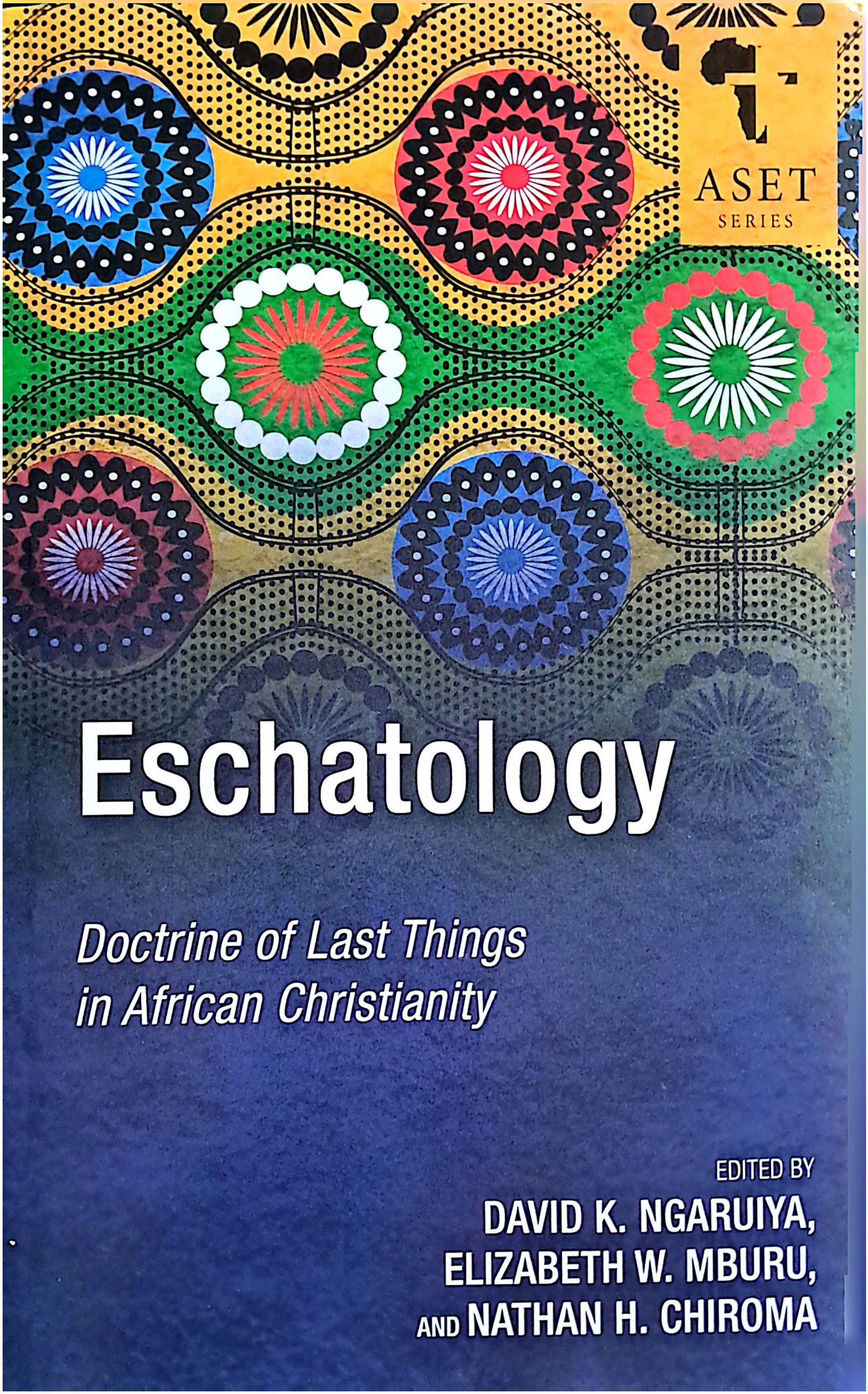
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# 14

# Old Testament Views of Death and the Afterlife

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## Abstract

Death is a universal reality. This chapter explores the understanding of death and the afterlife in the Old Testament, tracking the pre-exilic views held by the patriarchs and the post-exilic views held by both the Yahweh community and their contemporaries.

