

ABSTRACT

On Death and the Afterlife: Resurrecting the Christian Doctrine of Last Things

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Christianity is very much a product of a mixing of cultures. Christ lived at a time of great mobility and social stability under the Roman Empire, and thus Christianity was born into a collision of Greco-Roman culture and Israelite culture. Naturally, there are some conflicts. One such area that saw great disparity of ideas was eschatology. Greek eschatology is centered around the idea of escape from the physical world, which is seen as inherently evil and corrupt. The eschatology of the Israelites was just the opposite - God created the world and it was good. Though mankind had broken God's creation through sin, God's people longed for the redemption of the world and a physical resurrection to restore God's perfect order. Unfortunately, Christian eschatology is partially the product of these two incompatible worldviews. In this thesis, I will argue that many of the church fathers unknowingly and unwittingly brought into Christianity more of this Greek duality of the physical and spiritual worlds than is actually true. I argue that this crisis is further exaggerated by the Septuagint's misuse of Hebrew eschatological terms without proper context. Finally, in this thesis I hope to direct modern Christianity back to its Hebrew roots, and instead of placing its deep longing in meeting God in heaven, praying fervently for the redemption, recreation, and resurrection of the physical world as a part of God's ultimate victory over Death.

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ON DEATH AND THE AFTERLIFE
RESURRECTING THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE OF LAST THINGS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Dedication:	iii
Acknowledgments:	iv
Chapter One:	1
Chapter Two:	13
Chapter Three:	28
Chapter Four:	48
Chapter Five:	69
Bibliography:	80

“He hoped and prayed that there was not an afterlife. Then he realized that there was probably a contradiction involved here, and merely hoped there was not an afterlife.”

-- Douglas Adams

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved grandmother, Joanne Mills, who passed away before its completion, but whose encouragement and love will always be remembered and cherished.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction, Statement of the Problem, Terms and Disciplines

Introduction

Death. At the end of every life there is a death. Death is a concept that has both vexed and fascinated men from the beginning of history. It is something that happens to everyone, but owing to its very nature, death is hard to understand. No one can discuss how death feels, since they necessarily are dead. In addition to that, owing to its unknown nature, death breeds fear. People fear to die. They fear what may happen after death, and that is something that is difficult to understand and impossible to investigate. This fear brings people together in an attempt to understand, cope with, and accept death as a part of life. When people come together to mourn the dead and comfort the beloved ones of those lost, a cultural identity is created surrounding death. Cultures and civilizations create rituals to commemorate those who have died, and often use those very rituals to give some meaning to death. For example, in modern America, it is customary to look back over the life of the person who has died and celebrate all the good things that they have done. To those attending the funeral service, this gives some sense of purpose in death, as if to say that the deceased has spent their time on earth well and fulfilled their duty, and is thus free to pass on. These very rituals help to explain our mindset regarding death, for it seems as though we have some understanding that there must be a “passing on” to something else after death. Yet no one can be sure, for as the Psalmist says, death

is a place of silence.¹ No one comes back from the grave to explain why death happens, what death means, or what happens after death. We must interpret it while we still live. We must create meaning and understanding out of death from the framework in which we understand life, and the framework in which we understand all of the world.

Each culture and people has its own understanding of death and its own way of interpreting death. Despite the great variety in cultures throughout the world, the prevailing idea among most peoples is that death is not the end of existence.² This life is not all that there is. There must be something more after death. Why does mankind have this notion? Perhaps it is that we believe that simple non-existence after death is not reconcilable with our understanding of and experience of the spiritual aspects of life. Or perhaps it is just a hope, a hope that we will go on in some capacity after we die. There is also an intuitive, not rational sense of justice among mankind that good lives will be rewarded and bad lives will be punished. For those who profess Christianity, as I do, the belief in the afterlife stems also from the promises of God that death will be overturned and that our existence is eternal. Regardless of the reason for the belief in the afterlife, many cultures and peoples have such concepts. These ideas vary wildly, but all hinge on an idea that there is more to existence than this current life. Death is one of the only universals in life, and it is therefore natural that having beliefs about death and what happens to the deceased after they die is also common in all human cultures.

¹ Psalm 115:17

² Of course, this is not universally true, but the majority of peoples and cultures believe in some form of afterlife.

As stated above, I profess to the Christian faith, which has a rich idea of the afterlife, full of either joy and unending fellowship with God our creator for those who believe, or eternal damnation for those who do not. The prevailing Christian view is that all people will continue to exist after death, for God has created us with immortality. Some will spend that immortality in perfect communion with God, and others will spend it apart from God, in a place of punishment. Christians believe that all people deserve to enter that place of punishment, but that by faith through God's grace we are allowed to enter into his presence. This is made possible through the atoning sacrifice of God's only son, Jesus Christ, who paid the debt of sin for all mankind.

Christianity traces its roots back to Judaism, one of the oldest religious ideologies in the world. Jews, or Israelites as they were called at the time, also believed in a life after death, but their understanding of it was far less developed than are the ideas expressed in modern Christianity. From the very beginning of the Hebrew Scriptures, there is an understanding of death. Mankind brought sin into the world, and the end consequence of that is death. Everyone has sinned, and thus everyone will die. However, even from the very outset of death entering the world, God promises life. God promises to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden that he will fix the world that they have broken and undo death. Though Adam and Eve have no concept of how God intends to accomplish this, the idea that death must not be the final end to all things was born. Over time, as God reveals more and more of himself in history, Israel gains a clearer and clearer understanding of the way in which God will overcome death. We will trace in detail the ideas of Israelite eschatological theology in a later chapter, but for now it

suffices to say merely that ancient Israelites believed that God would somehow undo the problem of death and restore this physical world to a state of perfection through resurrection of the dead, and remake the world as it was before sin entered it. This paradise was to be enjoyed by those who professed Judaism, where they would exist as Adam and Eve did before sin and death existed, in perfect communion with God.

It is from this Israelite worldview that Christianity springs forth. Christians in fact claim to worship the same God as the Israelites. However, Christianity has other influences that Judaism does not. Christianity has also been profoundly affected by the culture of the Greeks. At the time of the birth of Christianity, Greek culture had been spread throughout the known world by the Romans, and was the dominating philosophical and theological worldview of most people. The Greeks had their own concept of the afterlife, which will again be discussed at length in a later chapter. In short, the Greeks understood that the world was broken and believed that matter and the physicality of the world were the cause of that; that matter was inherently flawed and corrupt, and that death will at last free the soul from the the prison of the flesh and release it to exist in the spiritual afterlife. These Greek ideas were transmitted to Christianity partly by virtue of being the prevailing worldview at the time. Greek culture and language dominated the world and influenced lost every aspect of life at the time. Of course, it was through the lens of Rome that Greek influence spread, but it was Greek influence nonetheless. As well, Greek was also the spoken language of the day, further extending its influence over Christianity.

Much of the influence that Greek thought exerts over Christianity comes in the form of the Septuagint, a translation of the Israelite Scriptures into Greek. This translation allowed not only for Greek-speaking and Greek-minded people to read the Hebrew Scriptures, but also for the superimposition of Greek ideas on top of Israelite ones. This covering is particularly noticeable in regards to the terms used to describe the afterlife. In the Hebrew, the principle term used for the afterlife is שְׁאוֹל (she'ol), which is usually best translated as “pit” or “grave.” Often it is never further defined or understood. She'ol is nebulous in meaning, both to the English speaking person and the Hebrew speaking person. The Old Testament moves toward a more concrete definition over time, but only cursorily and vaguely. In contrast, the Greek word translated in the Septuagint for she'ol is ᾍδης (Hades). This word carries with some very different connotations than she'ol. In Greek mythology, the underworld, Hades, is a very well-defined place. For example, there is a king of the underworld, also named Hades, who is the brother of the king of the gods, Zeus. There are also different levels of Hades. There is a place of blessing, called the Elysium Fields, and a place of punishment, called Tartarus.

The Septuagint was the primary translation of the Old Testament of most of the world at the time of the birth of Christianity, as Greek was the common spoken language. Thus, there was a superimposition of Greek afterlife concepts on top of the eschatology of the Israelites for those who approached Christianity from any other perspective than Judaism. One of the central tenants of Christianity that separates it from Judaism is that the good news brought by Christ is for all people, not just Israel. Thus Christian

communities began to pop up all over the world in non-Hebrew speaking communities, and the Septuagint was read as Scripture since most of these people spoke Greek as a common language, if not their only language.

Statement of the Problem

This blending of the Israelite idea of the afterlife and the Greek idea of the afterlife into Christianity created some problems. These two worldviews are incompatible, and the truth in both is lost when superimposed on top of each other. A physical resurrection, as thought by Israel, would directly conflict with the Greek notion that the physical world is bad and that being freed from it is the ultimate end of the soul. To the Greek mind, matter is inherently evil, and it is the aim of the soul to be freed from it. This is not true in the eschatology of the Israelites. According to the teaching in the Torah, God created the world and saw that it was very good. The physical world is full of beauty and inherent goodness, even in the state of sin that mankind brought into the world.

In this thesis, we will examine in detail the development of the Hebrew ideas of the afterlife by looking at the Old Testament Scriptures in their original language. This thesis will look at how the idea of the afterlife develops in the Old Testament, how those ideas existed at the time of Christ, and how those ideas shape Christianity. We will also discuss the Greek concept of the afterlife and the underworld in detail by examining different works of mythology in which the underworld is pictured. We will then see how these two different ideologies intertwine themselves into the fabric of Christianity. We

will see how multiple Christian authors and theologians helped to canonize the blended eschatology that Christianity inherited. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is a perfect example of this blending motif. In the work, he sets out to paint a picture of a distinctly Christian afterlife. However, he fills this afterlife with concepts originating in Greek thought. We will discuss Dante and other Christian authors in detail in a later chapter. Lastly, we will examine where the church stands today, generally, in its beliefs about the afterlife and see if there are any problems present. If there are inconsistencies, we will offer solutions of how these can be solved. hope that through this work, a better understanding of the true nature of the afterlife can be achieved, and that those of the Christian faith who read it can gain a better understanding of the roots of their beliefs and understand their cultural and religious heritage with greater clarity.

Scholarship on this Topic

Though there is much scholarship on both the Israelite and Greek eschatologies, there is not an abundance of research on how these two ideas blend into Christian theology. I will be using works that follow the development of afterlife ideas throughout the entirety Old Testament and also works that focus on death conceptions of Israel at specific time periods in history. Many scholars have thoroughly expounded upon the Israelite cultural understanding of death and the afterlife in excellent works, and on these works I will rely heavily. In addition to that, I will focus directly on the Old Testament text in order to delve into its meaning.

I have also found a wonderful collection of scholarship regarding the Greek ideas of the underworld. Many scholars have written about this idea, and again, I will draw frequently from these works. I will also look at original sources regarding the Greek afterlife conception, such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Hesiod's *Theogony*. In addition to that, the Greek notion of the afterlife is accepted wholeheartedly by the Romans, who were the dominant people and culture at the time of the birth of Christianity, and thus we can use Roman works that describe the afterlife, such as Virgil's *Aeneid*, in addition to strictly Greek works, to gain clarity about the afterlife.

I hope to further scholarship on the blending of these incompatible ideas and the problems that they have caused for Christianity. Today, Christians have a notion that they do not want to go to hell. However, it is unclear what is to happen instead. What happens to the soul in place of punishment? Do we live in a spiritual state with God? Is there a physical resurrection? When? What happens in the meantime? I intend to provide some possible answers to these questions and begin a conversation among scholars that will further our collective understanding of what happens after we die, in order to better align ourselves with the teaching of Scripture and the will of God.

Tools for this Thesis: Hermeneutics

In order to properly examine how the development of Israelite eschatology evolves over time, it is necessary to have a basic understanding of the discipline of Biblical hermeneutics. Biblical hermeneutics is the study of methods of interpretation of the Bible. It is usually necessary to interpret the Bible, as its purpose is not often to

explain theological concepts in plain language, but to tell a story, and is thus often unclear in theological meaning. The reader who seeks to gain theological wisdom from the text must interpret its meaning in some way. There are many different ways to engage with the text and interpret it. For example, it is possible to look strictly at the language, the grammar, word usage, and sentence structure of the text in order to derive meaning.

It is also possible to examine the text in a cultural and historical context. Since the Biblical text was written in history, it is necessary to understand the culture surrounding it in order to comprehend its full meaning. For example, we must understand the situation of the Jews in Palestine under the dominion of the Roman Empire to grasp the full extent of the meaning behind Jesus' parables. When Jesus says "give unto Caesar what is Caesar's,"³ we must know that there was a great conflict at the time about taxation among the Jews. Jesus is providing clarity to those listening about how to handle this conflict. It is also necessary to look at the larger context of the passage when trying to gain understanding of the meaning of a specific verse. It may even be necessary to look very broadly at theology to understand the meaning of a specific verse.

