are grafted into the house of Israel, and become sons of Abraham (cf. Rom 9:6–8; 11:16–24; Gal. 3:7–9; 26–29). This is included in our study of the afterlife, as the new covenant of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection is the foundation of our eternal life with God, emphasizing forgiveness of sins, faith in Christ, eternal life, and the promise of resurrection for all.

⁸³ Charles L. Feinberg, “Jeremiah,” *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary with the New International Version: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel*, eds. Geoffrey W. Grogan, Charles F. Feinberg, H. L. Ellison, and Ralph H. Alexander (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), 574–75.

⁸⁴ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, ed. Leslie F. Church (1710, repr., Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1960), 995.

Death in the New Testament

The massacre of the innocent babies, ordered by Herod, in Matthew 2:16 records the first deaths in the NT. All male babies under two years of age in Bethlehem were killed. Wilkins estimates that between ten and thirty babies were murdered, based upon the estimated population of Bethlehem of approximately one thousand. This was a huge loss for the tiny village, but not a historical incident that stands out significantly when considering other horrific deeds in Herod's infamous reign.⁸⁵ Jesus had great love for the children as demonstrated in Mark 10:14, "Let the little children come to me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of God," and following in vs. 16, "And He took them up in His arms, laid His hands on them, and blessed them."

This terrorizing by Herod was the most extreme and difficult deaths that could have been imposed on the parents of these babies, creating a vacant feeling for parents living on earth and losing a young child. When it comes to the afterlife, there is abundant evidence that the spirits of babies and young children are immediately taken to the presence of God. This thought stems from what biblical authorities call "the age of spiritual accountability." This is considered the age that a child becomes emotionally mature enough to become responsible for their beliefs and actions. Scholars have debated this theological concept of "age of accountability" from five to thirteen years, with the Jews accepting the age of twelve or thirteen,⁸⁶ and most Christian denominations at age seven. Jesus, speaking of children, said, "unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever

⁸⁵ Michael J. Wilkins, *Matthew, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 19.

⁸⁶ Perry Stone, *Your Journey Into Eternity: Life for the Next 1000 Years* (Cleveland, TN: Voice of Evangelism, 2023), 73.

humbles himself as this little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 18:3–4). Jesus then comments that “whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me” (vs.5). This statement implies that the child represents Jesus so that to welcome the child is to welcome Jesus himself. Jesus instructed the disciples to “let the little children come to Me, and do not forbid them; for of such is the kingdom of heaven” (cf. Matt. 19:14; Mark 10:14–15).

Jesus tells us that children have angels, “in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 18:10). The biblical term “their angels” as seeing the face of God is unique in scripture. France writes, “Those who might easily be despised on earth are represented in heaven by angels who are important enough to have privileged access to God.”⁸⁷ Blomberg wrote that this verse is somewhat cryptic; it may or may not indicate that each person has a guardian angel representing him or her before God.⁸⁸ Matthew, however, is very explicit, “It is not the will of your Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (vs. 14). Every “little one” matters to God and every “little one” in heaven has an angel. Psalm 34:7 tells us, “The angel of the Lord encamps all around those who fear Him, and delivers them.” Children that have not yet reached the age of accountability have an angel that delivers them. If *they suddenly perish, their spirit is immediately carried to the presence of God.*

Stone related this story of a girl with birth defects that died at age five. After the girl’s death, her pastor entered the room and saw two shafts of light descend from the ceiling, forming into two angels. Their wings of light formed, went through the girl’s body, and lifted her spirit from her body. They carried her spirit, that had no birth defects, on their wings and disappeared

⁸⁷ R. T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 686.

⁸⁸ Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 238.

through the ceiling.⁸⁹ This story is reminiscent of the story of Lazarus, the beggar, who died and was carried to heaven by angels (Luke 16:19–23).

The next death written of in the New Testament (NT) was the death of a young girl, the daughter of a ruler, that asked Jesus to “lay your hand on her and she will live” (Matt.9:18), for she has just died. In Luke 8, we learn the ruler’s name was Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue, whose daughter was twelve years of age (vs. 41–42). Jesus came to the house, filled with mourners, and told them the girl was not dead, but sleeping (Matt.9:23–24). Mark also writes about this miracle, with Jesus saying to the mourners and those wailing, “the child is not dead but sleeping” (5:39). Mourning began as soon as death occurred in NT Israel and burial was made as soon as possible, preferably on the day of death.⁹⁰ Jewish families were expected to hire mourners and a wailing woman upon the death of a family member,⁹¹ but Jesus dismisses them, puts them outside, and took the girl’s father, mother, Peter, James, and John only inside the house (Luke 8:51). “He took her by the hand and the girl rose (Matt.9:25). Luke writes, then Jesus “took her by the hand and called, saying, ‘little girl, arise.’” Then her spirit returned, and she arose immediately” (Luke 8:54–55).

Luke writes that “her parents were astonished” (vs. 56), but no details are given about the girl’s experience of dying and being resuscitated. Jesus said, “Let the little children come to me...for of such is the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:16). Matthew wrote Jesus’ words, “Take heed that you do not despise one of these little ones, for I say to you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Matt.18:10). Bock writes, this miracle shows Jesus’

⁸⁹ Stone, *Your Journey Into Eternity*, 78–79.

⁹⁰ J. Julius Scott Jr., *Jewish Backgrounds of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2003), 250.

⁹¹ France, *Matthew*, 373.

sovereign power over disease, death, and life itself and is fundamental to Christian hope, since life after death represents the basic belief of Christian expectation: “the raising of Jairus’ daughter, which called for great faith, reminds us of the faith we must have in God’s power to bring us to Him after we die.”⁹² Although much could have been written about the girl’s passing, her spirit’s existence after death, and her re-entry into mortality, nothing is mentioned. The purpose of the story is to show the power that Jesus has over life and death and how the faith of one man resulted in a miraculous event. Jesus demonstrated his compassion for others, symbolic of God’s great love for His children, while affirming His identity as the Son of God, the Messiah.

When Jesus learned of the death of John the Baptist, he departed to a deserted place by Himself (Matt.14:13). Jesus had great respect for the Baptist and speaking to the multitudes, said “among those born of women there has not risen one greater than John the Baptist” (Matt.11:11) and “if you are willing to receive it, he is Elijah who is to come” (vs.14). Just as the angel had prophesied to Zacharias at John’s birth announcement, “He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit ... he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children’” (Luke1:15–16), Jesus knew that the people believed John was a prophet (Matt.14:5; 21:26) and understood he was the fulfillment of Malachi 3:1, “Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me” and Malachi 4:5–6, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.” John had drawn large crowds in Judea and the surrounding area to the Jordan River, where he was baptizing and heralding the coming salvation, and was “the pivotal figure in the coming of the age of salvation,”⁹³ His death

⁹² Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1996), 249.

⁹³ France, *Matthew*, 426–27.

was, “precious in the sight of the Lord” (Ps.116:15) and may have been accompanied by numerous angels to escort John’s spirit to God’s heavenly presence (cf. Luke 16:22). Barnes writes that the death of one of His (God’s) friends was of such great importance that it should occur only when the most good could be affected by it.⁹⁴ John was beheaded in prison (Matt.14:10), after calling out Herod’s immorality (Matt.14:4), and joined the ranks of Jewish prophets that perished for the faith. There must have been a joyous reunion when John joined Abel, Zechariah, Urijah, and Isaiah in the afterlife (Gen. 4:8; 2 Chron. 24:20–22; Jer. 26:20–23; Ascension of Isaiah).

The Jews understood that John’s righteousness led to eternal life, as Proverbs 10:16 says “The labor of the righteous leads to life” and 11:18–19 “he who sows righteousness will have a sure reward. As righteousness leads to life” and 12:28 “In the way of righteousness is life, and in its pathway there is no death.” John was highly respected among the Jews and his martyrdom at the hand of Herod was a significant event, strengthening the faith and unwavering adherence of the apostles and early followers of Jesus.

When Jesus went to Nain, “a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow” (Luke 7:12). Widows in the Bible were considered the most vulnerable of the people, for whom God had a special concern. For a widow to lose her only son that she had to support her was a tragic loss.⁹⁵ A large crowd was with her and Jesus had compassion on her (vs.12–13). Then Jesus touched the open coffin and said, “Young man, I say to you, arise” (vs.14). This effective act of ministry began with compassion for the widow, followed by Jesus taking authority over death, then the young man’s speaking; as Jesus presented him to his mother

⁹⁴ Barnes, *Psalms*, 3:164.

⁹⁵ Mark L. Strauss, *Luke*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 69.