The development of the belief in the afterlife progresses from grim images of Sheol, the abode of both the righteous and the unrighteous without hope, to a later view that death is an end to the existence of human life and an entry into a new world. This evolving concept eventually introduces the idea of resurrection, with a distinction between the fate of the righteous and that of the wicked, marked by joys for the righteous and punishment for the wicked.

This chapter notes exceptional figures such as Enoch and Elijah, whose experiences challenge the notion of death as final, pointing to divine involvement beyond the grave. It then briefly ventures into what this implies for the church and readers in Africa, drawing parallels with African traditional beliefs while investigating the influence of Old Testament views of death and the afterlife. The chapter aims to formulate a sound contemporary view of death and the afterlife informed by biblical and cultural insights.

**Keywords:** death, afterlife, pre-exilic, post-exilic, Sheol



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## Introduction

We talk of things to come only because we come to some form of ending or a proverbial entry into the unknown. Human curiosity drives us to ask whether our current existence is all there is. Psalm 90:10 invokes this longing:

> Our days may come to seventy years,
> or eighty, if our strength endures;
> yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow,
> for they quickly pass, and we fly away.

In seeking to understand human destiny, we are confronted with the choice to believe either that God is the author and sustainer of life, or that there is simply no existence beyond death.

The biblical narrative attributes the beginning of life to the breath of God. The Hebrew word for life (*khayyim*) appears for the first time in Genesis 2:7. We see a clear demarcation between the life we live and the breath we have received from God. On the one hand, to live represents the totality of all we do. *Khayyim* carries the thought of the one and only breath we have received, which enables us to experience the rest of life. In the words of Job, it is that breath that Elohim gives and takes away.[1]

Without life we cannot be bothered by death. Humankind has thus long been on a quest to answer the questions of life (quality and quantity) and regarding the ultimate fate or state of the departed. Peter Berger asserts that "the power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death or, more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it."[2]

This understanding of life is important to better grasp the Old Testament view of death and the afterlife; we are therefore now in a position to investigate the concept of death and how it was gradually developed.

## The Reality of Death and Afterlife in Selected Old Testament Writings

The Old Testament presents death and the afterlife through a variety of perspectives as witnessed in the OT texts. Those range from or are drawn from personal experiences to broader theological reflections by the writers. As T. Desmond Alexander notes:

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1. See Job 9:22; 12:10.

2. Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), 51, cited in J. J. Collins, "The Root of Immortality: Death in the Context of Jewish Wisdom," *Harvard Theological Review* 71 (1978): 177.

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> The Hebrew term for "death," *māwet*, has a variety of connotations in the Old Testament. According to W. Brueggeman, *māwet* is used in three distinctive ways: (a) *biologically*, indicating "the end of historical life" (*e.g.* Gn. 21:16); (b) *mythologically*, "as a power, agent or principle" (*e.g.* Jb. 18:13; Je. 9:21); and (c) *symbolically*, "as the loss of rich, joyous existence as willed by God" (*e.g.* Dt. 30:15; Ps. 13:3–4).[3]

This study focuses primarily on biological death, and death as a place of post-mortem existence (e.g. Job 38:17; Isa 28:15).[4]

To paint a picture of the subject, we delve into a brief study of the views of death and the afterlife among groups of people in the pre-exilic and the post-exilic periods.

## Pre-exilic View of Death and the Afterlife

The Torah does not venture into detail about the quality of life after death. The emphasis at this time is more on the importance of life – the here and now – than on the longing for an afterlife. Phrases such as "gathered to his people" are reserved for the patriarchs and not seen as the longing of the community. Deuteronomy 30:19, "I have set before you life and death. . . . Now choose life," affirms this focus. Furthermore, as Philip Johnston argues, death was not commonly seen as a means of reuniting with those already deceased: the phrase "gathered to his people" is used only of Moses and Aaron, while "slept with his fathers" was originally used of royalty and later became more widespread; by then the phrase simply connoted a peaceful death.[5]

A phrase that is characteristic of the view of death and the afterlife in the pre-exilic period is "dust you are and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19). This followed the fall and reflects the fact that death is the inevitable fate of humankind. A grim side of death is suggested by terms such as "Sheol," "Abaddon," "destruction," and "the pit," and this became a dominant theme of this era. Death is depicted as a realm of darkness, bitterness, terror, distress, forgetful-

3. T. Desmond Alexander, "The Old Testament View of Life after Death," *Themelios* 11, no. 2 (1986), Gospel Coalition.

4. Alexander, "Old Testament View."

5. Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 33.