In addition to these methods of interpretation, we must also understand that the Scriptures are not a theological treatise, but a work of literature. There are different genres of literature in the Bible. Some of it is narrative, some is written as a letter, some of it is dialogue, and still other parts poetry. Word usage in each of these different genres

³ Mark 12:17

differs, and affects meaning in different ways. Thus, it will be necessary for us to examine and take into account the writing style of the particular passage that we are seeking to understand in order to fully grasp its meaning. For example, as a general rule, in narrative literature of the Bible, death is often mentioned in a literal sense, as in, someone has died and the narrative is telling this to the reader. However, in Biblical poetry, death is often allegorical or referring to the larger idea of sin in the world. This same concept proves true when the text is discussing she'ol, the place of death. In Genesis for example, when Jacob is mourning the death of his son Joseph, he claims that he will not be comforted and will continue to mourn his son until he joins him in the grave.⁴ This is a narrative portion of the text, and Jacob is using the term grave in a very specific context, referring to his own physical death and the death of his son. However, if we look at Psalm 116:3 for a poetic example, the psalmist says “the anguish of the grave came over me.” It is clear here that there is not the death of one specific person that is troubling the author, but the larger concept of death as a problem that plagues humanity. The genre and context of both of these passages helps us to understand the true meaning of the words we are trying to identify.

Throughout this thesis, we will be using multiple different hermeneutical techniques in order to gain the best understanding of the passages at hand. In addition to that, we will be able to use hermeneutical principles to examine the works other than the Bible that are necessary for this thesis, such as the *Odyssey* and *Aeneid*. We will look at the larger context of the passages that we are examining, the genre of that particular part

⁴ Genesis 37:35

of the work, and the cultural heritage and context within which that work was produced. All of these tools will help us come to a true understanding of the concepts with which we are wrestling.

Tools for this Thesis: Philology

Secondly, in order to proceed further, it is also necessary to develop an awareness of the discipline of philology. Philology is the branch of study that deals with the structure, historical development, and relationship of a language or languages. It is the study of the history and development of languages through written works over the course of time. In this thesis, there is a great breadth of time that will be covered. There is a timespan of about 3,000 years between the first and the last time she'ol is used in the Old Testament.⁵ As with any language, words develop and change meaning over time. This is true of English, and it is certainly true of ancient Hebrew and Greek. As part of the goal of this thesis is to trace the development of afterlife ideas and concepts over time, philology will be an invaluable and necessary tool to have at our disposal.

There are a number of different methods of using philology to acquire knowledge of language and word meaning. One of these is a comparative method. We will compare different uses of the same word, and using the context of the passage within which the word occurs, we will note any differences in meaning among the occurrences. Through this method, we will begin to build a timeline of the development of the word's meaning.

⁵ This is, of course, a guess. The timeline of the Old Testament is incredibly difficult to pin down, and interpretations vary wildly. I am approximating that the events of Genesis occurred sometime around 3,500 B.C., and that the latest references to she'ol occur around the time of the return from the Babylonian Exile in 540 B.C.

In doing so, we will see how the mindset of the people changes over time with regard to the particular concept denoted by that word.

Summary

It is the goal of this thesis to trace the cultural and linguistic concepts of death and the afterlife through time in both Israelite understanding and Greek understanding. We will see how both of these different eschatologies come together in the Septuagint, and are subsequently brought into Christianity. We will look at how these ideas become cemented in Christian teaching over time through examining works by Christian authors. Lastly, we will undertake to analyze the beliefs concerning the afterlife of the current Christian church, see if there are any inconsistencies or problems within that worldview, and propose some potential solutions to any problems that we find.

We will be undertaking a study not only of both language and textual criticism, but also of culture and cultural mindset. Both of these areas of study will involve close examination of different texts that are representative of both Greek and Hebrew language and culture. We will be using different tools throughout our study in order to accurately depict the usages of words and the cultural mindsets that we seek to understand. Ultimately, we hope to gain a fuller understanding of the history of afterlife belief in Western culture and religion, and also a more accurate worldview for ourselves as we seek grow in faith and wisdom about our own lives and beliefs.

CHAPTER TWO

Jewish Eschatology and Afterlife in a Study of the Old Testament

Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is twofold: first, I will examine the language used in the Hebrew Bible to describe the place of death and the afterlife. The name of the place of death in the Hebrew is **שְׁאוֹל** (she'ol). I will undertake to learn the nature of this word and the meanings it carries with it about the nature of death and the afterlife as Old Testament Israelites understood it. We will examine the context of verses in which this word is used, and attempt to develop a true understanding of its meaning, both linguistically and culturally. Secondly, I will take an overview look at Israelite eschatology throughout the Old Testament and try to grow in understanding of what these people believed about the possibility of life after death.⁶ In this second section, I will trace the ideas and concepts of afterlife through the chronology of the Old Testament and show how they develop and evolve over time. Ultimately, I will hope to arrive at references to the possibility of a resurrection of some sort and seek to frame those verses in the larger context of Israelite eschatology.

⁶ I will focus exclusively on the Hebrew text in this chapter, saving my examination of the Septuagint for a later section.

Precise Meaning of She'ol

The first use of the word she'ol⁷ occurs in Genesis 37:35.⁸ In this passage, Jacob has just been informed by his sons that his favorite child Joseph was killed by wild animals.⁹ Jacob mourns for Joseph and refuses to be comforted. The full text of verse 35 in the Hebrew is thus:¹⁰

וַיָּקֻמוּ כָּל-בָּנָיו וְכָל-בָּנוֹתָיו לְנַחֲמוֹ וַיֹּמְאוּ לְהִתְנַחֵם וַיֹּאמֶר כִּי-אֶרֶד אֶל-בְּנֵי אֲבִי
שְׁאֵלָה וַיִּבְךְּ אֹתוֹ אָבִיו:

Translation:

35. And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to console him but he refused to be consoled, and he said, “For I will go down to the pit mourning unto my son.” And his [Joseph’s] father wept for him.¹¹

This verse paints a picture of hopelessness for Jacob and Joseph. Jacob refuses to be consoled because he recognizes that there is no hope of ever being with Joseph. Yes he will eventually join him in She’ol, but that is not something that is to be desired. We can learn from the context of this verse that She’ol is not a place of happily being brought

⁷ Anytime I am talking about the Hebrew word “she’ol,” I will leave it uncapitalized. If I am referring to She’ol the place itself, I will capitalize it.

⁸ Here is an exhaustive list of the usages of she’ol in all its forms in the Old Testament:

Gen 37:35, Gen 42:38, Gen 44:29, Gen 44:31, Num 16:30, Num 16:33, Deut 32:22, 1 Sam 2:6, 2 Sam 22:6, 1 Kings 2:6, 1 Kings 2:9, Job 7:9, Job 11:8, Job 14:13, Job 17:13, Job 17:16, Job 21:13, Job 24:19, Job 26:6, Psa 6:6, Psa 9:18, Psa 15:10, Psa 17:6, Psa 29:4, Psa 30:18, Psa 48:15, Psa 48:15, Psa 48:16, Psa 54:16, Psa 85:13, Psa 87:4, Psa 88:49, Psa 115:6, Psa 138:8, Psa 140:7, Pro 1:12, Pro 5:5, Pro 7:27, Pro 9:18, Pro 15:11, Pro 15:24, Pro 23:14, Pro 27:20, Pro 30:16, Ecc 9:10, SoS 8:6, Isa 5:14, Isa 7:11, Isa 14:9, Isa 14:11, Isa 14:15, Isa 28:15, Isa 28:18, Isa 38:10, Isa 38:18, Isa 57:9, Eze 31:15, Eze 31:16, Eze 31:17, Eze 32:21, Eze 32:27, Hos 13:14, Hos 13:14, Amo 9:2, Jon 2:2, Hab 2:5

Note: these references correspond to the Hebrew Text, and frequently do not match up exactly with the English references.

⁹ This is, of course, a lie. Joseph’s brothers were jealous of his favoritism from their father, so they sold him into slavery.

¹⁰ All Hebrew texts will be pulled from the Westminster Leningrad Codex, abbreviated as WTT for *Westminster Theological Text*

¹¹ All verse translations are my own unless otherwise specified.

together with lost loved ones, but a place simply of death. We cannot gain much more information about it than that from this passage. It is not a desirable place and it is not a place of hope, though it appears to be an inevitable reality, as Jacob recognizes that he will ultimately arrive there.

All throughout its usage in the Old Testament, however, the word *she'ol* carries with it a vague and loose meaning. For this reason, there are multiple ways in which it is expressed in English across different Biblical translations. In some contexts, *she'ol* has been translated as *grave*.¹² In these passages, the word is often used to simply denote the state of being dead. *She'ol* has also been translated as *the pit*. These are usually passages that refer to a great descent associated with entering *she'ol*, such as the Genesis verse I have translated above. Those translating wanted to convey a sense of depth and the idea that *she'ol* was under the earth. Lastly, many translations often use the word *hell* when translating *she'ol*. This is a great problem, as the English word *hell* denotes a place of punishment. While we learn from the New Testament that the abode of the dead apart from God is in fact a place of suffering, there is no understanding of this within the context of the Old Testament.¹³ Thus, translating *she'ol* as *hell* creates a false understanding in the mind of the English speaker, as the word *hell* carries with it a connotation of punishment, suffering, and pain, while *she'ol* does not convey that sense

¹² For this next section I will use the RSV as a reference. The theologian Alvah Hovey expounded upon the different possible meanings of *she'ol* and uses the RSV, and I will thus follow suit.

Hovey, Alvah. *The Meaning of She'ol in the Old Testament*. "The Old Testament Student," Vol. 5, No. 2. pp. 49-52. The University of Chicago Press. 1885.

¹³ *Ibid.* pp. 51

to the ancient Hebrew speaker.¹⁴ Further, there seems to be no unity or consensus among Biblical translators regarding the proper way to render she'ol into English. This problem creates disparity and uncertainty of meaning for non-Hebrew speakers approaching the Scripture. Despite being translated in a variety of ways, she'ol does not appear to convey different meanings in the original Hebrew context. Rather, it communicates an ambiguous but consistent meaning in almost every reference. English translators have interpreted this ambiguity as an inherent multiplicity of meanings, or polysemeity, within the word itself, freeing them to invoke whichever sense seemed best suited the context, rather than trying to convey a univocal meaning in each instance. There are also other times throughout the Old Testament where she'ol is commonly left untranslated and is used as a proper noun. This happens in 29 of the 66 occurrences of she'ol in the Old Testament.¹⁵ Every single occurrence of this is in a passage of poetry of some kind, either as God is speaking¹⁶ or in the poetic books.¹⁷ Alvah Hovey, in his article *The Meaning of She'ol in the Old Testament*, says this of the variances of use for she'ol in the Old Testament:

Upon examination, we do not discover in the Old Testament use of the word evidence that it always had more than one signification, or that its later signification was different from its earlier. But there are indications that *She'ol* was used to denote a dim, obscure unexplored region or state, and this circumstance seems to render the meaning of the word itself indefinite. Yet not in

¹⁴ Hovey also notes that every time *hell* is the preferred translation it is in one of the prophetic books.

¹⁵ Again, in the RSV. This figure maybe slightly different for other translations. Hovey, Alvah. *The Meaning of She'ol in the Old Testament*. "The Old Testament Student," Vol. 5, No. 2. pp. 50. The University of Chicago Press. 1885.

¹⁶ Almost anytime God himself speaks in the Old Testament, whether it is a poetic book or not, that passage will be written as poetry. Of course there are exceptions to this.

¹⁷ See Psa. 31:17 (30:18 in the Hebrew text) for example.

the sense of it being variable; the reality named was vague, obscure, but the name always meant that reality.¹⁸

Thus, it is apparent that the Israelite understanding of she'ol was itself indefinite, but consistent. Anything else that we learn about She'ol must be from the context of the surrounding verses, which I will examine now.

She'ol in Context

There is much that can be inferred about the nature of She'ol from the context of the verses in which that word is used and in passages that, though they may not use the word explicitly, give an understanding about the nature of the concept. For example, in the Psalms, we learn that both the righteous and the wicked will go down to She'ol. The first 5 verses of Psalm 88 are thus:

שִׁיר מִזְמוֹר לְבְנֵי קֹרַח לְמִנְצֵחַ עַל־מַחֲלַת לְעֻצּוֹת מַשְׁכִּיל לְהִימָן הָאֶזְרָחִי: יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי
יְשׁוּעָתִי יוֹם־צָעָקָתִי בַלֵּילָה נִגְדָּה:

תָּבוֹא לִפְנֵיהֶם תִּפְלֹתִי הִטָּה־אָזְנוֹךָ לְרִנָּתִי:

כִּי־שָׁבַעְתָּה בְּרָעוֹת נַפְשִׁי וַחֲיִי לְשָׂאוֹל הִגִּיעוּ:

נִחַשְׁתִּי עִם־יֹרְדֵי בֹר הָיִיתִי כַּגֹּבֶר אִין־אֵיל:

בַּמָּתִים תִּפְשִׁי כְמוֹ חֲלָלִים | שִׁכְבִּי קָבֶר אֲשֶׁר לֹא זְכַרְתָּם עוֹד וְהִמָּה מִיָּדְךָ נִגְזְרוּ:

Translation:

1. A Psalm for the sons of Korah, to the chief musician, on Mahalat Leannot. A song of Heman the Ezrahite.
O LORD God of my salvation, I have cried out day and night before you.
2. Let my prayer come before you; incline your ear to my cry.
3. For my soul is filled with troubles and my life draws near to She'ol.