(vs.15). Jesus dealt with the most fundamental obstacle we will ever face as God promises to restore to life those who follow Him.⁹⁶

Martha and Mary, sisters of Lazarus, sent word to Jesus that their brother was sick. When Jesus arrived, Lazarus was dead and had been in the tomb for four days (John 11:17). The Jewish custom was to bury the dead as soon as possible after death, believing that the spirit left the body on the third day.⁹⁷ Martha said, “if you had been here, my brother would not have died. But even now I know that whatever you ask of God, God will give you” (John 11:21–22). Jesus told her, “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live. And whoever lives and believes in Me shall never die” (vs.25–26). Mary came weeping, along with the Jews with her, and repeated Martha’s greeting and Jesus wept (vs.32–35). Jesus went to the tomb with them and had the stone rolled away, when Martha said, “Lord, by this time there is a stench, for he has been dead four days” (vs.39). Jesus said, “Did I not say to you that if you would believe you would see the glory of God?” (vs.40). Jesus lifted up His eyes and cried with a loud voice, “Lazarus come forth“ (vs.43). Lazarus walked out of the tomb in his graveclothes (vs.44)! What a miracle! Jesus came alongside Martha and Mary and grieved with them and wept with them, before performing the life-giving miracle. This was a demonstration of God’s love that we too can come to know in times of trial and grief.⁹⁸ “Many of the Jews who had come to Mary, and had seen the things Jesus did, believed in Him” (vs.45).

Jesus’ cry of “Lazarus come forth” was a fulfillment of John 5:25, “the hour is coming, and now is, when the dead will hear the voice of the Son of God; and those who hear will live.”

⁹⁶ Bock, *Luke*, 208.

⁹⁷ Andreas J. Köstenberger, *John*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 115.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

It was not fulfillment of John 5:28 that “all” in the grave will hear his voice, which will occur on the last day. Jesus, the Son of God, has such great authority that had He not specified *Lazarus*, all the tombs would have given up their dead to resurrection life.⁹⁹ Jesus is the first fruits of the resurrection, therefore Lazarus resurrection was a resurrection to mortality, not immortality, as Lazarus would die again later. Some theologians describe this resurrection of Lazarus as resuscitation, being only “a pale anticipation of what was yet to come.”¹⁰⁰ No description is given of Lazarus’ illness, his descent into life after death, or his renewal back to the continuation of mortality. The raising of Lazarus is the climax of signs serving as manifestations of the glory of God in the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ,¹⁰¹ and can only be a pale anticipation of the resurrection of Jesus, yet to come.¹⁰²

Death of Christ

“Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the scriptures” was written by Paul in 1 Corinthians 15:3–4. Volumes have been written about the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, so I will not examine the details of His death, but will examine His final words and what biblical writers wrote about His afterlife.

Matthew wrote “ἀφῆκεν (aphēken) τὸ (to) πνεῦμα (pneuma),” glossed as “Yielded up His spirit” (27:50). This phrase with the aorist indicative active verb “ἀφῆκεν (aphēken) may suggest that Jesus voluntarily gave up His life (for the idea cf. John 10:17–18).¹⁰³ John writes

⁹⁹ D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1991), 418.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 419.

¹⁰¹ F. F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 249.

¹⁰² Carson, *John*, 419.

¹⁰³ France, *Matthew*, 1078.

that Jesus final words were, “It is finished” (27:30), followed by, “παρέδωκεν (paredōken) τὸ (to) πνεῦμα (pneuma) He gave up his spirit.” This phrase could also be translated as, “He handed over His spirit to God.”¹⁰⁴ These writings are comparable to Luke 23:46, “Father, into your hands I commit My spirit.” Luke used the verb παρατίθεμαι (paratithemai) meaning commit, to place alongside, or to present by implication. These writings refer to the parable of the Good Shepherd in John 10 where Jesus says “I lay down my life for the sheep” (vs.15) and “I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again” (vs.17–18). The resurrection of Jesus is described in all four gospels and even Josephus, the historian wrote, “There was about this time, Jesus, a wise man, if it be lawful to call him a man...He was [the] Christ; and when Pilate had condemned him to the cross, those that loved him at the first did not forsake him, for he appeared to them alive again the third day, as the divine prophets had foretold these and ten thousand other wonderful things concerning him.”¹⁰⁵

The thief on the cross, next to the dying Jesus, recognized His divinity and asked Jesus to remember him. Jesus told the repentant thief on the cross, “*Today* you will be with Me in *Paradise*” (Luke 23:43). Swindoll references to this verse as, “the presence of the Lord in a place of peace and paradise.”¹⁰⁶ The KJV and every modern translation translates this first word as “today.” *Today* is translated from σήμερον (sēmeron), meaning today, this day, now, at

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Josephus, “The Antiquities of the Jews,” 379.

¹⁰⁶ Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: 1 & 2 Corinthians* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2017), 235.

present, or present day.¹⁰⁷ Waters writes this is a reference to the *very day*, not another day.¹⁰⁸

The thief on the cross went with Jesus to *Paradise* that *day*.

Jesus did not tell the thief that he would go to heaven (οὐρανὸς ouranos). He used the Greek word Παραδείσω (Paradeisō), glossed as *Paradise*. This word is of Persian and Greek origin and was used by Greek writers of the Septuagint (LXX). It was used to describe the Garden of Eden in Gen. 2:8 and a garden by a river in Numbers 24:6. To the Jews, *paradise* signified the eternal place of bliss for the righteous dead.¹⁰⁹ Myths from surrounding nations present Paradise as a place of blessedness, where the gods lived and where distinguished humans went to in the afterlife. The word is used forty-six times in the LXX, mostly as translations of the Hebrew words meaning “garden,” with the reference being to the garden of God, with the Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge contained therein. Jewish writers speculated about *Paradise*, e.g., hidden at the edge of the earth, on a high mountain, in heaven, or the abode of the righteous in the intermediate state before resurrection. *Paradise* is used only three times in the NT (Luke 23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4; Rev. 2:7) and essentially becomes the intermediate state or afterlife in fellowship with Christ Jesus in contemporary Christian thought (cf. Acts 7:56; 2 Cor. 5:8; Phil. 1:23).¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ William D. Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 413.

¹⁰⁸ Larry J. Waters, “*The Believer’s Intermediate State after Death*” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 169, no. 675 (July 2012): 283–303.

¹⁰⁹ Strauss, *Luke*, 177.

¹¹⁰ Verlyn D. Verbrugge, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000), 434.

The word *Paradise* was well used by the Jews and Greeks referring to pleasure gardens of the rich and royalty. The Sadducees were a sect of Judaism that were wealthy and priestly.¹¹¹ They felt that their wealth was well-deserved due to their “superior morality” and they were entitled to the splendors of life. They also believed life ended with death and did not hesitate to spend their wealth on comforts, including pleasure gardens. They ignored biblical writings that referred to the resurrection and preferred the books of Job, Ecclesiastes, and the apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus, which did not contain references to the afterlife or resurrection. The Sadducees were traditional aristocracy and their wealth allowed them to create pleasurable gardens in their estates. These gardens often included walks and pools, in addition to beautiful gardens and botanical formations. The Greeks did the same with walls around their gardens. The wealthy named their pleasure gardens *Paradise*. King Herod had large architecturally designed gardens with pools for beauty and recreation, so both Jews and Greeks referred to them as *Paradise*.¹¹²

The affluent Sadducees did not need “eternal life” as they were sufficiently occupied with the pleasures of this life. Josephus, the Jewish historian, compared them to the aristocratic Epicureans from the Greek culture.¹¹³ They were so busy enjoying the good life that they ignored any effort to convince them of an afterlife. The word *Paradise* thus became the best way to describe a beautiful abundant blissful afterlife. The Lord speaking to the prophet Ezra said, “because you have humbled yourself...you will receive the greatest glory...it is for you that *paradise* is opened, the tree of life is planted, the age to come is prepared, plenty is provided, a city is built, rest is appointed, goodness is established and wisdom perfected beforehand” (2

¹¹¹ Segal, *Life After Death*, 376.

¹¹² Ibid., 376–78.

¹¹³ Ibid., 378.

Esdras 8:49–52 NRSV).¹¹⁴ The Lord continues to expand the blessings of *paradise* to Ezra saying that the root of evil is sealed up from you, illness is banished, death is hidden, Hades has fled,¹¹⁵ corruption has been forgotten, sorrows have passed away, and immortality is made manifest (2 Esdras 8:53 NRSV). Bock writes that *paradise* is the place of the righteous that Jesus refers to as the place that He and the repentant thief will depart to “that very day,”¹¹⁶ Paradise was the most vivid description of the afterlife that Jesus could reveal to the repentant thief to ensure him that he would accompany Jesus to the realm of forgiveness and transcendent contentment.

