

The Nature of Man

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To understand the biblical view of life, death and the future destiny of man it is necessary to first have a firm grasp of the biblical view of the nature of man. Fortunately, this is one subject of which there is a great deal of unanimity in the world of biblical scholarship - at least as regards the original creation of man and the Old Testament view of man in general. However, it does not seem that this understanding has been effectively communicated to the Church at large. The result has been an infiltration into Christian doctrine of ideas that have their origin in pagan Greek or Oriental religion and philosophy. As representative of the scholarly consensus about the biblical view of the nature of man, I quote from the chapter "Life and Death in the Old Testament" by M.A. Knibb in the book *The World of Ancient Israel* (ed. R.C. Clements, Cambridge):

The account of the creation of man in the ... narrative of the creation and fall (Gen. 2:4b-3:24) epitomizes the Old Testament view of the constitution of man: "Yahweh God formed man of the dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life ... and the man became a living being (*nepes hayyah*)" (Gen. 2:7). It is widely recognized that there is no suggestion here of a dichotomy between body and soul; the "breath of life" is not conceived of as having an existence somehow separate from the body, and it is man as an entity who becomes a "living being." Thus, for example, Westermann comments: "a human being does not consist of a number of parts (like body and soul and so on), but rather is "something" that comes into being as a human person by a quickening into life ... a person is created as a *nepes hayyah* [living soul]; a "living soul" is not put into one's body."

The idea that man's life depends on the breath breathed into him by God is expressed in the Old Testament in a variety of ways. Gen. 2:7 uses the expression "the breath of life", but in Job 33:4 (cf. 32:8) this is explicitly identified as "the breath of the Almighty":

"The spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life."

Here "spirit" (*ruach*) and "breath" (*nesamah*) are used virtually synonymously, as they are also in Isa. 42:5; and in some later passages *ruach* is used with the meaning "breath" simply as a synonym of *nesamah*: cf. Gen. 6:17; 7:15; Zech. 12:1 ... just as the life of man is dependent on the gift of Yahweh of the "breath" or "spirit," so the withdrawal of this by Yahweh means the death of man:

"When you take away their breath [ruach], they die and return to their dust.

When you send forth your breath [ruach], they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" (Psa. 104:29-30).

... Correspondingly, in Ezekial's vision of the renewal of the nation (Ezekial 37), sinews, flesh and skin first come upon the bones, but life only returns to them after the "breath" (*ruach*) comes into them at Yahweh's command [p. 398].

In addition to this understanding of life and death it must be emphasized that nowhere does the Old Testament indicate that man was created in any sense as "immortal": either as an immortal person as a whole or as having an immortal "part" such as "spirit" or "soul."

... There is no suggestion in the narratives of the creation and fall, nor indeed in the Old Testament as a whole, that man was created immortal and lost his immortality as a result of disobedience. In Gen. 2:17 death is certainly prescribed as the penalty for eating the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, but there is no hint that man originally had possessed immortality ... the implication of 3:22-24, which refer to the tree of life which might have given man immortality is that man did not at that time possess it. There is thus no idea in the narrative of the creation and fall that man had once been immortal [*ibid.*, pp. 402-403].

The Old Testament View of Death

Despite the fact that the Old Testament sometimes uses poetic imagery in regards to the state of the dead (e.g. Isaiah 14:3-23) there is no evidence that death was meant to be understood as anything other than what its natural meaning would indicate: lifelessness, without consciousness, as expressed by the metaphor of "sleep". The common idea that people were believed to continue in a "shadowy existence in a weaker form of life" (i.e., as "shades") in the underworld of *Sheol* does not accord well with the general picture presented in the Old Testament as exemplified by such plain statements as follow:

Lighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death (Psalm 13:3).

For in death there is no remembrance of thee (Psalm 6:5).

Man's breath goes forth, he returns to the earth; in that very day his thoughts perish (Psalm 146:4).

For the living know that they shall die, but the dead know not anything (Eccl. 9:5).