¹⁸ Hovey pp. 50

4. I am considered with those who go down into a cistern.¹⁹ I am as a man who does not have strength.

5. As one loosed upon the dead, like one who lies in a tomb, whom you do not remember any longer; and they are cut off from your hand.

There are three very important things that we can learn from the context of this passage about the nature of She'ol. First, it is clear that this is a righteous person crying out to God. The speaker recognizes God as the giver of salvation, and prays to him. However, his soul is going into She'ol. Thus, She'ol cannot just be a place of punishment for unrighteous people, those who reject God, in contrast with our modern concept of hell. Hell is a place of torture, punishment, and suffering brought about by the unrighteous man refusing to receive the grace of God through faith. In the psalm above, the man is asking directly for grace, calling out to God to take notice of him and relieve him of his suffering. Both the righteous and the unrighteous end up in She'ol. Secondly, we can learn from this passage that, to the author of this psalm, She'ol is not seen as being as bad as his present suffering. Though he says that his life is headed down into She'ol, the psalmist is asking God for relief from his present sufferings, and is not asking to be saved from She'ol. It seems inevitable that he will ultimately go there, but that his present troubles are accelerating that process. Therefore, if we are to take this passage as characteristic,²⁰ then it seems that, to the mind of the Psalmist, She'ol cannot be avoided. Lastly, this passage tells us that She'ol is a place cut off from God. Those in She'ol are

¹⁹ I chose the word cistern in this verse to point out to the reader that, though very similar in meaning, this word is not she'ol. Translating it as "pit" would be misleading. The word here is בֹּאֵר (bowr), which is given in the Brown Driver Briggs Lexicon as "pit, cistern, or well - in poetry may metaphorically refer to the grave." BDB. 953

²⁰ See other examples of this sort of description of She'ol in Psa. 6:6, Pro. 9:18, Pro. 25:11, Ecc. 9:5, or Isa. 38:18 and their surrounding contexts.

forgotten and away from the hand of God. It is difficult to speculate exactly what this entails, but it is clear that it is not a place to be desired, as it is seemingly not an afterlife in communion with the Lord.

Where does this leave us thus far? We have established that She'ol in some Old Testament contexts is simply a place of death, for both righteous and unrighteous, and is a place not of punishment, but of continued existence in some form. It is apart from the hand of the Lord, and is thus not somewhere where anyone wishes to go, but all seem to end up. Is there any hope of escaping from She'ol? If we widen our lens to include the New Testament, it would seem that the answer is “yes,”²¹ but can that perspective be gained by studying the Old Testament alone? If what the New Testament says is true, that souls can be redeemed from She'ol, then we ought to see at least hints of that in the Hebrew Scriptures. Psalm 30:1-3 says this:²²

מִזְמוֹר שִׁיר־חֲנֻכַּת הַבַּיִת לְדָוִד: אֲרוּמָמָהּ יְהוָה כִּי דָלִיתָנִי וְלֹא־שָׁמַחַת אִיבִי לִי:

יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי שׁוּעָתִי אֵלֶיךָ וַתִּרְפָּאֵנִי:

יְהוָה הֶעֱלִיתָ מִן־שְׁאוֹל נַפְשִׁי חַיִּיתָנִי מִיַּרְדֵּי־כּוֹר:

Translation:

1. A psalm at the consecration of the house of David.
I will lift you up, O LORD, for you have drawn me out and not let my enemy rejoice over me.
2. O LORD my God, I cried to you and you healed me.
3. O LORD, you have raised my soul up from She'ol. You have given me life that I may not go down.

²¹ There is of course much debate and controversy regarding the ideas put forth in the New Testament. I will handle these issues in a later chapter.

²² Some editions have this as verses 1-4

There are certainly many possible interpretations of these verses with regard to She'ol. Did the psalmist die and God brought him from the dead? Or is it more simply that God has prolonged the psalmist's life and prevented him from entering She'ol prematurely? If we look closely at the verb usage in the third verse, we can see that the verb in the first clause is הָעֲלִיתָ (he'eletaa), which comes from the root עָלָה (alaah) meaning *he went up*. In Psalm 30:3 above, the verb is conjugated in the Hif'il stem in the imperfect tense. In Hebrew, Hif'il is the stem that denotes causation, meaning that the subject of the verb is causing the action to happen to the object of the verb. In this passage, the subject is יְהוָה (YHWH), who is causing the object of the verb נַפְשִׁי (nafshee, meaning *soul*), to go up. The implication of this is that *the soul was down somewhere and God brought it up*. Down where? From the context of the passage, it appears to have been She'ol. What can we learn from this passage? While it seems excessive and unwise to jump to the conclusion that the author was raised from the dead, there is some inference that God has saving power over those in She'ol and over those who could be in She'ol later.

In conclusion, we can learn a lot about the nature of She'ol from understanding the contexts of the passages in which we see the word. Though its meaning is certainly vague and nebulous, we have learned that it is different from the modern conception of hell, in that hell is distinctly a place of punishment, typically by fire,²³ while She'ol is not. Both the righteous and the unrighteous may go to She'ol, so having faith or righteousness in life does not stave off the possibility of entering. However, in spite of

²³ Though it is not always fire. Dante in his *Divine Comedy* famously has the bottom of hell being a frozen lake. I will focus on different conceptions of hell in a later chapter.

that, it seems that She'ol may not be a permanent destination, and that God has saving power over those dwelling there. This idea that there may be more actual life and livelihood to come after death instead of just mere existence gets developed in some of the later prophets. Attempting to understand the nature of this later conception of the “life to come” will be the focus of our next section of study.

Early Israelite Understanding of the Afterlife

Our study of the eschatology of the Israelites properly begins with the earliest concepts of the afterlife as put forth by the Old Testament and then develop those ideas chronologically through the text. The first books of the Hebrew Scriptures, the Torah, detail, among many other things, the beginnings of the people of Israel. The Israelites trace their lineage all the way back to the first people created by God, Adam and Eve. The Book of Genesis records the events of these first people. In the study the Israelite understanding of death and the afterlife, we must begin at the beginning. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.”²⁴ God saw that what he had created was perfect. It did not contain death. God created the first people, Adam and Eve, to be perfect and immortal. They were to live in the garden God had created for them and cultivate it and tend to the earth. God also promised that they would live in communion with him. In Genesis chapter 3, Adam and Eve bring sin into the world by eating of the forbidden fruit. Adam and Eve broke the only prohibitive rule that God had given them, and thus earned death as a punishment. God shows up to the garden and curses Eve,

²⁴Yes, the very beginning. Gen. 1:1

Adam, and the serpent who tricked Eve, but even in so doing, provides some hope for redemption. God says this in his curse to the serpent:²⁵

וְאִי־בָהּ אֶשְׂתִּית בֵּינִךָ וּבֵין הָאִשָּׁה וּבֵין זַרְעֶךָ וּבֵין זַרְעָהּ הִוא יִשׁוּפְךָ רֹאשׁ וְאַתָּה תִּשׁוּפֶנּוּ עָקֵב:

Translation:

15. I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall crush your head and you shall bruise his heel.”

Here is the first glimpse of the promise that all will be made right someday in the future.

Though it is subtle, and very likely was unclear to Adam and Eve, we can see that God is saying that ultimately the serpent, though he will cause much pain and suffering for mankind, will be crushed. The seed of the woman will eventually defeat the serpent.

Immediately after God proclaims his curses over Eve, Adam, and the serpent, the text says that God “made garments of skin”²⁶ for the people who were now aware of their shame. The significance of this event cannot be overlooked. Where does God get the “skin”? It is understood from the text that God must have killed an animal to make the skin coverings for Adam and Eve. Though it is not yet apparent at this time, God will make it clear to Israel later that sacrifice must be involved in the covering for sin.²⁷ God provides a temporary solution to the problem that Adam and Eve have created. It is clear to them that God’s solution is not going to completely fix the problem, since they still

²⁵ Gen. 3:15

²⁶ Gen. 3:21 NASB

²⁷ All throughout the Levitical Law it is made clear that sin must be paid for by a sacrifice. In the Genesis narrative, God provides a literal covering for Adam and Eve that parallels the covering for sin. For a full article on this topic, see Bromiley, G. W. “Atone.” in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* 1.352-60.

will die and sin still thrives in the world, but even in the very act of their disobedience, God is looking out for them and providing means for their redemption. This concept is integral to Israelite theology and eschatology. From the very entrance of death into the world, God begins to give grace to mankind and initiates his plan of redemption. From this point up until God gives the full law to Moses, there is really no fuller understanding of God's plan of redemption. There is simply the notion that at some point in the future, God is going to somehow right the wrong of sin.

Redemption Becoming Resurrection

Though the idea of redemption gets re-glimpsed all throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, there is still really a lack of understanding as to *how* God is going to go about redeeming the righteous. Job, for example, does not have hope in a resurrection for himself, saying "So man lies down and does not rise. Until the heavens are no longer, he will not awake nor be aroused out of his sleep."²⁸ However, as we progress further forward in the timeline of the Old Testament, the idea that resurrection will be the means of restoring and redeeming the world begin to emerge. The earliest clear reference to the possibility of the resurrection of the dead occurs in Isaiah 26:19:

יְהִי־נָּו מִתְּיָד נִבְלָתִי יִקְוֶמוּן הַקִּיצוֹ וְרִנְנוּ שִׁכְנֵי עֶפְרַי כִּי טַל אֹרֶת טִלָּה וְאֶרֶץ רִפְאִים תִּפְּיֵל:

Translation:

29. Your dead shall live; together with my body they will arise. Let them that dwell of dust awake and sing, for your dew of the grass is as the dew, and the earth shall cast out the dead.

²⁸ Job 14:12 NASB

This verse is given in the context of a song of praise, wherein the earth and God's people are crying out for God to save them and creation, crying out as with birth pains²⁹ and in desperation for God to act. According to Isaiah, God will respond to the crying out of the earth by bringing forth dead like dew, giving them new life and giving new life to creation. It seems as though this verse appears out of nowhere, with the idea of resurrection seemingly coming out of the blue. Despite the fact that we do not have textual references clearly expounding the doctrine of resurrection, it is unlikely that it springs forth first here. There are likely other times this idea was written previously, but that those are simply lost.³⁰ Whatever the case maybe, this is the earliest clear reference to the concept of a resurrection in the canon of Scripture.³¹

Elsewhere, a passage from the book of Ezekiel provides some of the clearest language describing resurrection. This text says:

Again He said to me, "Prophesy over these bones and say to them, 'O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD.' " "Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones, 'Behold, I will cause breath to enter you that you may come to life. 'I will put sinews on you, make flesh grow back on you, cover you with skin and put breath in you that you may come alive; and you will know that I am the LORD.' "

So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and behold, a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to its bone. And I looked, and behold, sinews were on them, and flesh grew and skin covered them; but there was no breath in them. Then He said to me, "Prophesy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, 'Thus says the Lord GOD, "Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they come to

²⁹ 26:17

³⁰ Paton, Lewis Bayles. *The Hebrew Idea of the Future Life: V. Yahweh's Relation to the Dead in the Later Hebrew Religion*. "The Biblical World," Vol. 35, No. 5. pp. 339-352. The University of Chicago Press. 1910.

³¹ Rosenblatt, Samuel. "Olam Ha-Ba." *Encyclopaedia Judaica*. Ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik. 2nd ed. Vol. 15. Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2007. 399-400.

life.””” So I prophesied as He commanded me, and the breath came into them, and they came to life and stood on their feet, an exceedingly great army.³²

In this passage, we not only have a clear directive from God to call back life from beyond the grave, but a description of how that process happens. God commands flesh back onto the dry bones first through his prophet, and then calls back the breath of life into them.

The idea of the breath of life is one of the first in all of Scripture. God fashions man out of the dust of the earth, and then breathes life into him. Lewis Bayles Patton discusses in his article entitled *The Hebrew Idea of the Future Life. I. Earliest Conceptions of the Soul*, saying

it was evident even to the most rudimentary intelligence that an invisible something had gone out of the man [at the point of death]. Most primitive peoples observed the fact that breathing ceases at death, and therefore identified the vital principle with the breath. In many languages the words for “spirit” denote primarily “breath” or “wind.”