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ness, and inactivity.[6] As seen in the use of the terms "gathered to his people" and "slept with his fathers," it was not a crisis if death came in a natural way and "in the fullness of time." The Israelites were content in the face of a natural death because their culture had other forms of continuity: through one's descendants, through the survival of the nation, and through the memory of a good name.[7] But this does not answer the question of the state of the departed.

The consensus about death was that Yahweh, who gives the breath of life, allowed the body to decay, but the soul went to Sheol and lived a mysterious and shadowy existence there – see Numbers 16:29–30:

> If these men die a natural death and suffer the fate of all mankind, then the LORD has not sent me. But if the LORD brings about something totally new, and the earth opens its mouth and swallows them, with everything that belongs to them, and they go down alive into the realm of the dead, then you will know that these men have treated the LORD with contempt.

Moses introduces us to a leader's understanding of death and the afterlife that must have been a prevailing view: first, the idea of natural death (the kind of death that the Israelites would have preferred), and, second, the reality of death for the wicked as both separation from the community – God's people – and entrance into Sheol, in this case alive, as if to imply a life after death but not a blessed life. Psalm 6:5 says, "For in death there is no remembrance of you; In Sheol who shall give you thanks?" (ASV). We can only give thanks when we can benefit from what we receive. The psalm implies that in Sheol that aspect of life is nonexistent.

Though the view of death and the afterlife is largely considered as developing in the pre-exilic communities, we encounter nuances of a belief in the afterlife echoed by Job:

> I know that my redeemer lives,
> and that in the end he will stand on the earth.
> And after my skin has been destroyed,
> yet in my flesh I will see God;
> I myself will see him
> with my own eyes – I, and not another.

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6. F. J. Mabie, "Chaos and Death," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 52.

7. Shannon Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period*, SBLDS 170 (Atlanta: Scholars, 1999), 1–2.

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How my heart yearns within me! (Job 19:25–27; see also 29:18)

Many have argued that interpreting Job as revelation of the life to come is to assign meaning above and beyond the poetic nature of his writings. Therefore, a more conservative approach has been adopted by some to indicate that Job indicates only desire and not faith. This seems likely when we compare the above-mentioned verses with the following:

But a man dies and is laid low;
he breathes his last and is no more.
As the water of a lake dries up
or a riverbed becomes parched and dry,
so he lies down and does not rise;
till the heavens are no more, people will not awake
or be roused from their sleep.
If only you would hide me in the grave
and conceal me till your anger has passed!
If only you would set me a time
and then remember me!
If someone dies, will they live again?
All the days of my hard service
I will wait for my renewal to come. (Job 14:10–14)

### Sheol as the Destination of All

Sheol appears to be understood as the collective destination of all the dead. In discussing this topic, there are two major opposing suggestions for the meaning of the term: (1) that Sheol is a neutral place where souls are gathered after death; or (2) that Sheol is a term for the grave, where the physical body is laid to rest. The cases for these two leading and differing conclusions have been made by Alec Motyer and Eriks Galenieks.

Though the understanding of death in the pre-exilic period can be summarized by the word "Sheol," these two schools of thought reveal the varied nuances of this understanding. Alec Motyer views Sheol as a neutral place of gathering, beginning with the patriarch Abraham. The dead are reunited, demonstrating both a clear view of life and the continuity of life in community. Genesis 25:8 says that Abraham "died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people." Likewise Jacob, when he presumed his son to be dead, said, "I will go down to Sheol to my son mourning" (Gen

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37:35 ASV).[8] Stephen Cook develops the thought of covenant relationship as a determining factor in the kind of death and the nuance of Sheol that we need to read in context.[9] He argues that not all readings of Sheol, the city of death, should lead us to conclude that every soul must end up captive there. David, for example, is able to trust that his soul will someday join the soul of his dead baby (2 Sam 12:23).[10]

Motyer argues that Sheol in the Old Testament is a place name and ought never to be represented as, for example, "the grave" or "hell." Rather "it is the name of the place to which the dead go, and all alike go there . . . It is the place of the dead alike, good and bad, dying in their beds or in battle, belonging to the people of God or outside that privileged company."[11] This bold assertion reduces the Old Testament view of death to an amoral destination – a view that is challenged by the comments of the psalmist, who differentiates the fate of the righteous from that of the wicked and enemies of God.