In short, the Old Testament view of death is summed up by James H. Charlesworth in his introduction to Vol. I of *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Doubleday):

At death the individual simply is gathered to his final (or father's) place, the tomb. Sheol and the netherworld is described as the abode of the dead, not of people who continue to live after death ... Only through his reputation or a son does his life continue on the earth (p. xxviii).

Life After Death in the Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha

After the return of many Israelites from their period of exile in Babylon and Assyria a time-span of some 400 years passed between the last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, and the coming of John the Baptist. During this time, many foreign influences were introduced into the religious thinking of Judaism by the various empires - Persian, Greek and Roman - that occupied the general area of Palestine and beyond. Here it is important to make a clear distinction between the views and beliefs of the religion of *Judaism* (an increasingly fragmented religion made of up various sects and views, much like Christianity today) with that of the Old Testament *biblical* view.

The Old Testament Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha represent Jewish writings of this time that were heavily influenced by a combination of the Old Testament, Greek or Hellenistic thought and the popular pagan oriental religions of that day. The Apocryphal books eventually found their way into the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint, but were never considered to be a part of the Hebrew Canon of scripture. The so-called Pseudepigraphical writings were collected only recently (mostly 19th century) so as to be a "body" of writings under the heading of "Pseudepigrapha".

Many of these as individual writings such as I Enoch were apparently quite influential in the thinking of many Jewish people (and later many Christians) in the centuries just before and after Christ.

All of these books to a greater or lesser degree reflect a combination of Old Testament, Hellenistic and popular speculative thinking from the centuries just before Christ. They, together with the Dead Sea Scrolls, are extremely important for understanding the history and the thought world of early Judaism around the time of Christ. However, they are far less important for gaining an understanding of the *biblical* view of things and in some cases they are more likely to be detrimental to it. It is from these books that such ideas as the immortality of the soul, immediate conscious existence after death, eternal torment and all kinds of non-biblical ideas relating to angels, spirits and the after-life crept into Jewish, and later, into Christian thinking. When Paul spoke of "Jewish myths" and "speculations" to refute and to beware of, it was in all likelihood these, and similar types of writings, about which he spoke. Charlesworth summarizes the views presented in the Apocrypha and the Pseudepigrapha regarding death and the after-life:

In contrast to this [Old Testament] perception are the ideas developed in post-exilic Judaism. Some books in the Apocrypha contain numerous explicit references to the resurrection of the dead (see esp. 2 Mac 7, 14), or possibly even to the immortality of the soul (Wisdom of Solomon) ... Some pseudepigrapha, even more than these other documents, contain many passages that with pellucid clarity express the belief in a resurrection after death ...

Logically, subsequent to the development of this idea is the attempt to describe the future place of rest for the righteous. Hence, picturesque images of Paradise appear in many pseudepigrapha. *The various pictorial descriptions are characterized by mutually exclusive ideas.* Paradise is placed sometimes in the third heaven ... and sometimes on the earth ... It is depicted as either without inhabitants ... or with inhabitants... It is portrayed as both an eternal inheritance ... and a state preceding the end ... The Pseudepigrapha mirror a living religion in which the attempt was made to come to terms with the dynamic phenomena of history and experience [*ibid.* p.xxxiii].

No doubt such literature helped keep alive the hope of a future just society achieved through divine intervention and resurrection of the dead as set forth in OT passages such as Dan. 12:2, but this was often at the expense of a mixture of pagan thought concepts. E. Earl Ellis describes the resulting religious thought world at the time of the coming of Christ:

In the time of Jesus Jewish views on the future life varied from group to group. Usually more resistant to the inroads of Hellenistic culture, the Pharisees in this matter were considerably, and rather early, influenced by Greek thought. The departure of the "soul" to reward or punishment immediately at death was for them a widespread if not dominant belief ... The Essenes (or some of them) shared this view, perhaps along with the Pharisees' doctrine of resurrection ... The Sadducees believed in neither "resurrection, neither angel nor spirit." In their view soul and body perished together at death. Like the Sadducees and the Old Testament Psalms ... the Qumran writings also seem to regard the whole man as mortal, perishing at death ... But in addition there is the distinct hope ... [of] ... an immortality for the righteous via resurrection. This view is closer to the New Testament thought than the teachings of either the Pharisees or Sadducees ... [*The New Century Bible Commentary, the Gospel of Luke*, pp. 234-235].