Paul writes about Jesus’ afterlife in Ephesians 4, “When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men” (vs. 8). This is a quote from Psalm 68:18 with the change of “You have received gifts among men” to “gave gifts to men.” Paul here appears to be citing an early Aramaic version of the psalm (preserved in a Targum—a written Aramaic translation of the Old Testament) that contains “he gave.”¹¹⁷ The “have received gifts” was referenced in OT times to the receiving of the law by Moses and the Targum “he gave gifts” referred to the giving of the law by Yahweh to Moses, then to the people. Paul quoted this text because it was significant as the Jews heard this verse read aloud each year at Pentecost. Since Paul was writing about spiritual gifts, he referenced this verse from Psalm 68 as it identifies God’s greatness and awesome power.¹¹⁸ Hoehner writes that Paul changed the Psalm 68:18

¹¹⁴ Second Esdras is an apocryphal book, also known as 4 Ezra, written in Hebrew around AD 100 It is included in the Slavonic & Russian Orthodox Bibles, Latin Vulgate Appendix, 1611 KJV Apocrypha, Eastern Orthodox Bibles, NRSV Bible, and Anglican Book of Common Prayer. It is not included in the Hebrew OT or most Protestant Bibles. Quotations are taken from New Revised Standard Version with Apocrypha (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977).

¹¹⁵ *Hades*, glossed from ᾗδης (*hadē*), is the Greek understanding of the afterlife, comparable to *Sheol* in the Hebrew Bible. Like *Sheol*, it is sometimes translated as “hell” or a place of torment or punishment.

¹¹⁶ Bock, *Luke*, 596.

¹¹⁷ Clinton E. Arnold, Frank S. Thielman, and S. M. Baugh, *Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 27.

pericope to make it applicable to the present Ephesian context, declaring that the referenced gifts are of a spiritual nature and are given to the believers in the Ephesian assembly and by application to believers down through the ages.¹¹⁹

Paul continues in vs. 9, “Now this, “He ascended”—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth?” “It is best to understand this as a reference to the underworld (or *Hades*). Christ went there following His death on the cross to proclaim His victory to the imprisoned powers of darkness.”¹²⁰ (cf. 1 Peter 3:19). When Christ returns to earth, every knee will bow before Him as recorded in Philippians 2:9–10, “Therefore God has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

“He who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fulfill all things” (Eph. 4:10). Jesus’ descent is recorded in 1 Peter 3:18-20, “For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just for the unjust, that He might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient, when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah.” These verses describe the three days Jesus’ body lay in the tomb, prior to His resurrection. His spirit taught the disobedient spirits that lived during Noah’s day, but were now dead. These “spirits in prison” are one of the three separations of spirits described by Enoch, as he saw “the spirits of the sons of men who were dead” (Enoch 22:5). Enoch writes in 22:9,

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002).

¹²⁰ Arnold, Thielman, and Baugh, *Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 27.

“Three separations have been made between the spirits of the dead.”¹²¹ The angel, Raphael said, “These places, in which they dwell, shall they occupy until the day of judgment” (Enoch 22:4). There were only eight righteous followers of Yahweh in the days of Noah, so many of the people never heard about the Lord, but followed the rest of the unbelievers to their death. These disobedient spirits were taught the gospel by Jesus Christ’s spirit while His body lay in the tomb.

First Peter 3:18–20 is explained in 1 Peter 4:6, “For this reason the gospel was preached also to those who are dead, that they might be judged according to men in the flesh, but live according to God in the spirit.” *Imprisoned spirits* are those people that are held in bondage due to their lusts for sin. In 1 Peter 3:18–20, Jesus descends to Hades to preach the gospel to the imprisoned spirits that lived in the days of Noah. In Noah’s day the earth was filled with disobedient people, with only eight persons being saved from the flood. With such widespread evil and disobedience many of the people never heard of Yahweh and the Law. Jesus went there to teach the gospel to people that had never heard it. The repentant thief on the cross went there as well, as his *Paradise* was to hear the gospel taught by the Savior Himself (Luke 23:43).

Ephesians 4:8 is also a partial fulfillment of Isaiah 42:7, “To open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the prison, those who sit in darkness from the prison house.” Beyer writes, “The covenant of people and the light to the Gentiles that the servant brought included special blessings (42:7). Blind eyes would see, and captives would be released from prison.”¹²² “Captives released from prison” refers to Christ liberating those in bondage to sin, which He did in his earthy ministry and continued after His death. The adversary and his followers believed they could stop Jesus from liberating the sinful captives held in bondage by putting Christ to death.

¹²¹ Laurence, *The Book of Enoch*, 26.

¹²² Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah*, 177.

They did not realize that Christ's death did not mean an end to His ministry, but only a change in venue.

That Christ preached to the spirits in prison after His death and before His resurrection is a difficult passage to explain and not all theologians accept it. Marshall writes that this is the commonly accepted view, but he offers two alternative explanations. One is that Jesus made this visit to the spirits in prison after His resurrection. Another interpretation is that Christ's spirit was active in Noah, and empowered him to preach righteousness.¹²³ These interpretations do not involve "Life Immediately After Death" therefore I will not elucidate on them here. For further information see the note below or the bibliography.

Early Christians (c. AD 200) developed the Apostle's Creed as a summary of the apostle's teachings and it reached its present form about the sixth or seventh century.¹²⁴ It reads, "(Jesus) suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried; He descended into hell; on the third day, He rose again from the dead; He ascended into Heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father Almighty." The version presently used by the Roman Catholic Church reads "He descended to the dead."¹²⁵ This is early Christian theology, showing the belief that Christ's spirit descended to Hades, while His body lay in the tomb.

A variety of scholars interpret Ephesians 4:9 as a reference to Jesus' descent into Hades along with 1 Peter 3:18-21, creating two references to Christ's descent into Hades while His body lay in the tomb.¹²⁶ A second interpretation of Psalm 68:18 is a reference to the ascension, which

¹²³ I. Howard Marshall, *1 Peter*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 122–28.

¹²⁴ "Apostles' Creed, accessed April 25, 2024, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Apostles-Creed>.

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Stephen E. Fowl, *Ephesians: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012), 138.

can only come to light through the incarnation, but it does not answer the gloss of Ephesians 4:9 “descended into the lower parts of the earth.” Ephesians 4:10 tells us that He who descended is also the one who ascended, describing Jesus’ descent into Hades, followed by His resurrection on the third day. Given the context of Ephesians 4, the claim in verse 10 becomes an extraordinary assertion of the identity of Son and Spirit.”¹²⁷ The interpretation of Psalm 68:18 to the incarnation does not accommodate Ephesians 4:9 “He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth.”

Ephesians 4:10 expands on verses 8 and 9, “He who descended is also the one who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.” Verse 8 tells us “He led captivity captive,” meaning He led Satan and his followers or those spirits formerly led by Satan that now accept the Savior and have become liberated and captive to His gospel teachings.¹²⁸ This is a fulfillment of Isaiah 49:25, “Even the captives of the mighty shall be taken away, and the prey of the terrible be delivered; for I will contend with him who contends with you, and I will save your children.” Oswalt writes, “God responds again that He has not cast them off and has the power to restore them...The focus is now on return to God, and Isaiah is speaking figuratively about a worldwide response to God’s reconciliation through the work of the servant.”¹²⁹

Paul makes a Christological interpretation of Psalm 68:18 where Christ receives gifts, the souls of formerly rebellious persons, then writes in Ephesians 4:8 that He gave gifts, the correct teachings of the gospel and the Holy Spirit. “That He might fill all things” (vs. 10) is a reference to Christ teaching both the living and the dead and elucidates His great power as expressed in the book of Ephesians.

¹²⁷ Ibid., 139.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 137.

¹²⁹ Oswalt, *Isaiah*, 554.

Other New Testament Teachings

In Luke 16, Jesus tells the story of a selfish rich man and a humble beggar named Lazarus. The rich man died and was buried. Lazarus also died and the angels carried him to *Abraham's bosom*. The rich man was in torment and saw Lazarus in Abraham's bosom. He cried out, asking Abraham to send Lazarus with a bit of water for he was tormented in the flames. Abraham replied that it was impossible because there was a gulf between them; as Enoch described in 22:9. Then he asked Abraham to send Lazarus to his brother's house to warn them so they would not also go to this place of torment. Abraham told him that if they did not listen to Moses and the prophets, they would not listen to one that rose from the dead. Strauss writes that this is also a veiled reference to the Jewish religious leaders who are rejecting the OT prophecies concerning Jesus the Messiah.¹³⁰ Osborne continues by anointing this story as an allegory, with the rich man representing the Pharisees, who love money, and the poor Lazarus, who symbolizes the poor downtrodden sinners that the Pharisees look down on.¹³¹ He continues that this story represents all that we do with our resources to serve God and others is repaid to us when we reach the afterlife, which is permanent, because what we do in this life determines how we will spend eternity.¹³²

Here is an example of a humble believer returning to God, as described in Ecclesiastes 12:7. It is another example of the gospel being preached to the dead, as recorded in 1 Peter 4:6; only this time the preacher is Abraham, instead of Jesus, and the afterlife is labeled *Abraham's Bosom* instead of *Paradise*. We also learn that angels carry the spirit of humble persons, after

¹³⁰ Strauss, *Luke*, 136.

¹³¹ Grant R. Osborne, *Luke: Verse by Verse* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2018), 266.