On the other hand, Eriks Galenieks systematically studied all sixty-six occurrences of the Hebrew term Sheol, and other terms associated with it, and concluded as follows:

> The summary of the current exegesis leads to the basic conclusion that the term Sheol refers to the place of the dead, which by its nature, function and purpose entirely harmonizes with the anthropological, theological, and eschatological paradigm of the Hebrew Scripture. At the same time, the Hebrew Scripture provides no support for the idea that the term Sheol is somehow associated with one's after-death existence in the so-called underworld . . . it is best associated with the grave.[12]

A similar conclusion is drawn by R. Laird Harris, summarized by Desmond Alexander. Harris argues that Sheol frequently alludes to the place of burial,

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8. Alec Motyer, *After Death: What Happens When You Die?* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1996), 18–19.

9. Stephen. L Cook, "Death, Kinship, and Community: Afterlife and the Sheol Ideal in Israel," in *The Family in Life and in Death: The Family in Ancient Israel – Sociological and Archaeological Perspectives*, ed. Patricia Dutcher-Walls, LHBOTS (London: Bloomsbury, 2009), 106.

10. Cook, "Death, Kinship," 110.

11. Alec Motyer, *After Death: What Happens When You Die?* (Fearn: Christian Focus, 1996), 18–19.

12. Eriks Galenieks, "The Nature, Function, and Purpose of the Term Sheol in the Torah, Prophets, and Writings," (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2005), 621.

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·e the actual corpse is interred.[13] Thus Sheol is the grave, the location where ıody dies; but it is not the location of the soul. Therefore to know what ıens to the human soul after death we need to investigate other parts and ,s in the Bible (Exod 3:6; Matt 22:32).[14]

)ther interpretations suggest that Sheol may apply differently depending ontext. For example, Pokrifka sees Sheol as "a place only for the wicked, ı which the righteous are redeemed." She would probably agree that the teous also go to Sheol, but that they are redeemed from there.[15] Interest-y, according to Galenieks, Sheol is the destiny for everyone in two passages 39:49 and Eccl 9:10), of the righteous in eight passages (Gen 37:35; 42:28; 9, 31; Isa 38:10; Ps 88:4; Job 17:13, 16), and of the wicked in twenty-six pas-s. The evidence supports Galenieks's belief that everyone experiences Sheol. However, Alexander notes that

> Heidel makes [an] observation of special relevance for our present discussion: "As regards She'ol . . . we have evidence that it, in the signification of the subterranean realm of the spirits, applies to the habitation of the souls of the wicked only." In saying this Heidel distinguishes clearly between the destiny of the righteous and the wicked in the after-life; whereas the souls of the ungodly go down to *Sheol*, the souls of the pious ascend to heaven.[16]

s not clear how to reconcile Heidel's views with the many Scriptures that ow Sheol as the general abode of all the dead. That distinction can only assumed in the contextual meaning of Sheol. This suggests that when we counter an address to the wicked, we should read Sheol to mean a place of struction, but when we read an account of the death of the righteous, Sheol ould be understood to refer to the grave and not as the final destination of

13. T. Desmond Alexander, "The Old Testament View of Life after Death," *Themelios* 11, .2 (1986), discussing R. Laird Harris, "The Meaning of the Word Sheol as Shown by Parallels Poetic Passages," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 4 (1961): 129–35; cf. R. Laird ırris, "She'ôl," in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. cher Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 892–93.

14. Victor Umaru, "The Concept of Death and the Afterlife in the Old Testament and the ıplication for the People of Hona in Gombi, LGA, Adamawa State, Nigeria," *Light in a Once-ark World* 6 (Jan. 2024): 88.

15. J. Pokrifka, "Life, Imagery of," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry ıd Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, )08), 431.