This idea is clearly present in the Ezekiel passage above. Not only does God need to refresh the body, but put the breath of life back into the body. This shows a full re-creation, and parallels the Genesis account of the first creation of man very closely. The original hearers of Ezekiel’s prophecy would likely have been reminded of the creation story, which brings up an interesting potential point about the nature of resurrection: as in the first creation, God is clearly giving a brand-new body to the dead person. In Genesis, the new bodies given to Adam and Eve were without sin, and so it seems likely that the same concept would apply, though this may not be true.

³² Eze. 37:5-10 NASB

Bayles goes on to say that

primitive man believed not only in the distinction between soul and body but also in the ability of the soul to survive the catastrophe of death... Among the Semites this belief existed from the earliest times. The ancient tombs at Nippur and Tello in Babylonia contain the usual offerings to the dead... The most ancient Hebrew tombs in Palestine contain precisely the same deposits that are found in other Semitic tombs, and bear witness to the same conception of immortality that was held by the other Semitic peoples.³³

Bayles further points out that just because the Hebrew idea of the immortality of the soul is borrowed from other Semitic people does not necessarily contradict the additional possibility of having a coherent system within their own culture. This idea that the soul goes on after death fits in perfectly with the ideas we discussed above about the nature of She'ol. We have seen that She'ol seems to be simply a shadowy place of vague existence without physical form or location. Thus it would make sense that disembodied souls exist in such a place. However, the shadowy existence in She'ol is not, to the Israelite mind, a true afterlife. It is far more an "after-being." There is certainly not full life, but also not simply non-existence. It is only through the power of the Lord bringing about a full bodily resurrecting and re-breathing the breath of life into new flesh that true afterlife may be achieved.

Conclusions

In this chapter we have looked at both the nature of She'ol specifically, and also the larger nature of the Israelite afterlife from a more general perspective. Ultimately, we have come to the conclusion that She'ol is far different from our modern conceptions of

³³ Paton, Lewis Bayles. *The Hebrew Idea of the Future Life. I. Earliest Conceptions of the Soul*. "The Biblical World," Vol. 35, No. 1. pp. 9-10. The University of Chicago Press. 1910.

hell and heaven, where the underworld is a place of torment. To the ancient Israelites, She'ol is not a place of punishment, but shadowy existence; a destination after death for both the righteous and the unrighteous. Early ideas surrounding the nature of She'ol are very vague, but it is clear from these references that the prevailing thought was that no one escaped from going there. However, later on in the eschatological development, we can see that there is hope that the Lord may redeem souls out of She'ol, giving them new bodies and full new life. This new life is truly an “afterlife” as the state of being in She'ol is never seen as being alive. According to the passage we read from Ezekiel, it takes both the spirit of breath (the soul from She'ol) and the physical creation of a new body in order to bring about resurrection and fully enter into an afterlife. This idea of full resurrected life takes on its clearest expression in the Book of Daniel, in chapter 12, verses 3 and 4.

וְרַבִּים מִיִּשְׁנֵי אֲדַמַּת-עֶפֶר יִקְיִצּוּ אֵלֶּה לְחַיֵּי עוֹלָם וְאֵלֶּה לְחַרְפּוֹת לְדָרְאוֹן עוֹלָם:

וְהַמְּשֻׁכְּלִים יִזְהָרוּ כְּזֹהַר הַרְקִיעַ וּמִצְדֵּיקֵי הָרַבִּים כַּכּוֹכָבִים לְעוֹלָם וָעֶד:

Translation:

3. And a great abundance of those who slept in the dust of the earth shall come awake to life everlasting, and some to disgrace and everlasting contempt.

4. And those who have insight shall shine as the brightness of the firmament, and they who turn many to righteousness shall shine as the stars forever and ever.

CHAPTER THREE

Classical Greek Eschatology and Afterlife Thought in Prominent Greek Works

Introduction

In this chapter, I will look at the Classical Greek ideas of the afterlife.³⁴ There is not, of course, one uncontested idea of the afterlife put forth in Greek mythology, as we have seen with our study of Israel. In addition to that, we are dealing with a few hundred years of history and cultural development during the time period we call “Classical Greece.” Modern scholarship regards “Classical Greece” as the time period between 500 B.C. and the death of Alexander the Great in 323 B.C.³⁵ What is more, many of the ideas about eschatology that are prevalent in Classical Greece have their roots in Homer, who lived hundreds of years prior to this classical age. No one is quite sure when Homer lived, or even who he exactly was, but the great historian Herodotus claimed that Homer lived 400 years before his own time, which would put Homer around 850 B.C.³⁶ Thus, in this chapter, we will be studying the development of the eschatology of the Greeks from roughly 850 B.C. to the end of the Classical Age in 323 B.C., beginning with a study of the afterlife in both of Homer’s works, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

³⁴ This chapter will have a strong focus on the primary texts of Homer and Plato as their works give not only the clearest representation of Greek afterlife thought at the time, but were also the most influential in defining the afterlife for later generations.

³⁵ Martin, Thomas R. *Ancient Greece: from Prehistoric to Hellenistic Times*. pp. 94. Yale University Press. 1996.

³⁶ Strassler, Robert B. *The Landmark Herodotus: the Histories*. Anchor Publishing. Canada. 2009. 2.53

Afterlife in the Iliad

In the *Iliad*, an epic about war, there is certainly much death. All throughout the text are references to people dying and having their souls go down to Hades, the realm of the dead. Often, the text does not say any more than simply “he died and his soul went down to the realm of Hades.”³⁷ From the *Iliad* alone it is difficult to gain a full understanding of the nature of the Classical Greek view of the afterlife, but we can learn five important things: first, that the realm of the dead is under the earth; second, that it is ruled over by Hades, the lord of the dead; third, that it is divided into different regions; fourth, that all souls will go to the underworld; and fifth, that there are specific rites and rituals that need to be performed in order for a soul to gain entrance into the underworld.

Regarding the first point, the text of Book 20 of the *Iliad* says:

Poseidon heaving underground made the wide mainland quake
even to the craggy mountain peaks.

...

Hades, lord of the shades, bound from his throne
and gave a cry, in fear that earth, undone
by Lord Poseidon’s shaking, would cave in,
and the vile moldy kennels the gods hate
might stand revealed to mortals and immortals.³⁸

³⁷ See *Il.* 1.3, 7.129, 7.328, 22.52, 22.361, or 23.136 for prime examples of this.

³⁸ *Il.* 20.65-75.

It is clear from this text that Hades is located, at least in the mind of Homer, under the earth. Poseidon shakes the ground, and the god Hades is afraid that the earth will crack open and reveal the underworld to the living. In another passage, a woman named Althaia beats upon the ground to call upon Hades.

She called upon the gods,
beating the grassy earth with both of her hands
as she pitched forward on her knees, with cries
to the Lord of the Undergloom and cold Persephone
while tears wetted her veils - in her entreaty
that death come to her son.

In this passage, again we see the idea that the underworld is *under* the world. In fact, the Greek words χθόνα δύναι, meaning “to plunge into the earth” are used on multiple occasions to refer to death throughout the *Iliad*.³⁹ As a result of this idea of plunging into the earth, some of the gods are denoted as chthonic (coming from the word χθόνιος, meaning “earth”) gods.⁴⁰ These were the gods under the ground, such as Hades and Persephone. Though there were many gods associated with the earth, such as nymphs and lesser spirits, the epithet χθόνιος appears to be reserved for gods that were involved with souls in the realm of the dead.⁴¹

³⁹ See *Il.* 6.411 as an example.

⁴⁰ This word is used all throughout tragedy (see Eur. Alc. 237 as a prime example as an epithet of Hades), though is not specifically used in the *Iliad*. Having said that, it is clear that the ideas of chthonic deities are already well established by Homer’s time.

⁴¹ Fairbanks, Arthur. "The Chthonic Gods of Greek Religion." *The American Journal of Philology* 21, no. 3. 1900. pp. 243.

Arthur Fairbanks says,

Chthonic gods are gods of the realm beneath the earth, which is the realm of souls. They are not *gods* of the souls, for, strictly speaking, only living men worship gods. They are *rulers* of souls; while from the standpoint of men who offer them worship, they are gods whose home is below the earth, gods who are associated with souls. As gods, men invoke them when the souls of the dead are worshipped, when a man seeks help to avenge wrongs against the dead, or when souls of the dead are to be evoked by magic rites.”⁴²

Thus, only living people actually worshipped the gods, but the chthonic gods were those that ruled over the realm of the dead and abided under the earth, as opposed to most of the gods who lived on the mountain of Olympus.

The idea of the chthonic gods leads to the second important thing that the *Iliad* teaches about the nature of the Greek afterlife: that the underworld was ruled over by Hades, and named for him. Though this has already been mentioned, it is worth noting in further detail. Hades was a brother of Zeus and Poseidon. In Book 15 of the *Iliad*, Poseidon says of the three brothers,

Sons of Kronos all of us are, all three whom Rhea bore,

Zeus and I and the lord of those below.

All things were split three ways, to each his honor,

when we cast lots. Indeed it fell to me

to abide forever in the grey sea water;

Hades received the dark mist at the world's end,

and Zeus the open heaven of air and cloud.⁴³

⁴² *Ibid.* pp. 246.

⁴³ *Il.* 15.217-224.

Hades ruled over the underworld just as Poseidon ruled over the sea and Zeus over the heavens. All three were worshipped only by *living* men. The dead, as Fairbanks mentioned above, do not worship. Yet Hades maintained a level of control over them, and is poetically said to call the deceased down to his abode.⁴⁴ However, Hades was not punisher of the dead or tormenter of souls, unlike modern conceptions of hell where Satan tortures the wicked.⁴⁵ Hades simply presided over the dead and oversaw the underworld.⁴⁶

Though Hades did not rule over the dead as a tormenter, there was a place in the underworld for the punishment of the wicked. This is the third thing we can learn about the underworld from the *Iliad*, that it is divided into different sections. In Book 8, Zeus says,

If I catch anyone slipping away
with a mind to assist the Danaans or the Trojans,
he comes back blasted without ceremony,
or else he will be flung out of Olympus
into the murk of Tartarus that lies
deep down in the underworld. Iron the gates are,
brazen the doorslab, and the depth from hell

⁴⁴ *Il.* 22.361.

⁴⁵ The idea of Satan being the ruler of hell and the punisher of wicked souls is actually nowhere rooted in Hellenistic or Judaic eschatology, but comes into the collective Western consciousness (primarily) through medieval and renaissance art depicting Satan and demons torturing souls. We will discuss these ideas in a later chapter.

⁴⁶ Garland, Robert. *The Greek Way of Death*. London: Duckworth.1985. pp. 52.

as great as heaven's utmost height from earth.

Tartarus was the place where souls deserving to be punished after life go for eternity.

Though it was technically part of the underworld, Zeus here says that it was as far below Hades as earth is from heaven. Book 8 later tells us that Zeus banished his father Kronos there after overthrowing him and gaining control of the universe.⁴⁷ Tartarus is the closest thing to the modern conception of hell in Classical Greek mythology. As little as is known about Hades, much less is known about Tartarus. Generally, it was reserved for the most wicked of people and spirits, and most average people had no chance of finding themselves banished there after dying. Again, it is difficult to glean anything other than these fragmentary details from the account given in the *Iliad*. However, Homer must not have been creating an entirely new mythology, otherwise there would have been fuller explanation of it. Therefore, it is safe to suppose that there was a cultural understanding of Tartarus as being a place of punishment for the wicked and that only the vilest of people would be sent there. These ideas must have been readily known to Homer's audience to allow for such a minor comment about Tartarus to be made with no explanation.

Fourth, we can learn from the *Iliad* that ending life in Hades is inescapable.

Much like Joseph in Genesis from our discussion in the previous chapter, none of the characters in the *Iliad* have any expectation of the afterlife other than to reside in Hades. Hades is the end for all mortals. This idea is illustrated through one of the major themes of the *Iliad*: the idea of immortality of name. For the epic heroes of Homer's story, there

⁴⁷ *Il.* 8.544-549.

is no higher cause than glory and honor. This glory, being won through skill in battle, is the primary motivating factor behind the entirety of the Trojan war.⁴⁸ The central conflict of the *Iliad*, in fact, is the dishonor that king Agamemnon did to Achilles resulting in his refusal to fight for most of the story. The reason that honor and glory are such important concepts to the Greek heroes is because they understood the mortality of life and the finality of entrance into Hades. They had no hope for resurrection, redemption, or continued meaningful existence after death. The only meaning that lived on after they died was the memory of their names, and the only way names were remembered was through glory and honor won in life. In Book 9, Achilles says to the embassy who has come to persuade him to return to the fighting,

The portion's equal
whether a man hangs back or fights his best;
the same respect, or lack of it, is given
the brave man and the coward. One who's active dies
like the do-nothing. What least thing have I
to show for it, for harsh days undergone
and my life gambled, all these years of war?⁴⁹

Achilles understood that death is the end for all, and thus the only course in life is to win glory. Later in that same book he speaks of a prophecy given to him by his mother about the possibility of winning glory:

⁴⁸ There are of course other factors, such as the recovery of Helen, but many of the warriors (Achilles) make it clear that the real reason they have travelled to Troy was glory.