¹³² *Ibid.*

death, to their place of reward in the afterlife. The Jews in Jesus' day considered the place of the afterlife for righteous believers to be the *bosom of Abraham* or a *paradise* and they subscribed to the teaching that the spirit of a righteous person was carried there by divine angels; these angels being ministering spirits sent to escort those who are heirs of salvation (Heb.1:14).

Stephen, the first recorded martyr in the New Testament following Jesus, saw a vision before his death, "But he being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, 'Look! I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God'" (Acts 7:55–56). *Heaven* in this passage is translated from οὐρανὸν (ouranon), an accusative masculine singular noun, and the plural, οὐρανός (ouranous), meaning to cover or encompass, as the heavens cover the earth, including the atmosphere and clouds, or spiritually expressive as the abode of God and angels.¹³³ *Heaven* is the term for the place where New Testament Christians believed God and Jesus dwelt. This is also the only New Testament occurrence of the title "the Son of Man" outside the Gospels.¹³⁴ Stephen's statement reminds us of a similar statement made by Jesus when the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?" and Jesus replied, "I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power and coming on the clouds of heaven" (Mark 14:61–62). For that statement Jesus was adjudged guilty of blasphemy and worthy of death (14:63–64).

Isaiah, Matthew, the author of Hebrews, and John described *heaven* as the throne of God (Isa. 66:1; Matt. 5:34; Heb. 8:1; Rev. 4–5). The *heavens* open and the spirit of God descends like a dove and rest on Jesus at His baptism and a voice from *heaven* declares, "This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:16–17). Jesus, speaking of the Parousia, said, "they

¹³³ Mounce, *The Analytical Lexicon to the Greek New Testament*, 345.

¹³⁴ Ajith Fernando, *Acts*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 260.

will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of *heaven* with power and great glory” (Matt. 24:30). Now, Stephen challenged that judgment by affirming that Jesus is the glorious Christ and is now at the right hand of God and the Sanhedrin had no choice but to condemn Stephen to death too, unless they were willing to admit they were wrong about their verdict on Jesus. This vision gave Stephen courage: He is not wrong in the path he has taken and this cause will triumph.¹³⁵

Then the Jews stoned him and he “fell asleep” (Acts 7:60). This is the description of Stephen’s death. Segal writes regarding Stephen’s death, “Stephen’s spirit enters heaven and is welcomed by the enthroned Son of Man.”¹³⁶ This statement is not recorded in Acts but is Segal’s description of Stephen’s life immediately after death, and he offers no explanation for it except to write, “It is not possible to know exactly what is implied by this simple declarative narration.”¹³⁷ *Fall asleep* is a common description of death in the NT. See John 11:11 where Jesus describes Lazarus’ death as *Lazarus sleeps* or Acts 13:36 where David’s death is described as *fell asleep*, or Matt. 9:24 where Jesus tells the wailing crowd, “the girl is not dead, but *sleeping*.” Paul describes some that have passed away in I Cor. 15:5 as “Some have *fallen asleep*,” and in 15:20 describing Christ risen from the dead “and has become the first fruits of those that have *fallen asleep*,” and promises that some will be changed, “We shall not all *sleep*, but we shall all be changed” (I Cor. 15:51). In 1 Thessalonians 4:15–16, Paul writes that those who remain until the coming of the Lord will not “precede those who are *asleep*... and the dead in Christ will rise first.” Then vs.17 reveals that believers will always “be with the Lord.”

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Segal, *Life After Death*, 481.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

Barnes writes, “He fell asleep - This is the usual mode of describing the death of saints in the Bible. It is an expression indicating (1) the "peacefulness" of their death, compared with the alarm of sinners, (2) The hope of a resurrection; as we retire to sleep with the hope of again awaking to the duties and enjoyments of life.”¹³⁸ “He fell asleep” was a common expression among the Jews to signify the death of good men. But this sleep is not attributable to the soul, but to the body; for he had commended his spirit to the Lord Jesus, while Stephen’s body was overwhelmed with the stones the mob cast on him.¹³⁹ Stephen’s final words were “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit. Lord, do not charge them with this sin” (Acts 7:59–60). This was a recall of Psalm 31:5, “Into your hand I commit my spirit.” Stephen’s last words were almost a replay of Christ’s last words, “Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do” (Luke 23:34), and “Father, into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46). Jesus and Stephen modeled Jesus’ commandment to “love your enemies...and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High” (Luke 6:35).

Paul, writing around AD 58 about himself, states, “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago—whether in the body I do not know; or out of the body I do not know, God knows—such a one was caught up to the *third heaven*...he was caught up into *Paradise* and heard *inexpressible* words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter” (2 Cor. 12:2–4, emphasis added). This would have placed Paul’s vision a few years after his conversion. The understanding here is that Paul was suddenly taken into *Paradise*, but why did he describe it as the *third heaven*?

¹³⁸ Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament: Acts*, accessed October 27, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/acts/7.htm>.

¹³⁹ Adam Clarke, *Clarke’s Commentary: Acts*, accessed January 27, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/clarke/acts/7.htm>.

The OT concepts of *heaven* contain certain aspects of ANE cosmology, e.g., *Sheol*, (the underworld), the earth, and heaven, together, form a cosmic building with *heaven* being the starry firmament in the sky. This Jewish concept derives from the LXX, that heaven consists of several spheres with Yahweh dwelling in the highest sphere, along with the angels (Matt. 5:16; 22:30).¹⁴⁰ God is said to dwell “in heaven” and is referred in the OT as the “God of heaven,” and in Revelation 11:13 *heaven* is described as “God’s throne.” Heaven is above and there are angels in heaven that serve as God’s messengers and appear in visions to John. Dark and evil vanishes from heaven so “it becomes a world of pure light.”¹⁴¹

Pseudepigrapha, apocryphal, and rabbinic writings speak of one, three, five, seven, or ten heavens. These books are not canonical in most Protestant Bibles, but expand upon certain biblical principles, (e.g. the third heaven). They also provide insight into the cultural and religious beliefs of the Jews during the second temple period (516 BC–70 AD). 1 Enoch, 4 Esdras, and 2 Baruch know only one heaven, the Testament of Levi describes three heavens, 3 Baruch, 2 Enoch, Apocalypse of Zephaniah, and Testament of Abraham describe five heavens, Vision of Isaiah (chapters 6–11 of Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah) describes seven heavens,¹⁴² 2 Enoch describes Enoch’s journey to the seven heavens, where he sees God on his throne in the tenth heaven, after which he is shown the eighth, ninth, and tenth heavens by the angels, Gabriel and Michael.¹⁴³ *Paradise* is described as being in the third heaven in 2 Enoch

¹⁴⁰ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg, and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Victoria, BC: Trafford, 2005), 288.

¹⁴¹ Verbrugge, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 423.

¹⁴² James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1985), 164–76.

¹⁴³ Idem., ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1983), 110–40.

8:1–8, the Assumption of Moses 37, as well as 2 Corinthians 12:2–4 in the NT, but rabbinic tradition locates it in the seventh heaven.¹⁴⁴

Jewish writings speak of seven heavens, e.g., “And the angel who was sent to show him (the vision) was not of this firmament, nor was he from the angels of glory of this world, but he came from the seventh heaven (Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah 6:13–14).”¹⁴⁵ The seventh through the ninth chapters of this writing describe Isaiah’s vision journey through the seven heavens, with increasing glory as he proceeds from the first heaven to the seventh.¹⁴⁶

In the seventh heaven, Isaiah describes seeing the righteous from the time of Adam onward, angels, and wonderful light, and describes Abel and Enoch like angels who stand in great glory. An angel told him that the Beloved will descend into the world in the last days, will die, then ascend into the seventh heaven (Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah 9:6–18; cf. Matt. 27:50–28:20; Mark 15:37–16:19; Luke 23:46–24:51; John 19:30–21:14; Acts 1:9). Another angel showed Isaiah the *Book of Life*, which contained the deeds of the children of Israel, and told him that nothing which has been done in the world is hidden in the seventh heaven (Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah 9:21–23). This pseudepigrapha writing is not canonical and does not have the authority of Scripture, but is confirmed by the Great White Throne Judgment found in Revelation 20:12, “And I saw the dead, small and great, standing before God, and the

¹⁴⁴ Verbrugge, *New International Dictionary*, 422.

¹⁴⁵ “Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah” is not canonical, but is studied by theologians, and alluded to in Hebrews 11:37 “they were sawn in two” referring to Isaiah’s martyrdom. This writing is from the second century BC to the fourth century AD. It is a composite writing, consisting of the martyrdom and vision of Isaiah. The “Vision of Isaiah” is a Christian work describing Isaiah’s journey through the seven heavens. The original work of the “Ascension of Isaiah” was in Greek or Hebrew, then translated into Greek, then several different languages, including Ethiopic, which is the only language in which the entire writing has become extant. See Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 2:165–72.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid.

books were opened. And another *book* was opened which is the *Book of Life*. And the dead were judged according to their works, by the things which were written in the books.” This writing is further confirmed by Daniel 7:9–10, “I watched as the thrones were put in place, and the Ancient of Days was seated ... a thousand thousands ministered to Him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him, The court was seated, and the *books* were opened.”