The Destiny of God's People: Paradise in a New Heaven and New Earth

Whoever would profess to understand all that will take place after Christ's return or all the details concerning the final destiny of God's people would do so only in the face of clear scriptural statements that teach us that this is not now presently possible. Two verses come immediately to mind:

Dear friends, now we are the children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when he appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is (1 John 3:2).

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then shall I know fully, even as I am known (1 Cor. 13:12).

Without claiming to understand all the details we can, however, surely say that the final destiny of God's people is clearly stated in the Bible as being "a

new heaven and earth, the home of righteousness" (II Pet. 3:13; cp. Rev. 21:1ff.). That this is also equivalent to the term "kingdom of God" or "paradise" can be seen from a comparison of the characteristics of these two terms with that of the biblical hope of the new heaven and earth.

I Corinthians 15, for instance, describes the "kingdom of God" which will be inherited at Christ's return as being "imperishable." For this specific reason flesh and blood man cannot inherit it. Man must be "changed - in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye at the last trumpet" so that the "perishable clothes itself with the imperishable and the mortal with immortality" (I Cor. 15:50ff). Only in this way can man enter into this new "imperishable" realm. Likewise, though probably rich in symbolic language, the promise to the believer to be able to eat of "the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Rev. 2:7) is without any question a promise to have an immortal life in the "paradise" of "a new heaven and earth" because that is precisely where this "tree of life" and "paradise" are located (Rev. 22:1-5, 14).

It is interesting that for neither Paul nor the writer of the Book of Revelation is the hope for man's ultimate destiny to be found in "heaven" or even in a "millennium" on earth. Instead, it is to be found in the final "imperishable" kingdom of God where sin, death and destruction can play no part. Since it is self-evident that the picture presented in Rev. 20 of the perishable millennium cannot fit with Paul's own descriptions of an imperishable kingdom of God (I Cor. 15:50), it is not surprising that many have wondered how this millennium (which is *only* mentioned in Rev. 20) is to be understood. R.J. Bauckham comments on this in his article "Eschatology" in the *New Bible Dictionary*, p. 347:

It should be emphasized that no other passage of Scripture clearly refers to the millennium. To apply OT prophecies of the age of salvation specifically to the millennium runs counter to the general NT interpretation of such prophecies, which find their fulfillment in the salvation already achieved by Christ and to be consummated in the age to come. This is also how Rev. itself interprets such prophecies in chs. 21f. Within the structure of Rev. the millennium has a limited role, as a demonstration of the final victory of Christ and his saints over the powers of evil. The principle object

of Christian hope is not the millennium but the new creation of Rev. 21:1f. ...

Whatever one's understanding of the millennium may be it must be emphasized that the promise held out to the "overcomer" in Rev. 2:7 is not for a share in the millennium - it is to partake of the tree of life in the paradise of the new heaven and earth. Thus, even in the Book of Revelation itself the ultimate hope is focused on a final paradise not on an "intermediate state" - whether it be in heaven or on earth (cf. Rev. 21:1f; Rom. 8:18-21; I Cor. 15:50f). R.J. Bauckham summarizes well the biblical picture of the hope for the final destiny of God's people:

The destiny of the redeemed is to be like Christ ... to be with Christ ... to share in his glory ... and his

kingdom ... to be sons of God in perfect fellowship with God ...

With the final achievement of human salvation there will come also the liberation of the whole material creation from its share in the curse of sin (Rom. 8:19-23). The Christian hope is not for redemption *from* the world, but for the redemption *of* the world. Out of judgment (Heb. 12:26; 2 Pet. 3:10) will emerge a *recreated* universe ... "a new heaven and a new earth in which righteousness dwells" (2 Pet. 3:13). ["Eschatology," *New Bible Dictionary*, p. 347-348]

And so we say in unity with whole New Testament, "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!"

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