⁴⁹ *Il.* 9.388-394.

My mother, Thetis of the silvery feet,
tells me of two possible destinies
carrying me toward death: two ways:
if on the one hand I remain to fight
around Troy town, I lose all hope of home
but gain unfading glory; on the other,
if I sail back to my own land my glory
fails - but a long life lies ahead of me.⁵⁰

Achilles ultimately chose to die in battle and win eternal glory since he understood that death and Hades is the end either way. He had the hope that his name would be remembered after his death since the rest did not matter. Other characters hold similar mindsets throughout the epic, and thus we can say that the *Iliad* conveys an idea that Hades is inescapable.

Finally, we can learn from the *Iliad* that there are certain funeral rites that must be performed before a soul may enter the underworld. In Book 23, Achilles' cousin Patroclus has been killed by Hector, and Achilles is so consumed with rage toward Hector that he immediately sets out to kill him. So obsessed with the idea of murdering Hector is Achilles that he forgets to perform the funerary rites for Patroclus. This is odd, as Patroclus, during life, seems to be the only thing that Achilles consistently cares about.⁵¹

⁵⁰ *Il.* 9.500-508.

⁵¹ Achilles even claims at one point to no longer care for Briseis, his war-prize and the source of his dishonor on account of Agamemnon, even though his care for her was part of his reason for abdicating from the fight in the first place.

Yet upon his death, Achilles' rage blinds him to all but killing Hector. Thus, the spirit of Patroclus returns to Achilles to entreat him to perform the funeral rites.

Now the restful floods
of sleep, dissolving heartache, came upon him,
and soon forlorn Patroclus' shade came near -
a perfect likeness of the man, in height,
fine eyes, and voice, and dressed in his own fashion.

The image stood above him and addressed him:

“Sleeping so? Thou hast forgotten me,

Achilles. Never was I uncared for

in life but am in death. Accord me burial

in all haste: let me pass the gates of Death.

Shades that are images of used-up men

motion me away, will not receive me

among their hosts beyond the river. I wander

about the wide gates and the hall of Death.

Give me your hand. I sorrow.

When thou shalt have allotted me my fire

I will not fare here from the dark again.⁵²

This passage shows us a critical fact about the underworld in the minds of the Greeks:

souls were not allowed to enter unless the proper burial rites were performed. In the case

⁵² *Il.* 23.74-90.

of a hero such as Patroclus, these rites would include a time of mourning and contests to honor the dead, and finally a pyre on which the body would be burnt.⁵³ Through this we learn that the Greeks take death and burial very seriously. They believe that the body cannot enter into the realm of the dead unless the living work on their behalf. Of course, there are some exceptions to this idea, such as with sailors who are lost at sea, who are said to be buried by Poseidon's care and allowed to enter Hades.⁵⁴ The emphasis placed on the burial rites shows that this is a culture motivated by the idea of death. For the Homeric Greeks, there is a finality to death that seems contrary to their belief in a continued existence after death. However, when we examine the *Odyssey*, we will see that the life after death professed by the Classical Greeks is not life at all, but a mere mist of existence.

Afterlife in the Odyssey

Considering that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were both written at the same time, it is logical to assume that they put forth similar religious views, and in fact this is true. Thus, it is not necessary to re-hash all of the eschatological points made throughout the *Odyssey*, as they are in most regards identical to those of the *Iliad*. However, the *Odyssey* affords the audience something that the *Iliad* does not: a direct glimpse into the underworld. Thus we will focus on that episode for our discussion. In Book 11, Odysseus travels into the realm of the dead in order to find out how to return home. The

⁵³ Garland, Robert "Death in Greek Literature." *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Ancient Greece and Rome* vol. 1. Oxford University Press. 2010. pp. 371.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.* pp. 372.

sea-nymph Circe commanded Odysseus that the only way he would be able to make it home to Ithaca was to consult the prophet Tiresias. Unfortunately, Tiresias was dead, and Odysseus must travel to Hades to meet with him.⁵⁵ Thus Odysseus undertakes to find the underworld, and the narrator of the *Odyssey* tells the audience that Odysseus and his men sailed to the edge of the river of Oceanus, which bounded the earth, and that there they found the underworld, as per the direction of Circe the sea-nymph. This idea seems to contradict the ideas put forth in the *Iliad* about Hades being under the earth, but with an understanding that world was spherical, traveling to the other side of the sphere, past Oceanus, would essentially place someone “under” where they originally started.⁵⁶ If one had died, they would have travelled directly to Hades. However, in Odysseus’ case, being alive, a new route must be found to reach Hades.

Odysseus himself recounts the story of what happened to him and his men when they reach the shore of the dead:

When I had prayed sufficiently to the dead,
I cut the throats of the two sheep
and let the blood run into the trench,
and the ghosts came trooping up from the darkness
brides, young bachelors, old men worn out with toil,
maids who had been crossed in love,
and brave men who had been killed in battle,

⁵⁵ This account starts at *Od.* 10.487.

⁵⁶ Of course, the geography does not line up exactly right.

with their armor still smirched with blood;
they came from every quarter and flitted round the trench
with a strange kind of screaming sound that made me turn pale with fear.
When I saw them coming I told the men to be quick
and flay the carcasses of the two dead sheep
and make burnt offerings of them,
and at the same time to repeat prayers to Hades and to Persephone;
but I sat where I was with my sword drawn
and would not let the poor feckless ghosts
come near the blood till Tiresias should have answered my questions.⁵⁷

Odysseus goes on to recount the whole tale of his experience in the underworld, interacting with a great number of shades, from his own dead mother to the great Achilles, now deceased at Troy. The account of Odysseus' excursion in the underworld takes up the entirety of Book 11, and is often referred to as the *nekuia*, from the Greek *νέκυια*, meaning "a rite by which ghosts were called up and questioned about the future,"⁵⁸ referencing Odysseus' need to speak with Tiresias. The descriptions of the ghosts that Odysseus speaks with match the ideas laid out in the *Iliad* well, except that Odysseus learns that he is able to converse with the ghosts upon their consumption of the blood spilt from the sacrifice mentioned earlier.⁵⁹ This concept adds a new layer to our

⁵⁷ *Od.* 11.27-43.

⁵⁸ Liddell, Henry George, and Robert Scott. *A Greek-English Lexicon: with a Revised Supplement*. Edited by Henry Stuart Jones. Clarendon Press, 1996. (Hereafter referred to as LSJ)

⁵⁹ See *Od.* 11.84 for Tiresias drinking of the blood.

understanding of the Greek mythological underworld: though the shades existing down in Hades do not retain their former consciousness normally, it can be recalled to them through a sacrificial ritual. What does this tell about the nature of the underworld? First of all, it seems as though the souls exist in some state, not entirely of lack of consciousness, but of *reduced* consciousness. We have already seen in the *Iliad* that Patroclus was able to contact Achilles after death, and this episode from the *Odyssey* further confirms that idea.

Lastly, we can confirm from the *Odyssey* that Homer's idea of the underworld is one of permanence. Odysseus weeps over the loss of his mother, and even attempts to grasp hold of her and take her out of Hades, but she refuses, and says,

All people are like this when they are dead.

The sinews no longer hold the flesh and bones together;

these perish in the fierceness of consuming fire

as soon as life has left the body,

and the soul flits away as though it were a dream.⁶⁰

There is simply no change or hope of change for souls that exist in Hades. Most of the souls go on in their continued state of almost non-sentience, while some others retain a bit more of their memory, such as is the case with the soul of Achilles, whose words encapsulate perhaps the clearest expression of the nature of death in Homer:

Say not a word in death's favor;

I would rather be a paid servant in a poor man's house

⁶⁰ *Od.* 11.219-223.

and be above ground than king of kings among the dead.

But give me news about son;

is he gone to the wars and will he be a great warrior,

or is this not so?

...

could I but be as I then was and go

even for a short time to my father's house,

any one who tried to do him violence or supersede him

would soon feel my strength and invincible hands.⁶¹

Compounding the idea from Odysseus' mother that Hades is permanent, Achilles adds the idea that death is not desirable. He says "say not a word in death's favor" and that he would rather be a servant and alive than king of the dead. This sentiment is entirely counter to death as we have interacted with it thus far. To the other Homeric Greeks, death is the final end of all things, the great resting place, in contrast to a life of struggle. The great poet Sophocles puts this well in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, a play about a man who inadvertently kills his father and marries his mother:

"People of Thebes, my countrymen, look on Oedipus. He solved the famous riddle with his brilliance, he rose to power, a man beyond all power. Who could behold his greatness without envy? Now what a black sea of terror has overwhelmed him. Now

⁶¹ *Od.* 11.572-540.

as we keep our watch and wait the final day, count no man happy till he dies, free of pain at last.”⁶²

Yet Achilles speech seems to contradict that idea exactly. No matter how awful life may be (Achilles’ example is being a servant, which, given his nature, would be about the worst possible existence imaginable) it is still better than death. Thus, Homer seems to be offering commentary on the prevailing idea of the afterlife at the time of the Trojan War. Perhaps the people seemed to think that Hades was a restful, peaceful place, while Homer himself provides evidence to the contrary, maybe to reform the popular thinking about death.⁶³

Afterlife in Plato

The mythology expressed in Homer continues to be the prevalent view of the afterlife in Greek culture for a few hundred years. Of course, it grows and develops over time, but it does not undergo a radical shift until Plato begins to write in the late 4th Century B. C. Plato was a great philosopher, writer, thinker, and mathematician. He writes about a broad range of topics, and most of these works take the form of dialogue between Socrates, Plato’s teacher, and a number of different characters. For the purposes of this thesis, we will focus primarily on the *Phaedo*, in which Socrates, about to die, discusses the nature of the soul and the afterlife with his companions. The dialogue is the last of Plato’s four works detailing the accusation, trial and death of Socrates, and is told

⁶² *Soph.* OT 1678-1684.

⁶³ Scholars do not know exactly who Homer was, or even that he was one single person. Thus it is impossible to actually tell the worldview of the author by anything other than the text itself, and even so I am just speculating based on the nature of Achilles’ speech.

from the perspective of one of Socrates' students, Phaedo of Elis, hence the name of the work.⁶⁴ Early on in the work, Socrates claims that philosophers such as himself have actually been preparing themselves for death their whole lives:

Ordinary people seem not to realize that those who really apply themselves in the right way to philosophy are directly and of their own accord preparing themselves for dying and death. If this is true, and they have actually been looking forward to death all their lives, it would of course be absurd to be troubled when the thing comes for which they have so long been preparing and looking forward.⁶⁵

Socrates goes on to say that since philosophers care nothing about the pleasures of the body, not concerning himself with food or drink or good clothing, that the philosopher must be concerned with things of the mind. Simmias, another of his students, agrees with him.⁶⁶ Then Socrates says that since the philosopher is concerned with the things of the mind, that he is thus concerned with the things of the soul and its purification, since the mind and the soul are linked. Therefore, since death is the release of the soul from the body, Socrates considers the soul to have been freed at death. Going further, he says,

The desire to free the soul is found chiefly, or rather only, in the true philosopher.

In fact the philosopher's occupation consists precisely in the freeing and separation of soul from body. Isn't that so?

[Simmias:] Apparently.

⁶⁴ It is not the goal of this thesis to discuss the historical accuracy of Plato's works, or whether or not these events actually occurred. We are only interested in the ideas presented and how they shape cultural ideas.

⁶⁵ *Phaedo* 64a.

⁶⁶ In almost all of the platonic dialogues involving multiple characters, Socrates seems to have one disciple who always just agrees with him about anything. In the *Phaedo*, it is Simmias.

Well then, as I said at the beginning, if a man has trained himself throughout his life to live in a state as close as possible to death, would it not be ridiculous for him to be distressed when death comes to him?

[Simmias:] It would, of course.

Then it is a fact, Simmias, that true philosophers make dying their profession, and that to them of all men death is least alarming.⁶⁷

In short, to Socrates (and thus Plato), death is not to be feared, but embraced. This idea was novel and radically different from the conception of death held by most men before or since.⁶⁸ The underlying assumption that leads Plato to this conclusion is that matter is inherently flawed and evil.

Plato first introduces the concept of the flawed state of the physical world in the *Republic*, a dialogue about the nature of justice involving the creation of a hypothetical society. Using the idea of beauty as an example, Plato recognizes that there is a somewhat objective standard by which mankind denotes things as beautiful. Therefore, there must be some abstract concept of beauty that is the true nature of the thing itself. Plato calls this the “Form of the Beautiful.” This thing cannot be physical, or else it would simply fall into the category of beautiful things as perceived by mankind and cease to be the objective standard of beauty itself. Extending this concept, he says that there is a Form of every virtue, and the form of goodness (“The Form of the Good”) itself is the

⁶⁷ *Phaedo* 67d.