Paul’s journey of the third heaven in 2 Corinthians 12: 2–4 is confirmation of multiple heavens in Scripture and early Jewish writings. The concept of multiple heavens provides a structured understanding of the afterlife and enhances the thoughts of living eternally with God the Father and our Savior Jesus Christ. The concept of multiple heavens stimulates Christians to achieve a higher level of obedience and spirituality and thus attain a greater glory and intimacy with God.

The Greek verb used in 2 Corinthians 12:2–4 is ἀρπάζω (*harpazō*), meaning to *seize*, *carry away*, or *snatch up*. It is used here metamorphically to mean “seize eagerly,”¹⁴⁷ and is glossed as *caught up*—he was “caught up to the third heaven”—he was “caught up into Paradise.” This indicates he was involuntarily taken to Paradise, as if by a great spiritual force. He heard ἄρρητα (*arrēta*) *inexpressible* words, which may either mean what cannot be spoken, or what ought not to be spoken, meaning Paul could not attempt by words to do justice to what he saw and heard in Paradise. It was common among the Jews in NT times to consider the heavens divided into three divisions; “(1) the aerial, including the clouds and the atmosphere, the heavens above us, until we come to the stars, (2) the starry heavens, the heavens in which the sun, moon, and stars appear to be situated, and (3) the heavens beyond the stars. That heaven was believed to be the residence of God, of angels, and of holy spirits. It was this upper heaven, the dwelling-

¹⁴⁷ Zodiates, *Hebrew-Greek Keyword Study Bible*, 2045.

place of God, to which Paul may have referred, and whose wonders he was permitted to behold - this region where God dwelt; where Christ was seated at the right hand of the Father, and where the spirits of the just were assembled.¹⁴⁸ Swindoll referred to this as, “the ‘spiritual realm,’ a plane of reality accessible only by invitation, like the one the apostle John received in Revelation 4:1.”¹⁴⁹

The Pseudepigrapha Book of 2 Enoch does show the third heaven as the place of *Paradise*, but not the residence of God.¹⁵⁰ 2 Enoch 7 is about angels taking Enoch to the second heaven where there is darkness, weeping, and torment. Those here are ones who turned away from the Lord. 2 Enoch 8 is about the taking of Enoch to the third heaven, where *Paradise* is located. It was prepared for the righteous who carry out righteous judgment, give bread to the hungry, and clothe the naked. In 2 Enoch 10, he is shown the northern heaven, a frightful place with cruel darkness, torture, and torment. This place is reserved for those who do not glorify God, who practiced on earth the sin against nature; homosexuality, sex with children, witchcraft, enchantments, divinations, trafficking with demons, stealing, lying, insulting, coveting, resentment, fornication, and murder. In chapter 18, Enoch is shown the fifth heaven where giants, after descending to the earth, had taken the daughters of men and acted lawlessly, practicing miscegenation, creating great evil, and conceiving giants (cf. Gen. 6:1–4). They were dejected and miserable, similar to those residing in the second heaven. In chapter 19, Enoch saw archangels who preside over all the angels. Their faces were more brilliant than the sun, they

¹⁴⁸ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament: 2 Corinthians*, accessed May 26, 2024, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/2_corinthians/12.htm.

¹⁴⁹ Swindoll, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, 466.

¹⁵⁰ Second Enoch, or the *Slavonic Apocalypse of Enoch*, is an amplification of Genesis 5:21–32. The first part describes how Enoch was taken up and shown the seven heavens. There are twenty extant manuscripts with only a few being complete. Greek may have been the original language, before the Slavonic translation, and its provenance was attributed to Alexandria in the first century AD.

studied astronomy, and they recorded all the deeds of humans on the earth. Next, Enoch was shown the seventh heaven with a great light, armies of archangels, and a distant view of God, called in the Hebrew *Aravoth*.

Then Gabriel put Enoch in front of the face of the Lord in the eighth heaven (Called *Muzaloth*). Next, he saw the ninth heaven (Kukhavim) where the heavenly houses of the twelve zodiacs are. In chapter 22, Michael the archangel, brought Enoch in front of the face of the Lord in the tenth heaven. There, the Lord said, “Let Enoch join in and stand in front of my face forever.” Enoch said, “I had become like one of his glorious ones,” and he recorded that “all the souls are prepared for eternity, before the composition of the earth” (2 Enoch 23). God spoke to Enoch face to face (2 Enoch 24).

2 Enoch is not canonical and authoritative, is studied by theologians studying early Jewish literature, but supports the vision story of *Paradise* and the *third heaven* by Paul in 2 Corinthians 12. Enoch’s journey in Chapter 20 of 2 Enoch is similar to John the Revelator’s vision in Revelation 4:1. Both Enoch and John saw the Lord sitting on His throne in heaven. Enoch described angels with *six wings* and *many eyes* standing in front of the Lord, singing day and night, “Holy, Holy, Holy Lord Sabaoth, heaven and earth are full of his glory” (2 Enoch 20–21). John described creatures with *six wings* and *many eyes* saying, “Holy, holy, holy, Lord God Almighty, Who was and is and is to come!” (Rev. 4:8). Both writings describe this heavenly worship as ongoing, day and night, without end. Michaels writes, “To John the throne represents the power and majesty of the one setting on it, and everything else he sees is described in relation to this central throne ... What started as a heavenly tableau unfolding step by step before John’s eyes now becomes a scene of active worship and proclamation.”¹⁵¹ John described the Lord like

¹⁵¹ J. Ramsey Michaels, *Revelation*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1997), 91–92.

a jasper (opaque cryptocrystalline quartz) and a sardius stone (deep red gemstone) with a rainbow around the throne (Rev. 4:3). Enoch described the Lord's face as "iron made burning hot in a fire" and glowing with intense heat (2 Enoch 22).

The vision of the Ancient of Days in Daniel 7:9–14 is very similar and John was probably aware of it when he wrote his description of his vision. Both describe God sitting on a fiery throne, surrounded by creatures and angels, worshipping day and night (Dan. 7:9–10; Rev. 4:2–5). The *Son of Man* receives an everlasting kingdom in Daniel 7:13–14, and the *Lion of the Tribe of Judah* approaches the throne and is worshipped by the elders, angels, and creatures forever (Rev. 5:4–14). Daniel and John were spiritually enlightened, received wisdom, but also distressed at the scenes they witnessed (Dan. 7:15–16; Rev. 5:4–5). There are millions of angels, creatures, and elders worshipping the Lamb who was slain, singing, "For you were slain, and have redeemed us to God by your blood out of every tribe and tongue and people and nation, and have made us kings and priests to our God; and we shall reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:9–10), and saying, "Worthy is the Lamb who was slain" (vs. 12), and, "Blessing and honor and glory and power be to Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, forever and ever" (vs. 13). Daniel and John both describe the books being opened (Dan. 7:10; Rev. 5: 1–5) and the saints given authority to reign on the earth, "The saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and possess the kingdom forever" (Dan. 7:18), and "we shall reign on the earth" (Rev. 5:10), and "Then the kingdom and dominion, and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven, shall be given to the people, the saints of the Most High" (Dan. 7:27). Both authors write that God's kingdom is eternal (Dan. 7: 27; Rev. 5: 13). The two visions are so closely related that it appears both authors saw essentially the same vision, but recorded it differently.¹⁵²

¹⁵² G. K. Beale and David Campbell, *Revelation: A Shorter Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 96–97.

The vision of the Lord sitting on a throne is also recorded in Isaiah 6:1–3. The personal name for the God of Israel is יהוה (Yah-weh), used over 460 times by the prophet Isaiah, but here he uses the name אֲדֹנָי ('ă·dō·nāy) (Lord). The Israelites were concerned about using the name of God for fear of misusing His name. By the second temple period, they often substituted the Hebrew *Adonai* for *Lord*. This was a polite form of address to a stranger and is used to address one of higher social standing than oneself, or for a person speaking to a king or to God. Adonai is also used in early OT books as אֲדֹנָי יהוה ('ă·dō·nāy) יהוה Yah-weh (Lord God). Most English Bibles gloss *Adonai* as LORD, written in small capital letters.¹⁵³ When *adon* appears in the special plural form *adona[y]*, it always refers to God, not man, and appears over three hundred times in the OT. “Just as *Elohim* (God) is plural in Hebrew, so this word might also be called an intensive plural or plural of majesty.”¹⁵⁴ Like Daniel and John, Isaiah described the Lord sitting on a throne. Isaiah described the throne in the temple, whereas, Enoch and John described the place of the throne as in heaven. The worshipful seraphim are described in Isaiah 6: 2–3, and were similar to the creatures with six wings and many eyes in Revelation 4:6–8, and the seraphim of Enoch 20–21.