16. Alexander, "Old Testament View," quoting A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old estament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1949).

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the righteous. The deaths of figures such as Elijah and Enoch, who were taken by God, complicate a uniform reading of death in the Old Testament and introduce us to the lingering question of the destiny of the dead.

#### Abaddon: Death as Extinction

In certain texts, such as Job and Proverbs, death is depicted as complete extinction; for example, "he will perish forever, like his own dung" (Job 20:7). The term Abaddon, used five times in the Old Testament, underscores the permanence and destructiveness of death. It might be argued that the poetic nature of this language constitutes hyperbole; however, it appears that Job anticipated such an outcome (Job 10:21). This notion is somewhat echoed in Genesis, when it is stated that humans will return to dust (Gen 3:19). Death is portrayed as ongoing existence in a dismal, obscure state, severed from one's community and from communion with Yahweh. This isolated, shadowy condition defines death.

While it is challenging to exegete all occurrences of the term Sheol in the Psalms, it can be inferred that death and the afterlife are depicted in many psalms as a place of no return, a concept emphasized by the term Abaddon. Scripture reinforces the unavoidable reality of death ("We must all die") and asserts that death cannot be undone ("Like water spilled on the ground, which cannot be recovered"; 2 Sam 14:14). Joshua's announcement of his impending death underscores this point: "I am about to go the way of all the earth" (Josh 23:14; cf. 1 Kgs 2:2).

The Psalms seemingly present death as an inescapable reality (Pss 30:4; 86:13; 88:4; Jonah 2:3). This stark view is derived from the five instances where the word Abaddon is employed, especially in poetic literature. In Abaddon, there is no afterlife; it is the realm of destruction (see Job 26:6b; 28:22; Prov 15:11; 27:20).

### *Post-exilic Views*

The clearest resurrection language appears in Daniel 12:1–3, describing eternal life or everlasting contempt, a thought that Boyce argues was dominant in Persia.[17] Here resurrection language is clearly used with respect to those who are physically dead (sleeping in the dust of the earth); it includes a twofold

17. See Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge, 1979); Bernhard Lang, "Afterlife: Ancient Israel's Changing Vision of the World Beyond," *Bible Review* 4 (1988): 19.

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company (the elect/wise, and [implicitly] the reprobate), involves eternal consequences (everlasting life, or shame and everlasting contempt) and alludes to glorification for the righteous/wise (shining like stars for ever).[18]

We could argue that Daniel is exclusive in his language and is possibly addressing only the exiled community and the house of Israel; perhaps he does not see the enemies of Israel included in this hope of resurrection. This thought would later be prevalent in successive communities leading up to New Testament times. Perhaps, as Johnston suggests,[19] it envisages "those who die in or after the final period of persecution and anguish, some to be rewarded for their resistance, and others to be shamed for their collaboration."[20]

Other references to a resurrection of the body are found in Isaiah 26:19 and Ezekiel 37:1–14. These have generally been interpreted metaphorically as national renewal or restoration. Though our chapter is limited to the biblical text, we note that the continued development of the subject of resurrection at this period was recorded only in the apocryphal writings. The Israelite community is not known to have fully embraced a belief in the resurrection of the dead, and many scholars see the few references as isolated and proof that the concept was not widely or collectively supported. Johnston makes the following assertion about the nature of the experience of death and the belief in the afterlife in the Old Testament: "Death is seen as a friend but primarily an enemy, a friend when the victims are of ripe old age, an enemy when death comes for a young person . . . who lived an unfulfilled life."[21]

The post-exilic communities seem to have had the benefit of the views of the patriarchs as well as ancient Near Eastern understandings of death and the afterlife, coupled with the selected psalms. The introduction of the idea of the resurrection of the dead seems to have been a relatively late development in Jewish thinking on the afterlife.[22] One reason many scholars have advanced this position is because texts such as Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2, which could support this position, are all in the post-Exilic period as shown above.

To try to reconcile the shades of Sheol with the concept of resurrection, scholars who hold on to the resurrection theory assert that the righteous who

18. Paul R. Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 76.

19. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 226.

20. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 226.

21. For further discussion, see Johnston, 288.

22. See the discussion on this subject by T. H. Gaster, "Resurrection," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, vol. 4, ed. George A. Buttrick (New York: Abingdon, 1962), 39.