⁶⁸ I make a sweeping generalization here with the understanding that the fear of death, simply due to its unknowability, is common to most but not completely universal.

highest of these.⁶⁹ Thus, if the highest idea of perfection of any one thing is an imperceptible, non-physical Form, then all of matter must be flawed, or simply less ideal. For Plato, the idea of something being less-than-perfect is equivalent to it being evil, since, according to the idea of the Forms, the highest virtue that can be attained is perfection.

If we accept that matter is inherently flawed, then the bodily part of man is evil, and it is the desire of the soul to leave the body. Socrates makes this point in the *Phaedo*. However, he takes it even further, saying that not only does the soul desire to flee the body, it is in fact immortal, existing both before and after death. Socrates uses what scholars have come to call “the Argument from Recollection”⁷⁰ and combines this with his idea of the Forms. He explains that if humanity has some concept of the Form of the Beautiful, for example, that such knowledge must have existed within the soul from before birth, as no one understands when exactly he understood the nature of beautiful things. If that is true, the soul must have existed prior to birth, and thus will exist after death.

It is with these two ideas in hand; that the soul is immortal, and that death is actually freeing the soul from the imperfect prison of the body, that Socrates embraces his own death so nonchalantly, drinking the poison required of him with no hesitation - “quite calmly and with no sign of distaste, he drained the cup in one breath.”⁷¹ Socrates’ last words also convey a sense of serenity. He says “Crito, we ought to offer a cock to

⁶⁹ The discussion of the Forms takes up much of Book V in the *Republic*.

⁷⁰ Gulley, Norman. *Plato's Theory of Knowledge*. London, 1962. pp. 1–47.

⁷¹ *Phaedo* 117c.

Asclepius. See to it, and do not forget.”⁷² Despite the apparent simplicity of Socrates’ last words, they provide a beautiful, crisp snapshot of Platonic theory regarding death. Asclepius was the Greek cult god of healing, and sacrifices would be offered to him as thanks for healing. While many would say death is the farthest thing possible from healing, Socrates seems to think that death itself is the healing for his soul.⁷³

Conclusions

In this chapter, we have studied the mythology and eschatology of Classical Greece from the perspectives of arguably the two most influential authors of their time, Homer and Plato. In Homer’s *Iliad*, death is prominent. It is a story of war, and many characters die. Consistently, Homer describes them as “going down to Hades,” making it clear that the realm of the dead was under the earth. Hades, one of the most powerful of the gods, ruled over the underworld named after him. To the characters in Homer, there is no escape from the inevitability of death and no alternative to death in Hades, with the exception of Tartarus, a special place of punishment for wicked souls. What is more, some sense of consciousness is maintained by souls after death. This notion is confirmed in both the *Iliad* by the appearance of the shade of Patroclus, and in the *Odyssey* through Odysseus’ trip to the very underworld itself and interaction with many of the souls there. However, despite the fact that dead souls maintained some vague notion of existence beyond death, the ghost of Achilles conveys to Odysseus that it is not a pleasant

⁷² *Phaedo* 118a.

⁷³ There are, of course, other explanations for Socrates’ last words. See Waterfield, Robin. *Why Socrates Died: Dispelling the Myths*. W.W. Norton and Company. New York, 2009.

existence. Achilles, despite winning for himself eternal fame and glory, expresses to Odysseus that he would rather have been a servant in the estate of a farmer than lord of the dead.

Moving forward in history, Plato introduces two important concepts into the Greek eschatology: first that the soul is immortal and that its desire is to enter into the spiritual (or simply non-physical) realm of the Forms, and secondly, that the reason it desires to escape the physical world is that matter is evil and that the soul actually attains perfection once it has been freed of the prison of the body. These two concepts underly most of Platonic philosophy, and grow to shape Western culture and thought even up to this day.

In the next chapter, we will begin to see how the two radically different eschatologies we have studied thus far, in the Old Testament and in Classical Greece, begin to meld together and jointly shape the worldview of Christianity.

CHAPTER FOUR

Septuagint Translation, New Testament Eschatology, and Early Church Fathers

Introduction

Now that we have an understanding of death and the afterlife as presented in both the Old Testament and in Ancient Greece, we can begin to see how these two eschatologies blend together into the ideas that shape Christianity. In this chapter, we will see how the specific translation of the Septuagint causes conflict of meaning with words associated with the afterlife and how these conflicts of meaning cause fundamental misinterpretations of the true nature of the afterlife as expressed in the Old and New Testaments. We will also undertake to look at the eschatological ideas of the New Testament. The New Testament refines, clarifies (for the most part), and expands upon the ideas of the Old Testament. We will find that it does not contradict the Old Testament, but rather elaborates upon and confirms the ideas presented therein. We will also begin to see the root of the problem in question here: that there is a fundamental difference between the Greek concept of the immortality of the soul and the Christian concept of the resurrection of the body.

Overview of the Septuagint

According to legend, King Ptolemy II Philadelphus, who reigned from 309 to 246 B.C. in Alexandria, commissioned a translation of the Hebrew Torah into Greek for the Alexandrian Library. In this legend, Ptolemy collected 72 scholars, placed them in

separate chambers without first telling them what he intended them to do, and then asked them to translate the Torah. Miraculously, (supposedly) all 72 of them returned with *identical* translations, and thus it could be said that the translation must have been divinely inspired. This legend first appears in the pseudepigraphal *Letter of Aristeas* and is corroborated by the great Jewish historian Josephus in his work *Antiquities of the Jews*.⁷⁴ However, scholars today consider it fictitious.⁷⁵ Even though the likelihood that all 72 scholars came to the exact same translation is low, the name for this translation is still derived from this idea: *versio septuaginta interpretum*, "translation of the seventy interpreters," and is thus today called the Septuagint, abbreviated as LXX (the Roman numerals for 70). Despite the probably fabricated story regarding the original translation of the Septuagint, it is likely nonetheless that it originated in the 3rd century B.C. The Greek is representative of early Koine, and certain editorial footnotes date to the early 2nd century.⁷⁶

Over the next few centuries, the rest of the Old Testament was translated. Unfortunately, it is not known when, where, or by whom the rest of the books were translated. In fact, the only way scholars know that this endeavor was not undertaken by one person is the presence of varying degrees of Hebrew and Greek idiomatic phrases. Some texts more heavily interpret Hebrew idioms and translate them into Greek (such as

⁷⁴ Josephus, *Antiquities* XII:ii passim.

⁷⁵ The narrative is "open to the gravest suspicion, and the letter abounds with improbabilities and is now generally regarded as more or less fabulous," observed Thackeray, H. St.J. in: *The Letter of Aristeas, with an Appendix of the Ancient Evidence on the Origin of the LXX*. "The Classical Review" August–September ed. 1919. pp. 335-336.

⁷⁶ Lee, J.A.L., *A Lexical Study of the Septuagint Version of the Pentateuch*. "Septuagint and Cognate Studies" University of Chicago Press, 1983. pp. 19.

Daniel or Proverbs), while others attempt to follow the original Hebrew more closely (such as Kings or Chronicles).⁷⁷ Though all of this is unclear, full manuscripts of the Septuagint dating to the 1st century B. C. have been found in Egypt.⁷⁸ In this final form the Septuagint contains all of the books of the Western canon, including even those not present in the Hebrew text.⁷⁹

By the time of Christ, the Septuagint was complete and in wide circulation. Only a small fraction of the Roman world at the time could speak Hebrew or Aramaic, but Greek was the *lingua franca*. The use of the Septuagint was so widespread, even the apostles quoted from it when writing their letters that would later be the New Testament. Paul, in fact, uses direct quotes from the Septuagint more frequently than paraphrases from the Hebrew text.⁸⁰ Of course, the New Testament is written in Greek, so it makes sense to be using the Septuagint as a source text, but having the apostles, and even possibly Christ himself, speak from the Septuagint adds great weight to its legitimacy.⁸¹

Scholars today believe the Septuagint to be so widespread as to be the only and definitive

⁷⁷ Swete, H. B., *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, revised by R.R. Ottley, 1914; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1989. pp. 124.

Dines, Jennifer Mary. *The Septuagint*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2004. pp. 62.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* pp. 89.

⁷⁹ These works are Tobit, Judith, The Wisdom of Solomon, The Wisdom of Jesus son of Sirach, Baruch, The Letter of Jeremiah (which later became chapter 6 of Baruch in the Vulgate), additions to Daniel (The Prayer of Azarias, the Song of the Three Children, Susanna, and Bel and the Dragon), additions to Esther, 1 Maccabees, 2 Maccabees, 3 Maccabees, 4 Maccabees, 1 Esdras, The Book of the Odes, including the Prayer of Manasseh, the Psalms of Solomon, and Psalm 151.

⁸⁰ Sperber, Alexander. *New Testament and Septuagint*. "Journal of Biblical Literature" 1940. pp. 193.

See Rom. 4:3, 13:9, or 1Cr. 9:9, which quote Gen 15:6, Ex. 20:13, and Deut. 25:4 respectively for examples of this.

⁸¹ Though the New Testament is written in Greek, and thus all of Christ's speech comes down to us in Koine, it is not known if Christ actually *spoke* in Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic, or some combination of the three.

form of scripture in use by anyone other than the Israelite religious orders.⁸² Even members of these orders would use the Septuagint if they were a part of a synagogue body in a non-Hebrew speaking region.⁸³

The Critical Problem

Because of the widespread use of the Septuagint in Christian communities, the subtle nuances and differences from the original Hebrew text often went unnoticed, as many Christian communities throughout the Roman world were made up of Greek speaking peoples. Of those nuances, this thesis concerns itself with the ideas of the afterlife. As stated in a previous chapter, in the Hebrew text of the Old Testament the word she'ol is used, in various forms, 66 times. Of those 66, the Septuagint translates "she'ol" as "hades" in all but four.⁸⁴ Given the knowledge we have already explored in previous chapters, this should be taken with no small consequence. We have already explored that the nature of She'ol is very vague and with almost no definition given throughout the Old Testament. It is a shadowy place of death, and not more is known. Hades, in contrast, is a legendary place with extensive mythology associated with it, from the palace of the God Hades himself to the punishments of Tartarus. These two eschatological destinations could not be more different. Yet the Septuagint consistently translates she'ol as hades. This created in many early Christians a false understanding of the nature of death and the afterlife. Many of these early Christians had just converted

⁸² Swete, H. B., *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek*, revised by R.R. Ottley, 1914; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1989. pp. 19.

⁸³ *Ibid.* pp. 195.

⁸⁴ These four 2Sam 22:6, Job 24:19, Ps. 115:6, and Pro. 23:14.

from Greco-Roman paganism, and prior to their conversion, they believed that they were actually destined for Hades, along with everyone else. Thus, upon reading “hades” in the Old Testament Scriptures, the uneducated would not have had an understanding of it as any different of an afterlife belief system than the religious tradition from which they had recently converted. Even well-educated Greeks and Romans would have been biased in their impressions of the afterlife by the Platonic and Homeric overtones of their culture.

There is inherent conflict in the collision of the two worldviews, whether the first Christians recognized it or not. We have already established that the Greek eschatology, especially post-Platonism, is incompatible with that of the Old Testament. Greek eschatology seeks for freedom from the physical world, with death being the final release of the soul from the prison of the body. We have seen these ideas in both pre- and post-Platonic theory. Hebrew eschatology seeks the redemption of the physical world and body through resurrection. Ultimately, it comes down to this simple contrast: according to Greek Platonism, matter is evil, *to be escaped*; according to Judaism, matter is broken, *to be redeemed*. This contrast is nowhere better highlighted than in the disparity of the accounts of the death of Socrates and the death of Christ. The great German theologian Oscar Cullmann expresses this contrast well:

Plato shows us how Socrates goes to his death in complete peace and composure. The death of Socrates is a beautiful death. Nothing is seen here of death’s terror. Socrates cannot fear death, since indeed it sets us free from the body. Whoever fears death proves that he loves the world of the body, that he is thoroughly entangled in the world of sense. Death is the soul’s great friend. So he teaches; and so, in wonderful harmony with his teaching, he dies— this man who embodied the Greek world in its noblest form.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Cullmann, Oscar. *Immortality of the Soul; Or, Resurrection of the Dead?* Epworth Publishing. 1958. pp. 8-9.

Going on, Cullmann describes the death of Christ:

Jesus is afraid, though not as a coward would be of the men who will kill Him, still less of the pain and grief which precede death. He is afraid in the face of death itself. Death for Him is not something divine: it is something dreadful. Jesus does not want to be alone in this moment. He knows, of course, that the Father stands by to help Him. He looks to Him in this decisive moment as He has done throughout his life. He turns to Him with all His human fear of this great enemy, death. He is afraid of death... And then the death-scene itself. With sublime calm Socrates drinks the hemlock; but Jesus (thus says the Evangelist, Mark 15:34— we dare not gloss it over) cries: ‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’ And with another inarticulate cry He dies (Mark 15:37). This is not ‘death as a friend’. This is death in all its frightful horror. This is really ‘the last enemy’ of God.⁸⁶

Cullmann expresses well the great chasm of philosophical and religious differences between the Greek idea and the Hebrew (now Christian) one. To the Greek, death ultimately is a friend, a reliever from the struggles of life. But to the Christian, as Cullmann so states, death is a horror, an abomination even.