Paul’s vision is unprecedented. Never, before or since has any biblical person gone to *Paradise*, then returned, qualified to describe its beauty and serenity in a canonical biblical text.¹⁵⁵ Enoch and Elijah were taken up, but did not return (cf. Gen. 5:21–24; 2 Kings 2:11). Lazarus died and was resuscitated, but no description of the afterlife was ever recorded (cf. John

¹⁵³ David W. Baker, *Isaiah*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2013), 33.

¹⁵⁴ Robert L. Alden, “’ādôn,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, eds. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 13.

¹⁵⁵ Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament: 2 Corinthians*, accessed June 18, 2024, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/2_corinthians/12.htm.

11). Paul’s description of *Paradise* was recorded only by the brief description of ἄρρητα (*arrēta*) *inexpressible words*. Jesus did not describe the afterlife. We can here only speculate what Paul saw in *Paradise*. He heard *inexpressible words*—meaning either words that cannot be spoken or should not be spoken; Paul could not attempt to do justice by explaining what he saw and heard. Perhaps, he saw exalted glory, honor, and praise that he could not describe in words so he wrote, “which it is not lawful for a man to utter” (2 Cor. 12: 4).¹⁵⁶

We know that *Paradise* is the word chosen by Jesus, with His dying breath, to inform the repentant thief on the cross that he would accompany Jesus in the *afterlife*. *Paradise* was the name given to the beautiful botanical Jewish and Greek Gardens of the wealthy and famous. To live in *Paradise* with Yahweh, the source of truth, love, and joy, would be a sublime and transcendent experience; an unending journey filled with love and grace. It would be the ultimate fulfillment of human longing and would provide that “living water” that Jesus described (John 4:14). In this Paradisical glory the limitations, pain, and suffering of earth life would not exist. Jesus would be the *light of Paradise* and the *bread of life*.

The vision Paul had, so far surpasses what we can put into words, that he just described it as *inexpressible words*—words too sacred to be spoken, or unspeakable. Is it possible that the glory in heaven is so indescribable that if we knew what it was like, we would not be able to comprehend it? Or that we would end our life to get there? Swindoll writes, “So, when Paul described being caught up ‘to the third heaven ... into Paradise,’ he referred to his own, personal translation into a place in the spiritual realm, not to another planet or even another galaxy.”¹⁵⁷

¹⁵⁶ Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament: 2 Corinthians*, accessed August 3, 2024, https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/2_corinthians/12.htm.

¹⁵⁷ Swindoll, *1 & 2 Corinthians*, 467.

Paul did not write to boast in his own experiences so he wrote in the third person, but most expositors believe he was speaking of his own personal experience. Paul’s inexpressible experience “was so extraordinary that he couldn’t tell if it had occurred while still in his physical body or outside his body” (2 Cor. 12:2).¹⁵⁸

John was banished to the Isle of Patmos, where he received a vision of Christ, who told him, “ἔχω τὰς κλεῖς τοῦ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ ᾗδου—meaning, “I have the keys of Death and Hades” (Rev. 1:18). ᾗδου (*Hades*) is the Greek translation of *Sheol*, the under the earth world where the dead remain until the resurrection.¹⁵⁹ Θανάτου (*Thanatos*) *death* refers to the death of the body, but often carries the sense of destruction, misery, and exclusion from the presence of God.¹⁶⁰ κλεῖς (*kleis*) *keys* refers to the power to open and to shut, the word κλείς is figuratively used to denote power and authority of various kinds,¹⁶¹ and specifically in this verse, power over the bodies and souls of men. Keys is used as a metaphor for authority and is used in Revelation 9:1 and 20:1 as angelic authority and in Matthew 16:19 where Jesus gives authority to Peter. Because Jesus is resurrected, He now has power over death and the grave.¹⁶²

Antipas, the *faithful martyr* was killed in Pergamos (also known as Pergamum), which John described as Satan’s throne (Rev.2:13). Antipas was possibly the first Christian martyr in Asia and Pergamos housed the famous pagan temple to Asklepius, the Greek god of healing, symbolized by a staff intertwined with a snake.¹⁶³ Worship of Asklepius was widespread and

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 468.

¹⁵⁹ Zodhiates, *Hebrew-Greek Keyword Study Bible*, 2003.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 2147.

¹⁶¹ *Thayer’s Greek Lexicon*, accessed May 25, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/greek/2807.htm>.

¹⁶² Mark W. Wilson, *Revelation*, Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 16.

included Greece, Turkey, and Asia Minor. His symbol of medicine and healing is still used today. There was persecution in Pergamos and Antipas was described as a *faithful martyr* that held fast to the name of Christ and did not deny the faith (vs.13). Since Antipas was the only martyr recorded, it indicates that persecution and martyrdom had not become universal in this part of Asia (now present-day Turkey).¹⁶⁴ John continued to describe the sinful condition of the people in Pergamos as followers of Balaam and the Nicolaitans that ate food sacrificed to idols and committed sexual immorality (vs.14–15).

John calls on them to repent and recounts the promise of the Spirit, “To him who overcomes I will give some of the hidden manna to eat. And I will give him a white stone, and on the stone a new name written which no one knows except him who receives it” (vs. 17). “*To him who overcomes*” is a reference to faithful followers of Christ that have overcome the world of sin, as recorded by Paul, “Overcome evil with good” (Rom.12:21).

Overcome is glossed from νικῶντι (nikōnti) the root νικά (nikao), meaning to *conquer*, be *victorious*, or to *prevail*. “For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:4). The NT use of νικά (nikao), meaning *to conquer*, references the conflict between God or Christ and the demonic powers.¹⁶⁵ Paul writes about overcoming death and the world through the redemptive power of Jesus Christ, “Death is swallowed up in victory” (1 Cor. 15:54). Then he asks the question, “O Death where is your sting? O Hades where is your victory?” (vs.55). Hosea 13:14 provides the answer, “I will ransom

¹⁶³ Michaels, *Revelation*, 75.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 77.

¹⁶⁵ Verbrugge, *New Testament Theology*, 387.

them from the power of the grave, I will redeem them from death,” and Paul continues, “But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:56). Christ’s *victory* over the world is signified by Jesus’ coming, suffering, resurrection, and return to the Father. The adversary has had his power restrained.¹⁶⁶ Speaking to John the revelator, Jesus said, “To him who overcomes I will give to eat from the tree of life, which is in the midst of the Paradise of God” (Rev.2:7).

In this life, we are often troubled by anxiety, dangers, persecution, challenges, and hardships, but these difficulties lose their power to control us when we recognize the *victory* given to us through the death, atonement, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (1 Cor. 15:56–57).¹⁶⁷ Paul gives us counsel in Romans 12, “Abhor what is evil. Cling to what is good. Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love ... bless those who persecute you ... repay no one evil for evil ... do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (vs.9–21). Those who overcome sin and the world, at death, are immediately admitted into the realm of *Paradise* with the Lord. This is the fulfillment of Ecclesiastes 12:7, “And the spirit will return to God who gave it.” John the revelator heard a voice from heaven proclaim, “And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There shall be no more pain” (Rev. 21:4). Then He who sat on the throne (vs.5) said, “I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be my son” (vs.6–7).

Manna, glossed from *mánva* refers to the food provided by Yahweh to the Israelites during the Exodus from Egypt. *Hidden manna* can be considered the food provided to the eternal

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

souls by God. This is spiritual food that will fulfill our longing for God and nourish our souls forever. Jesus spoke of it in John 6:32–35, “Moses did not give you the bread from heaven, but My Father gives you the true bread from heaven. For the bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world ... I am the bread of life. He who comes to me shall never hunger, and he who believes in Me shall never thirst.” Speaking of the *Bread of Life*, Jesus said, “Do not labor for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures to everlasting life, which the Son of Man will give you” (John 6:27). Barnes writes, “Will I give to eat of the hidden manna - The true spiritual food; the food that nourishes the soul. The idea is, that the souls of those who "overcame," or who gained the victory in their conflict with sin, and in the persecutions and trials of the world, would be permitted to partake of that spiritual food which is laid up for the people of God, and by which they will be nourished forever ... they will be admitted into the immediate presence of God, and nourished forever by the food of heaven—what the angels have; what the soul will need to sustain it there. Even in this world their souls may be nourished with this "hidden manna"; in heaven it will be their constant food forever.”¹⁶⁸

There is no consensus among scholars as to the meaning of this phrase “I will give him a *white stone*, and on the stone a *new name* written which no one knows except him who receives it” (Rev. 2:17). If I reported the interpretations of fifty expositors on this pericope, there would not be any agreement amongst them. Therefore, I will give my interpretation, as led by research and the spirit, and another by Barnes, and a third by Beale.