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die will stay in the Sheol until they are miraculously brought back to life.[23] It follows that there must be a period between death and resurrection. Many writers assert that if all people, regardless of their moral character, descend to Sheol, the righteous must be raised up from it. If, however, Sheol is considered the dwelling place only of the wicked, the righteous must go elsewhere before being raised back to life. Sadly, the characteristics of the temporary home of the deceased righteous are not well described in the Old Testament.

## Applications for African Readers

In the context of this discussion on how Old Testament believers viewed death and the afterlife, the term "African readers" is employed to reflect the evolving understanding of identity within global realities. Factors such as migration, urbanization, and shifting social norms, including marriage, contribute to a broader perspective of what constitutes African identity. While acknowledging the individuality and distinctiveness of various ethnic groups within Africa, this broader approach is adopted for the purposes of examining the dominant actions and discourse surrounding death and the afterlife.

### *What Most Readers Hear*

Many African beliefs carried through the ages reflect views akin to Old Testament nuances. The following selected themes are thought to be close to African readers' beliefs concerning death and the afterlife. Primarily, many cultures in Africa believe that when a person dies, they continue to exist in a spirit realm in a new body replicating the one they had before, but they can move like an ancestor. This is somewhat of a nuance of the thought of being gathered to your people that we saw with the biblical patriarchs. This thought is well developed in the African psyche. Being an ancestor after death is something that everyone wants to experience, but it is believed that this cannot happen if a person has not lived a fulfilling life or if their life was cut short due to an accident or untimely death. Thus, you rarely hear of deceased children, youth, or people of middle age being referred to as ancestors. Length of life and the

23. B. Halpern and J. D. Levenson, eds., *Traditions in Transformation: Turning Points in iblical Faith* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1981), 247–321; Krister Stendahl, "Immortality Is oo Much and Too Little," in *Meanings: The Bible as Document and as Guide* (Philadelphia: ortress, 1984), 193–202.

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quality of your life, supported by the positive influence you have had on others, determines who will become an ancestor.

As Umaru states, Africans would, therefore,

> prefer a delayed, lingering death that happens naturally because they would have more time to settle many issues, such as making peace and saying farewell to family, and they would be permitted access to the afterlife. Except for the very elderly, death is considered an unnatural and premature event in all groups.[24]

In many African communities, death is not seen as an end of existence rather as transition into another form or realm. Life and death are seen as interconnected aspects of a single continuum of existence. Augustine Abasi affirms, "Through death, what is this worldly spills over into what is other-worldly."[25] To some degree, similar to the patriarchs, a person attains ancestorhood generally on the basis of long life and moral superiority, as Amanze states.[26]

It is important to note that ancestorhood should not be conflated with any concept of resurrection. On the contrary, many African communities have embraced the belief in reincarnation. As we saw with the development of the understanding of the term Sheol and its nuances, mourning in African cultures paints a picture of the brutal realities of the grave. Once a person is dead, the thought of finality is painful, but a glimmer of hope is seen in the way communities mourn. Many mourners speak to the dead as though present. The practice of speaking to the dead in the present tense is not fully shared with Bible believers. For example, the morally upright are expected to bring good tidings to the community, while lawbreakers are regarded as departed but are treated with care and caution lest they return in the form of tormenting spirits. In short, the African mindset departs from the finality of death, viewing the departed as only transitioned into a spirit form. Erich Rickens argues that, "when looking at the ethical discourse surrounding death within such a context, the effect of this perception is that the notions of 'life' and 'death' are not caught up in an absolute, opposing binary, as they are within a more western, modern setting."[27]

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24. Umaru, "Concept of Death," 84.

25. Augustine Kututera Abasi, "Lua-Lia, the 'Fresh Funeral': Founding a House for the Deceased among the Kasena of North-East Ghana," *Africa* 65, no. 3 (1995): 448.

26. James N. Amanze, "Christianity and Ancestors Veneration in Botswana," *Studies in World Christianity* 9, no. 1 (2003): 43.