Despite the disparity in these two worldviews, they both begin with the same premise, gained from a critical examination of the world. That premise is simply this: there is something wrong with the world. Both of these societies recognize the existence of evil, and see it as an aberration.⁸⁷ However, from here they diverge: Ancient Greeks assumed that evil is an inherent property of the physical world, while ancient Israelites believed that the world was good when God first created it, but was corrupted by humanity in rebellion against God. Thus, to the mind of the Greek, there was nothing to be done about evil, and that the best that could be hoped for was escape from the physical

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 10.

⁸⁷ Of course, this is a gross oversimplification of the issue, but is not the concern of this thesis.

world. Directly antithetical to this idea, the Israelites expectantly waited for God to redeem the world and destroy evil.

As we have already seen in previous chapters, the distinct worldviews of these cultures directly influence and shape their respective eschatologies, with Hades and She'ol being very different places with very different functions. Yet the Septuagint seems to make no apparent distinction. Naturally, this caused problems for the early church.

New Testament - Hades and Gehenna

In order to fully understand the nature of the difficulty faced by the early church in sorting out all of the conflicts of eschatology, we must first gain an understanding of the nature of the afterlife as it is expressed in the New Testament. Of course, the document that Christians today consider as Scripture, with as much weight and authority as the Hebrew Bible, did not exist at the time of the first followers of Christ. Letters were beginning to be written and circulated, but would not be compiled, organized, and recognized as Scriptural for a few hundred years.⁸⁸ Despite this, the Gospels and the writings of the apostles were considered authoritative immediately and were spread and copied quickly. These influenced the growing church, and provided some glimpse into the afterlife. The Gospels in particular, especially the direct words of Christ, present a view of life after death that is radically different than anything expressed prior to it. However, it is important to note that Christ speaks in ways his audience will understand,

⁸⁸ Eusebius' *Church History*, written around 330 A.D. contains the earliest record of the names of the books in the full New Testament canon as we know them today.

and thus does not ever clearly outline a view of the afterlife, but instead uses metaphors.⁸⁹

Though this is the case, there is much to be learned from a study of New Testament afterlife teachings. First of all, though the New Testament uses the word “hades” to refer to the afterlife just as the Septuagint does, in all eleven occurrences of the word in the text, the author (or speaker) is clearly referring to something other than the Greek notion of what Hades is.⁹⁰ This is clear simply from the context of the passages in which Hades is mentioned. As we have seen before, this disparity of language is the crux of the issue at hand. The word “hades” is first used in in the New Testament in Matthew 11:23,

καὶ σύ, Καφαρναούμ, μὴ ἕως οὐρανοῦ ὑψωθῇς; ἕως Ἰδαίου καταβήσῃ· ὅτι ἡ ἐν Σοδόμοις ἐγὼ νήθησαν αἱ δυνάμεις αἱ γὰρ νόμιμα ἐν σοί, ἔμινον ἄν μέχρι τῆς σήμερον.

Translation:

23. And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted up to heaven? You will be brought down to Hades. If in Sodom had been performed the miracles that I performed in you, it would remain to this day.

In this verse, Jesus is speaking woes on behalf of Capernaum as having rejected his teachings and being unresponsive and unrepentant having seen his miracles. He compares Capernaum to Sodom which was destroyed by God in Genesis 19. To the audience, this would have been a severe insult against Capernaum, as Sodom was found to not even have five righteous people living in it, and thus God rained down fire upon it and wiped it from the face of the earth. To say of Capernaum “Sodom would have listened to the things I said in your midst and repented, but you did not” is a grave

⁸⁹ Kyrtatas, Dimitris J. *The Origins of Christian Hell*. “Numen” 56, no. 2. 2009. pp. 283.

⁹⁰ “Hades” is used in Matt. 11:23, 16:18, Luke 10:15, 16:23, Acts 2:27, 2:31, 1 Cor. 15:55, Rev. 1:18, 6:8, 20:13, 20:14.

accusation, and is effectively saying “you all are worse than the people of Sodom.” Thus, it is clear that the “Hades” referenced in the verse is not the same Hades we have been encountering thus far in previous mythology. Given the context, this Hades must be closer in nature to Tartarus as we have thus far seen than to the Hades of Greek mythology. Why is it then that “hades” is the word used? By the time of Christ, though it still carries with it some of its original connotation, hades has come to mean primarily, simply, “death.” In every instance (except in the Book of Revelation, which I will discuss shortly) hades carries with it the idea of a place of punishment or suffering, closer in line with the modern conception of hell, unlike the idea of Hades that we have seen thus far. In Luke 16 for example, as a part of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, the text says

καὶ ἐν τῷ Ἅιδῃ ἐπάρας τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτοῦ, ὑπάρχων ἐν βασάνοις, ὁρᾷ Ἀβραάμ ἀπὸ μακρόθεν καὶ Λάζαρον ἐν τοῖς κόλποις αὐτοῦ. καὶ αὐτὸς φωνήσας ἔειπεν ὁ ἄρῃς Ἀβραάμ, ἐλέησόν με καὶ πέμψον Λάζαρον ἵνα βάψῃ τὸ κρῖνον τοῦ δακτύλου αὐτοῦ ἐν ὕδατι καὶ καταψύξῃ τὴν γλῶσσάν μου, ὅτι ὀδυνῶμαι ἐν τῇ φλογὶ ταύτῃ.⁹¹

Translation:

23. And in Hades he lifted up his eyes, being in torment, and saw Abraham from great length and Lazarus in his bosom.

24. And he, having cried out, said “Father Abraham, have mercy on me and send Lazarus, that he might dip point of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am suffering in this flame.”

According to the parable, during his life, the rich young man refused feed the poor righteous Lazarus, and now in death is suffering in Hades, *being burned alive*.⁹² This

⁹¹ Luke 16:23-24.

⁹² Well, technically “*being burned dead*,” but that is not the idiom.

again is far different from the Hades mythology developed through our study and seems to align with the ideas of hell as we know them today. 1 Corinthians 15:55 appears to present a similar idea:

οὐ σου, ἄνατ , τὸ κέντρον; οὐ σου, Ἄϊδη, τὸ νῖκος;

Translation:

55. Where of you, Death, is the sting? Where of you, Hades, is the victory?"

This again brings a negative sense to Hades as having a “sting” and a “victory” that is being defeated by the Lord. At this point, we can clearly see that the “Hades” of the New Testament is certainly different than the Hades of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and also divergent from the concept of She’ol. As seen in our earlier study, She’ol never appears to be a place of punishment or suffering; just shadowy existence.

In the Book of Revelation, Hades is personified as an enemy of God and a harbinger of the apocalypse, ultimately defeated by God himself after the Last Judgment. The word is used four times:

1:18. καὶ ὁ ὢν, καὶ ἐγ νόμην ν κρὸς καὶ ἰδοὺ ὢν ἰμι ἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰ νων, καὶ ἔχω τὰς κλ ἰς τοῦ θανάτου καὶ τοῦ Ἄιδου.

Translation:

18. And I am the living one, and I was dead but behold that I am alive for eternity, and I have the keys of death and of Hades.

6:8. καὶ ἶδον, καὶ ἰδοὺ ἵππος χλωρός, καὶ ὁ καθήμενος ἐπάνω αὐτοῦ, νομα αὐτῷ Ὁ ἀνατος, καὶ ὁ Ἄιδης ἠκολούθησεν αὐτῷ, καὶ ἐδόθη αὐτοῖς ἐξουσία ἐπὶ τὸ τέταρτον τῆς γῆς, ἀποκτείνειν ἐν ὁμοφάτῃ καὶ ἐν λιμῷ καὶ ἐν θανάτῳ καὶ ὑπὸ τῶν θηρίων τῆς γῆς.

Translation:

8. And see, a pale horse, and the one sitting on it, his name is Death, and Hades followed with him, and to them was given authority upon a fourth of the earth to kill by the sword, and by famine, and by death, and by the beasts of the earth.

20:13. καὶ ἔδωκεν ἡ θάλασσα τοὺς ἐν αὐτῇ, καὶ ὁ θάνατος καὶ ὁ Ἅιδης ἔδωκαν τοὺς ἐν αὐτοῖς, καὶ ἐκρίθησαν ἕκαστος κατὰ τὰ ἔργα αὐτῶν.

Translation:

13. And the sea gave up the dead who were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead who were in them, and they were judged, each of them according to their works.

20:14. καὶ ὁ θάνατος καὶ ὁ Ἅιδης ἐβλήθησαν εἰς τὴν λίμνην τοῦ πυρός. οὗτος ὁ θάνατος ὁ δὲ ὅτι ρός ἐστιν, ἡ λίμνη τοῦ πυρός.

Translation:

14. And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.

In all four of these verses, the idea that Hades expresses is one closely related to “Death,” and is in fact mentioned along with θάνατος in every verse. Hades is personified in these verses, in chapter 6 verse 8 as a horseman, and in chapter 20 verse 13 as some sort of being with the power to give up of some of the dead. In these verses, though highly metaphorical and allegorical, Hades appears to be a place of waiting before the final judgment of the Lord. There is no mention of souls being punished or relieved from punishment upon coming out of Hades, but simply that they were held there until the appropriate time. In fact, Hades itself is cast into the Lake of Fire along with Death in chapter 20 verse 14. A lake of fire is exactly how modern Westerners view hell, and is clearly a place of torment, and thus Hades must be distinct and different. What is more so, *Hades is no longer needed*. Hades is essentially “thrown out” with the garbage in the Last Judgment. Thus, it cannot be the final place of punishment for wicked sinners. It must serve a different purpose.

In addition to the New Testament's use of *hades*, there is another word used to represent the afterlife for the unrighteous: *γέεννα* (*Ge-enna*). This term is simply a transliteration of the Hebrew *גֵּי הִנּוֹם* (*Ge-Hinnom*), which means “valley of Hinnom.” Hinnom was a valley to the south of Jerusalem, which, throughout the Old Testament, is strongly associated with pagan idolatry and child sacrifice.⁹³ Except for two mere geographical references in the Book of Joshua, every single mention of Hinnom in the Old Testament Scriptures is a reference to child sacrifice to some Canaanite god, usually Molech.⁹⁴ Thus, it was naturally despised and hated by YHWH-fearing Israelites. Under the rule of Josiah, even though these horrible sacrifices were abolished, Israelites so hated and abhorred Hinnom that they began to throw their refuse and trash there. Even more so, often the rotting carcasses of animals or the unburied bodies of executed capitally-offending criminals were added to the trash heap. Thus, the place was often set alight to consume the refuse and sulphur was typically added to keep it burning.⁹⁵ As a result, Hinnom became not only a despicable place in the mind of Israel, but also a literal hell-on-earth: a continual fire burning, full of the rotting flesh of criminals, seen as the seat of pagan demonic power and evil in Judah.

In the New Testament, Jesus frequently speaks of the valley of Hinnom as a metaphor for a place of eternal punishment. All but one of the uses of the word in the

⁹³ BDB pp. 244 - Strong's Concordance #2011.

⁹⁴ All of these references are: Josh. 15:8, 18:16, 2 Kings 23:10, 2 Chron. 28:3, 33:6, Neh. 11:30, Jer. 7:31, 7:32, 19:12, 19:16, 32:35.

⁹⁵ Montgomery, James A. *The Holy City and Gehenna*. "Journal of Biblical Literature." Vol. 27, No. 1. pp. 24-47. The Society of Biblical Literature. 1908.

Kyrtatas, Dimitris J. *The Origins of Christian Hell*. "Numen" 56, no. 2. 2009. pp. 284.

New Testament are part of the teachings of Christ himself.⁹⁶ These verses, along with the verses about the lake of fire discussed above, present the clearest picture of punishment for the wicked in the afterlife. For example, in Matthew 5:22 Jesus says

ἐγὼ δὲ λέγω ὑμῖν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ὀργιζόμενος τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ἔνοχος ἔσται τῇ κρίσει· ὁ δ' ἂν πη τῷ ἀδελφῷ αὐτοῦ ῥακά, ἔνοχος ἔσται τῷ συνδρίῳ· ὁ δ' ἂν πη Μωρέ, ἔνοχος ἔσται εἰς τὴν γέενναν τοῦ πυρός.

Translation:

22. And I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable in the judgment; and moreover, if anyone might say to his brother “Rhaka!” he will be liable to the Sanhedrin; and moreover, if anyone might say “Fool!” he will be liable into Gehenna of fire.