There were some uses for a white stone in antiquity, e.g., as a token of admission, a voting piece, a Christian amulet, an item used in the initiation into the service of Asclepius, and

¹⁶⁸ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament: Revelation*, accessed May 24, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/revelation/2.htm>.

as a writing surface for official edits.¹⁶⁹ The white stone may be a literal stone given to each person at the resurrection or it may be symbolic of an important message given to each person as they enter *Paradise*. The message is important and is a *new name* and no one knows it except the person receiving it. This would indicate that it is a *new name* for the person entering *Paradise* or the eternal resurrected world. Thereafter, he/she will not be known by the earthly name. It is not unusual for God to give a person a new name, e.g., Abram to Abraham (Gen. 17:5), Jacob to Israel (Gen. 32:28), Simon Peter to Cephas (meaning *Stone* John 1:42). Zion and Jerusalem will be given a new name—*Hephzibah* (My delight is in her) and *Beulah* (married) (see Isa. 62:2–4). Yahweh has made Zion into a bride of beauty, like a crown jewel in His hand (Isa. 62:3) with a new name (vs.2-4).¹⁷⁰ Jesus is described in John’s vision as riding on a white horse in heaven with “a name written that no one knew except Himself” (Rev. 19:12). In the following verse he states that “His name is called ‘The Word of God.’” Regardless of the interpretation, the *white stone* with the *new name* has significance in the new heaven and new earth and informs the person of new and meaningful information that will be vital in the kingdom of God.

Barnes writes, “the Saviour would give him who overcame a token of his favor which would have some word or name inscribed on it, and which would be of use to him alone, or intelligible to him only: that is, some secret token which would make him sure of the favor of his Redeemer, and which would be unknown to other people.”¹⁷¹ Beale’s interpretation is the white stone reinforces the statement of the manna being a heavenly reward, as the manna eaten on the exodus was the color of bdellium, a semi-clear white. As a white stone was used for admission in

¹⁶⁹ Wilson, *Revelation*, 26.

¹⁷⁰ Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah*, 234.

¹⁷¹ Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament: Revelation*, accessed May 24, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/revelation/2.htm>.

Israel, the white stone serves as admission to the Marriage Supper of the Lamb and the heavenly kingdom. The new name refers to receiving Jesus' victorious kingly name ... no one knows except himself (Rev. 19:12–16). The new name refers to being in the presence of God. Revelation 22:3–4 tells us, "His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads." The reception of this new name represents the Christian's final reward of attaining fellowship with Christ in the kingdom of God.¹⁷²

"And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days clothed in sackcloth (Rev. 11:3). "The word rendered "witnesses" - μάρτυσίν (martyisin) is that from which we have derived the word "martyr." " It means properly *one who bears testimony*."¹⁷³ The modern-day understanding of *martyr* is one who has given his life as a witness for the truth. The word as used here may refer to all those faithful saints that have testified to the truthfulness of the gospel of Christ. The number "two" may have been used because that is the number of witnesses that are required to testify to make a legal fact. Moses' law required that there be two witnesses to establish a fact in a trial. The number "two" also suggests that the number of valiant witnesses of Christ would be small, but sufficient.¹⁷⁴ Beale writes, "The two witnesses mentioned here who prophesy are not individuals, but rather represent the corporate church in its capacity as faithful prophetic witness to Christ."¹⁷⁵

The beast from the bottomless pit will make war with them and kill them; their bodies will lie in the street for three-and-a-half days (vs.8–9), then they will be resurrected and ascend

¹⁷² Beale, *Revelation*, 68–69.

¹⁷³ Albert Barnes, *Barnes' Notes on the New Testament: Revelation*, accessed May 24, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/revelation/2.htm>.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Beale, *Revelation*, 220.

to heaven in a cloud (vs.11–12). Their enemies see them ascend, there is a great earthquake that kills seven thousand, and the rest of the people repent and give glory to God. “This is the only passage in Revelation that may suggest a large-scale conversion before the Parousia.”¹⁷⁶

Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 2:9, “Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him.” Many biblical expositors have used this passage as a reference to eternal life with these words used to describe the state of the saints there. After all, eternal life with God the Father and Jesus Christ is a transcendent fulfillment of the human heart to live with the source of all truth, goodness, love, and beauty. The use of this passage to describe the promised reward for righteous living surpasses all human understanding, i.e., “eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man.” A preacher using these words will stir the deepest emotions in the human heart by revealing the depth of God’s infinite love.

However, vs. 10 says, “But God ἀπεκάλυψεν (apekalypsen) *has revealed* them to us through His Spirit. For the Spirit searches all things, yes, the deep things of God.” ἀπεκάλυψεν (apekalypsen) is an aorist indicative active verb, meaning it describes a simple past action focusing on the action itself without indicating whether it is ongoing or completed. ἀπεκάλυψεν (apekalypsen) then means that God has already revealed these things through the Holy Spirit or is in the process of revealing them to those that love Him. Thus, this spiritual knowledge has been and is being imparted to those who love God. To those that do not love God, these things have not been revealed, so that they remain in a *lost* state. Paul’s intention is not to describe the future state of the redeemed, but “to prove that those who are Christians have true wisdom (1 Corinthians 2:6-7); or that they have views of truth, and of the excellence of the plan

¹⁷⁶ Wilson, *Revelation*, 74.

of salvation which the world has not, and which those who crucified the Lord Jesus did not possess.”¹⁷⁷ He is describing, not only the happiness of Christians, but their views of the wisdom of the plan of salvation.

1 Corinthians 2:9 appears to paraphrase Isaiah 64:4, “Men have not heard nor perceived by the ear, nor has the eye perceived any God besides you,” but Fitzmyer writes, “Although the words quoted are introduced with the common formula used when an OT passage is cited, no one has been able to identify the exact source of the words.”¹⁷⁸ He writes that Ascension of Isaiah, Apocalypse of Elijah, and other pseudepigrapha books imitate what Paul has written.¹⁷⁹

Pseudepigrapha

Pseudepigrapha writings are not canonical in most Protestant Bibles but are included in some others. Four passages in three books of the NT refer to pseudepigrapha. Jude 14–15 refers to the Book of Enoch (or 1 Enoch). Jude 9 refers to a legend found in the Assumption of Moses (also known as the Testament of Moses), vs. 12–13. 2 Peter 2 incorporates much of the Assumption of Moses. Hebrews 11:37 summarizes Isaiah’s death from the Martyrdom and Ascension of Isaiah 5:1–15. Since pseudepigrapha are not canonical, they do not carry the authority of Biblical books, however, they are valuable in understanding the beliefs, culture, and religious practices of the Jews and developing Christianity in the second temple period.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Albert Barnes, *Barnes’ Notes on the New Testament: Revelation*, accessed May 24, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/barnes/revelation/2.htm>.

¹⁷⁸ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *First Corinthians*, Anchor Yale Bible Commentary (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), 177.

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁸⁰ Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, 1:ix.

The Testament of Adam (TOA) is a pseudepigrapha writing from second to fifth century AD. In section two of the TOA, the Prophecy, Adam provides information to his son, Seth, where the Lord is speaking to Adam, “I am consigning you to death, and the maggot and worm will eat your body “And I answered and said to Him, ‘Why, my Lord?’ And He said to me, “Because you listened to the words of the serpent, you and your posterity will be food for the serpent. But after a short time there will be mercy on you because you were created in my image, and I will not leave you to waste away in *Sheol* (Testament of Adam 3:2–3).¹⁸¹ This writing is consistent with and supportive of other biblical writings that *Sheol* is not a permanent state, (e.g., Ps. 20:3; Hos. 13:14; 1 Cor. 15:54–55).

The Vision of Ezra is a translation of a twelfth century manuscript preserved in the Vatican Library.¹⁸² Ezra was visited by the angels Michael and Gabriel who said to him, “Come into *heaven* ... and they crossed over in *Paradise*. And he saw many thousands of the just and their habitations were the most splendid of any time. And after this, he was lifted up into *heaven*, and he came to a multitude of angels ... and the Lord said, “And the elect are those who go into eternal rest on account of confession, penitence, and largesse in almsgiving.” And Ezra said, “Lord, what do the just do in order that they may not enter into judgment?” And the Lord said to him, “(just as) the servant who performed well for his master will receive liberty, so too (will) the just in the kingdom of heaven.” Amen. (Vision of Ezra 56–66).¹⁸³ Here the angels, Michael and Gabriel, invite Ezra into *heaven*. Then they cross over into *Paradise*, before being lifted up

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 994.

¹⁸² This extant translation of the *Vision of Ezra* is considered a translation of the original Greek and is considered to be a part of the eOT pseudepigrapha because it references the OT prophet Ezra and is affiliated with other Ezra-related pseudepigrapha, though it is not canonical. It parallels certain NT apocrypha and is thoroughly Christian.

¹⁸³ Ibid., 590.

into *heaven*. It is unclear from this passage whether *Paradise* is *heaven* or is a place on the pathway to *heaven*. This references back to Paul's writing in 2 Corinthians 12:2–4 referring to Paradise being in the third heaven.

In the Questions of Ezra,¹⁸⁴ the prophet asks, “What has God prepared for the righteous and the sinners?” The Angel of the Lord replied, “Great joy and eternal light have been prepared for the righteous and for the sinners there have been prepared the outer darkness and the eternal fire.” ...Ezra asked, “When the day of the end arrives and he (angel) takes the soul, will he assign to the place of punishment or to the place of honor until the Parousia?” The angel replied, “Do not wait until the end of the day, but like a flying eagle hasten to do good deeds and mercy. For that day is fearsome, urgent, and exacting” (Questions of Ezra, Recension A:2–13).