27. Erich Rickens, "An African Perspective on Death," Medium, 3 June 2017.

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There has been a notable increase in belief in the resurrection of the dead, specifically as depicted in biblical literature. It is evident that such perspectives in prevailing African religions and practices have been significantly influenced by the arrival of Christianity on the continent. There is no record of any African community that believed in the bodily resurrection of the dead. Raymond Agbroko states that in African traditional religion there is "no belief that a day is set aside for the resurrection of the dead. In Agbroko's view, resurrection is for the purpose of coming back to make up for the former life one lived. Resurrection, which he sees as rebirth, occurs when one has not accomplished one's assignment on earth."[28]

### What Most Readers Practice

A. W. Tozer famously suggests that "what comes into our minds when we think about God is the most important thing about us."[29] It is not strange in Africa to see the convergence of biblical and African traditional religious beliefs concerning death and the afterlife. We observe several areas of convergence. First, the departed are regarded as the living dead – a thought that might be misconceived when reading about Abraham and the patriarchs. Africans can hear that God is the God of the living and not the dead, and can misinterpret this as saying that God is the God of the living dead – the ancestors. Second, because the ancestors are perceived to some degree as carrying spiritual authority, African readers can hear this as a nuance of the authority the patriarchs carried in regard to the community of Israel.

The Old Testament Scriptures do not permit communication with the dead or the worship of the dead. Nevertheless, there can be a subtle confusion of the resurrection for reincarnation or the desired communication with dead relatives. Every year, some families – Christians and others alike – continue to practice the remembrance of the dead with elaborate ceremonies. The concept of reincarnation possesses enduring personal and interpersonal implications and has exerted an impact on the community, as Olademo suggests. Historically, the concept has functioned as a mechanism for enforcing social and ethical norms in traditional societies – an impact it still seems to have today. The fundamental basis of this assertion is that within African societies, there

28. Agbroko cited in: Mercy Uwaezuoke Chukwuedo, "A Comparative Study of the Resurrection of the Body in Christianity and African Tradition Religion," *Journal of Religion and Human Relations* 11, no. 1 (2019): 71–72.

29. A. W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy* (Carlisle: OM, 1994), 11.

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exists a pervasive conviction of the afterlife and ultimate judgment:[30] judgment being inflicted by the living dead on the unjust and blessings being bequeathed on the morally upright.

## Conclusion and Reflections

The Old Testament presents a developing concept of death and the afterlife. The pre-exilic period emphasized the inevitability of death and Sheol as a shadowy realm for all. However, exceptions and poetic expressions hint at divine involvement beyond death. The post-exilic literature introduces resurrection as a divine act distinguishing the righteous from the wicked.

The patriarchs and pre-exilic believers seem to have had two views: an official view of death dominated by the meaning of Sheol, as demonstrated in this study, and a peripheral view of life after death captured by the thought of God saving some from the grave. These views seem to have coexisted but not been fully developed as they would later be in the post-exilic period. During the succeeding era, there is evidence of the concept of bodily resurrection as a possibility for the dead, with a clear emphasis on a good death for the righteous and a bad death for the wicked.

This analysis has illustrated that during the pre-exilic era, death was predominantly perceived as a natural event marking the cessation of life. The concept of an afterlife entailed a quiet existence within Sheol, a domain of the dead where virtuous and wicked individuals faced a shared destiny, forever separated from both God and the living. Following the exile, the Hebrew understanding of the afterlife underwent significant evolution, developing into a more comprehensive perspective on existence beyond death. The canon of the Old Testament, as demonstrated simply, has profoundly influenced African readers and believers. African perceptions and practices regarding death have been shaped by the prevailing intersection of biblical teachings and African traditional beliefs.

Contemporary readers are encouraged to define a holistic view of death and the afterlife, grounded in the revelation of death as a finality with regard to the grave, while also embracing the concept of the afterlife as demonstrated by post-exilic eschatological beliefs. Examining the norms inherited within a polarized religious environment against the scriptural revelations facilitates this understanding. Faith and practice resulting from such an examination should

30. O. Olademo, "Theology of African Traditional Religion" (National Open University of Nigeria, 2008).

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embody a healthy urgency to live the present life intentionally while fostering hope for an afterlife, interconnected with both community and the promise of the divine. Moses's prayer in Psalm 90:12 exemplifies this perspective:

> Teach us to number our days,
> that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

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