The Book of Jubilees is a Hebrew writing about matters revealed to Moses during the forty days he spent on Mt. Sinai (Exod. 24:18).¹⁸⁵ God's blessings on the righteous are described in chapter 23 and verse 31, “And their bones will rest in the earth, and their spirits will increase joy, and they will know that the Lord is an executor of judgment; but he will show mercy to hundreds and thousands, to all who love him.” This is an unusual text that specifies the spirit will increase in joy while the bones lie in the earth, meaning the *afterlife* before the resurrection begins. This same pericope is found in Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran MS 4Q176 21).¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁴ The “Questions of Ezra” was translated by M.E. Stone from Armenian apocrypha of AD 1208 (See *ibid.*). There is text sharing with the Greek 4 Ezra and resembles the Greek Apocalypse of Ezra. The central issue is the fate of souls after death and at the end of time. These writings are considered OT pseudepigrapha because they are related to other Ezra pseudepigrapha, though they are not canonical.

¹⁸⁵ See “Jubilees,” in *ibid.*, 2:102. The book of Jubilees or “Little Genesis” is an account revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai (Exod. 24:15–18) during the forty days visitation. It was originally written in Hebrew before 100 BC, and the earliest fragments found were at Qumran. This translation was by O. S. Wintermute and is not canonical.

¹⁸⁶ Segal, *Life After Death*, 355.

CHAPTER 5 CONCLUSION

Conclusion

For ancient Egyptians, “the afterlife was entered by ascending to the sky to join the gods, particularly the sun god in his journey across the sky.”¹⁸⁷ In Mesopotamia the netherworld was ruled by the gods. Before entering the seven-walled city, the deceased had to cross demon infested land. Many ANE texts paralleled the afterlife with sleep and did not connect one’s earthly life with the conditions of the afterlife. The people of the ANE influenced the culture and religious practices of the early Hebrews from the exodus. In ancient Israel the *cult of the dead* required certain rituals, including ancestral worship, that Moses forbade.¹⁸⁸ The OT prophets wrote of *Sheol*, the underworld, and understanding developed slowly, from Sheol being the place of all deceased, to being a place of judgment for the wicked and rewards for the righteous, as they await the resurrection.¹⁸⁹

The NT Jews were divided in their belief of the afterlife, just as Christians are divided today. Pharisees and Essenes in the NT believed the spirit is eternal, and in *Sheol* there are rewards and punishments, with the wicked confined in prison, and the righteous experiencing a bodily resurrection (Acts 23:8). The Sadducees reject the idea of Sheol, eternity of the soul, and bodily resurrection (Matt. 22: 23; Acts 23:8).¹⁹⁰ The Bible tells us that “the spirit will return to God who gave it” (Eccl. 12:7). Jesus spoke of the place of the spirit after death as *Paradise*

¹⁸⁷ Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 318.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 318–325.

¹⁸⁹ Terence Nichols, *Death and Afterlife: A Theological Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2010), 114–15.

¹⁹⁰ Josephus, “Antiquities of the Jews,” 376–377; *idem.*, “Wars of the Jews” in *Josephus Complete Works*, trans. William Whiston (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1973), 478.

(Luke 23:43). In the story of the rich man and Lazarus, the term *Abraham's Bosom* is used (Luke 16:22). "This term was used by the Jews indifferently, with "the garden of Eden," or "under the throne of glory," for the home of happy but waiting souls."¹⁹¹ Jesus described *Abraham's Bosom* in Matthew 8:11, "Many will come from east and west, and sit down with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of *heaven*." Jesus also described *heaven* as the place of residence of the "poor in spirit" (Matt.5:3) and those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake (Matt. 5:10). *πτωχοὶ* (ptōchoi) is translated as *poor* but may also be glossed as *poor in spirit*, destitute, or humble and devout person.¹⁹² Jesus is not speaking as the general social meaning, but as "poor in spirit," "based on OT and Jewish background, that people in affliction have confidence only in God."¹⁹³

Paul wrote that God's plan for humanity was a μυστήριον (mystērion) *mystery*, meaning that God's plan of salvation cannot be known except through God's ἀποκάλυψιν (apokalypsin) *revelation* (Eph. 3:3–4). God revealed this mystery to Paul and the other apostles and prophets by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 3:3–5). This revelation is that the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ was an atoning sacrifice for sin, whereby all mankind, Jews, and Gentiles, may be saved and become "partakers of His promise in Christ through the gospel" (Eph. 3:6). God has brought Jews and Gentiles together in one entity, united in Christ Jesus.¹⁹⁴

Paul also wrote that when Jesus died, "He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth" (Eph. 4:9). This was in harmony with the prevailing Jewish belief that the departed spirits

¹⁹¹ *Pulpit Commentary*, accessed May 23, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/luke/16-22.htm#lexicon>.

¹⁹² *Strong's Concordance*, accessed June 28, 2024, <https://biblehub.com/matthew/5-3.htm#lexicon>.

¹⁹³ Verbrugge, *New Testament Theology*, 504.

¹⁹⁴ Arnold, Thielman, and Baugh, *Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 22.

descended into the lower parts of the earth. As Jesus was dying, He told the repentant thief on the cross, “today you will be with Me in *Paradise*” (Luke 23:43), symbolizing forgiveness and fellowship with Christ. *Paradise* was seen by Paul in his vision of the third heaven and calls to mind a precious garden where the tree of life exists and glory is so overwhelming that he describes it as “inexpressible” (2 Cor. 12: 2–4).

Paradise was Jesus’ term for the immediate afterlife, as that was the common Jewish and Greek term for a place of transcendent, blissful, and peaceful life with God, and He offered that hope of salvation to the dying man on the cross. On the third day after His death,¹⁹⁵ Jesus was resurrected (Matt. 28:6; Mark 16:6; Luke 24:6; John 20:13–14). The resurrected Christ was seen by Mary Magdalene, his disciples, and others for forty days, until His ascension to his Father (See verses in previous sentence and Acts 1:3 & 9).

Paradise and *Abraham’s Bosom* are terms Jesus used to describe the transcendent afterlife for true disciples of Christ. *Heaven* identifies the abode of God and pseudepigrapha writings speak of multiple heavens. Pseudepigrapha writings are studied by theologians, are not canonical, but support Paul’s narrative of the third heaven. The idea of multiple heavens is recorded by Paul in 2 Corinthians 12:2–4, where he discloses being caught up to the third heaven and *Paradise*. Some theologians dismiss this as referring to the highest part of the atmosphere, rather than a spiritual place. This exposition discredits the multiple pseudepigrapha books. The concept of multiple heavens creates an expression of enhanced spiritual rewards and intimacy with God and Christ, reflecting the righteousness and spirituality of Christians.

¹⁹⁵ “In the Jewish tradition it is customary to count the day from the onset of night” (Meir M. Ydit, “The Counting of ‘Day’ and ‘Night’,” *Conservative Judaism Journal* 35, no. 1 [Fall 1981]: 25). Thus, Good Friday, the day of Christ’s death, counted as the first day, followed by Saturday (the Jewish Sabbath), the second day, and then Sunday, the third day.

Paul writes, “Neither death nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height or depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 8:38–39). The transcendent afterlife has its source in the love of God. This is best expressed in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” The love of God is infinite and embraces all; rich, poor, powerful, or humble: all races and ethnic groups are included, without distinction or exception. We must trust in God and our Savior to have everlasting life. Those who do not believe in the Son of God are condemned (3:18). Christ is truth (Eph. 4:21), and those who reject Him, reject truth. The person who belittles Christ and His teachings passes judgment on himself and does not have to wait until judgment day, he passes into judgment upon his death, while those who trust in Christ immediately inherit Paradisical life after death.¹⁹⁶

The choices we make in this life determine our afterlife. “Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor...let him who stole steal no longer... let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth... let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away...be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph. 4:25–32). Those who overcome the world and its temptations have the right to eat from the tree of life in the Paradisical garden (Rev. 2:7), share in Christ’s glorious kingdom, and drink the “living water” from which we will never thirst (John 4:14). *Heaven* is the term used by Christ in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 5: 3–12), where He describes the virtues that lead to eternal life in the kingdom of God. Here, teaching the multitude from a mountain top, Christ describes the blessedness of the poor in spirit, the meek, those that mourn, the peacemakers, merciful, pure in

¹⁹⁶ Bruce, *The Gospel of John*, 89–91.

heart, and all those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, or are persecuted for Christ. Verse twelve reinforces the great eternal reward when you are persecuted for Christ's sake, for the goodness of God in heaven is the eternal reward for injustices suffered upon the earth and is reaffirmed repeatedly throughout the NT, described as *heaven, paradise, and Abraham's bosom*.

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