As I have already expressed, the Hinnom valley was often used as a disposal place for the bodies of criminals. When Jesus gave this teaching, his original audience would have reacted to differently to his mention of Gehenna than would a modern audience. The idea that someone who calls his brother a fool might be thrown into the fire heap reserved for murderers would have been revolutionary and foreign to them. The word “rhaka” is a transliteration from an Aramaic word meaning “empty-headed.” That someone might go before the council of the Sanhedrin and be convicted, executed, and have their body thrown into Gehenna for calling someone empty-headed is dramatic and impactful to say the least. Though in this verse alone, Christ does not appear to be talking about an afterlife conception, when paired with the other times he discusses Gehenna, the picture becomes clearer.

⁹⁶ There are 12 uses in the New Testament. Christ uses γέεννα in Matt. 5:22, 5:29, 5:30, 10:28, 18:9, 23:15, 23:33, Mark 9:43, 9:45, 9:47, and Luke 12:5. The other reference is James 3:6.

In Luke 12:4-5 Jesus says

Λέγω δὲ ὑμῖν τοῖς φίλοις μου, μὴ φοβηθῆτ ἀπὸ τῶν ἀποκτ ννόντων τὸ σῶμα καὶ
μ τὰ ταῦτα μὴ ἐχόντων π ρισσότ ρόν τι ποιῆσαι. ὑποδ ίξω δὲ ὑμῖν τίνα
φοβηθῆτ · φοβήθητ τὸν μ τὰ τὸ ἀποκτ ἵναι ἔχοντα ἐξουσίαν ἐμβαλ ἱν ἰς τὴν
γέ νναν. ναί, λέγω ὑμῖν, τοῦτον φοβήθητ .

Translation:

4. And I say to you, my friends, you should not feel fear from those killing the body, and after this are not able to do anything more.

5. But I will show you whom you should fear: fear the one who, after having killed, has authority to throw you into Gehenna. Indeed, I say to you, fear him.

Though these verses are in the context of a larger passage where Jesus is preaching a hopeful message of repentance and redemption, they are certainly disturbing and arresting. The word “fear” in these verses is φοβήθητ (phaw-BAY-thay-te), which, though in other contexts can carry the idea of reverence or awe, here definitively conveys the idea of terror and dread. When someone is being approached by a murderer, they do not feel reverence, but panic and fright. Yet Christ says to fear not the one who may kill you, but fear the one who can kill you and *afterward throw you into the fiery pit*. Christ makes it clear that he is talking about God the Father, and the text makes it clear that God the Father is throwing people into Gehenna *after they die*. The Gospel of Matthew’s account of this teaching goes even further and says “Fear instead the one who may toss you, *body and soul*, into Gehenna.”⁹⁷

In the Gospel of Mark (chapter 9, verses 47 and 48), an even more gruesome depiction of Gehenna is given:

καὶ ἐὰν ὁ ὀφθαλμός σου σκανδαλί η σ , ἔκβαλ αὐτόν· καλόν σέ ἐστὶν
μονόφθαλμον ἰσ λθ ἱν ἰς τὴν βασιλ ἰαν τοῦ οὔ, ἢ δύο ὀφθαλμοὺς ἔχοντα

⁹⁷ I chose to go “out of order,” mentioning Luke first and then Matthew to highlight the intensity of the word usage in the Matthew verse.

βληθῆναι εἰς τὴν γέενναν, ὅπου ὁ σκῆλος αὐτῶν οὐ τὸ λυτῆται καὶ τὸ πῦρ οὐ σβέννυται.

Translation:

47. And if your eye might cause you to sin, cast it away; better it is for you, with one eye, to enter the Kingdom of God than having two eyes to be cast into Gehenna

48. where the worms do not die and the fire is not quenched.

Evidently, those people who are *body and soul* in Gehenna are conscious and sentient, else what torment and punishment are undying worms and unending fire? Yet worse than the punishment of worms and the fire of Gehenna is the understanding that the unrighteous person there has been barred entrance from the Kingdom of God. The contrast in the above verses is clear: remove the parts of you that cause you to sin and be allowed to enter the Kingdom of God, or do not and enter Gehenna.

Throughout the New Testament, the Kingdom of God is seen as the endpoint of the salvific work of Christ. The “Kingdom of God” is in fact one of the most common phrases in the New Testament Scriptures.⁹⁸ Christ repeats over and over again that those who are saved are done so to be able to enter the Kingdom of God. Yet there is inconsistency throughout the text as to when exactly it is that the righteous gain admittance, just as there is inconsistency regarding the nature of afterlife for the unrighteous. We have already seen that in certain cases, the unrighteous go into Hades, and in others Gehenna. Such inconsistency is true for the righteous. For example, it

⁹⁸ Kyratas, Dimitris J. *The Origins of Christian Hell*. “Numen” 56, no. 2. 2009. pp. 283.

Matthew instead uses the phrase “Kingdom of Heaven,” but expresses a synonymous concept.

appears that the criminal who repented on the cross with Christ was granted access to the Kingdom of God immediately.⁹⁹ Yet Matthew 25 makes it clear that it is not until the

Son of Man comes in His glory, and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him; and He will separate them from one another, as the shepherd separates the sheep from the goats.¹⁰⁰

This is clearly a reference to the Last Judgment, during which Death and Hades will be thrown into the Lake of Fire, as we have already discussed. What about those who have already been judged? Are the souls in Gehenna to be taken out, re-judged as wicked, and put back? Or do they go now into the Lake of Fire? Are the righteous souls already in the Kingdom of God re-judged too? Unfortunately, the Scripture provides no clear answer to these questions, and the nature of the end times and the final judgments of the Bible have been the subject of countless books, papers, and articles written from the time of the early church fathers on to scholarship today. It is in many of these writings, particularly those of the church fathers, that a fundamental misunderstanding about the nature of the afterlife, which is the primary concern of this thesis, is introduced into Christian teachings.

⁹⁹ Luke 23:40-43.

In this verse, Christ does not actually use the phrase “Kingdom of God.” Instead he uses *παράδ ἰσος*, which is even more vague of a term. The word itself does not shed any light on the nature of the afterlife, but it seems unlikely that there is some sort of “paradise” outside of the presence of God. However, this is irrelevant to the only point I try to make here, which is simply that there is ambiguity regarding the timing of entrance to various afterlife locations.

¹⁰⁰ Matthew 25: 31-32 NASB.

Misunderstanding in the Early Church

Now that we have studied some of the afterlife ideas presented in the New Testament, we can see just how easily it was for some of the writings in the early church to subtly and accidentally introduce ideas that were actually contrary to those expressed in the Scriptures. As we have already considered, the final culmination of and main purpose of salvation is entrance into the Kingdom of God. This idea is synonymous with the idea of “eternal life” throughout the New Testament.¹⁰¹ Problems, however, arise when the essence and nature of that life is expounded upon. In order to fully clarify my argument, allow me to provide an example of this in the early church.¹⁰²

The earliest account we have of a martyrdom other than those recorded in the New Testament itself is a letter called *The Martyrdom of Polycarp*. This letter from the church at Smyrna to the church at Philomelium, as its name suggests, depicts the events of the martyrdom of Polycarp, who was a bishop of Smyrna. Polycarp lived in the first half of the second century A.D., and was a very influential bishop.¹⁰³ His influence and the extensive reach of his teachings led to his eventual execution under Roman authorities, simply for being a Christian. A martyr is someone who gives up his life for the sake of his beliefs, and the word comes from the Greek word meaning “witness.” The

¹⁰¹ See Matt. 25:31-46 and as discussed above.

Sellers, Ovid R. *Israelite Belief in Immortality*. “The Biblical Archaeologist” 8, no. 1. 1945.

¹⁰² Providing further examples of this and developing this idea chronologically through the history of the church will be the main focus of my next chapter.

¹⁰³ Jefford, Clayton N. *The Apostolic Fathers and the New Testament*. Baker Books, 2006.

Holmes, Michael W., ed. *The Apostolic Fathers: Greek Texts and English Translations*. Baker Academic, 2007.

understanding is that, through his (usually public) death, a martyr necessarily proclaims that his beliefs are worth dying for, even if in a shameful way. The early church fathers considered martyrs to be sacrificers of their own lives, in much the same way Christ gave up his life. With regard to the *Martyrdom of Polycarp*, there is one particular passage that highlights this misconception in the early church. In section 2, the text says when discussing the nature of martyrdom:

And with the eyes of their hearts they looked upon the good things that are reserved for those who endure patiently, things that neither eye has seen nor ear has heard, nor has entered into the human heart, but that were shown to them by the Lord, for they were no longer humans, but already angels.¹⁰⁴

This passage seems to convey an idea that the souls of those who had been martyred had finally fled the world and had entered heaven to be with God, yet it calls them angels. Does it mean simply that the martyrs here had already ascended into heaven? Why not simply say so, instead of using the word *γγ λος*, which almost exclusively means “heavenly messenger”? I posit that the author of this text had a conception that Polycarp, and others who died in the Lord as he did, would finally relinquish their physical bodies and be united with God in the spiritual realm. The text explicitly says that *they were no longer human*, clearly implying the loss of physicality. They are now fully spiritual beings, as are the angels.

Though this idea of abandoning the broken, sinful world is appealing and makes sense with a cursory understanding of the nature of death (that the body decays while the

¹⁰⁴ “ΜΑΡΤΥΡΙΟΝ ΠΟΛΥΚΑΡΟΥ” 2.3

soul goes to be with the Lord) it is in fact in opposition with the ideas of the afterlife as put forth by the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments. Recalling our study of the Hebrew Scriptures, though she'ol is not a physical place in the sense that it could be found on a map, the eventual conclusion of the plan of redemption that God lays out beginning in Genesis calls for the salvation and redemption of the physical world, not its abandonment, and thus a physical afterlife. The Israelites long for the coming of the Lord back to the *physical world* to bring them peace from their enemies, prosperity, and communion with Himself.

In the New Testament as well, we have conceptions that show that to the mind of the Hebrew, the physical world and the spiritual world are inextricably linked. For example, the Gospel of Matthew refers to wicked sinners being thrown body AND soul into Gehenna. There is no separation of the soul from the body. Gehenna is a place of punishment for the physical and the spiritual, in contrast to the Greek concept of Tartarus, which, as we have seen, is considered only a spiritual place of punishment. Though there are references to Hades in the New Testament that seem to support the idea of a spiritual afterlife, none of these imply any sort of permanence. As already discussed, all of the dead in Hades are taken out in the Last Judgment, judged, and then sent elsewhere. This coincides with a physical resurrection of *everyone who has ever lived*.¹⁰⁵ Of course, some of those resurrected are immediately judged as wicked and sent out to eternal punishment, but we must understand the nature of the resurrection here: this is not simply a collecting of all the dead souls before God for judgment, but a reuniting of those dead

¹⁰⁵ See above, Matthew 25:36-41.

souls with their bodies. Notice: in Revelation 20:13, the text explicitly mentions that the sea gave up the dead that were in it, as did Hades, for the judgment. Nowhere else in Scripture or elsewhere is the sea in the same category as any sort of afterlife “place.” The sea is never seen as a place that harbors souls, though it is a place where people have died, and their bodies were lost there. The sea gives up the bodies of those who died in it, for judgment. Obviously, these are not lifeless, zombified bodies that come before the Lord, but instead have been reunited with their respective souls and are as fully resurrected as Christ, and by the same power no less.

Conclusions

Throughout this chapter, we have seen that the Septuagint translates the ideas of the afterlife from Hebrew into Greek, and in so doing superimposes Greek afterlife conceptions onto the Hebrew Bible. Because the New Testament was written down in Greek, the overwhelming majority of Old Testament references in the New Testament are from the Septuagint. Even when there is a possibility that the speaker, usually Christ, could have been speaking Hebrew or Aramaic to an exclusively Judean audience, the versions we have of those teachings from the New Testament authors are in Greek. As a result, though the New Testament (and of course Christ himself) does not contradict the eschatology of the Old Testament, this is only to be understood through careful study of the *Hebrew* Bible and eschatological ideas, not the Septuagint. If only the Septuagint is studied, it is easy to falsely insert the Greek conceptions into Christian doctrine. Thus, despite the clarity with which both the Old and New Testaments expound upon the idea

that the end of all things is a physical existence out of a physical resurrection in physical communion with God (or physical punishment), the Greek mindset of desiring a non-physical after-death existence still seeps into Christian teachings simply because the Septuagint was often the only Old Testament source available to Christians outside of Judea.

In the next chapter, I will show how these false Greek ideas take root in Christianity through further examples of writings by church fathers. I will also provide commentary on the state of the church today and hopefully express how changes can be made.

CHAPTER FIVE

Eschatological Misconceptions in the History of the Church

Introduction

In this chapter, I will show that there exists a misconception about the nature of the afterlife that permeates many of the great works of Christianity. We have already discussed exactly what this misconception is: that many Christians view the afterlife as a strictly spiritual place. We have seen that this misconception found its way into Christianity as a result of the pervasiveness of Greek philosophy and mythology throughout the Roman world. The idea that when we die our bodies decay but our soul goes to be with God forever, though an appealing one, is not the eschatology taught by the Scripture. This misconception is essentially a form of Platonic dualism.¹⁰⁶ In contrast, both the Old Testament and the New Testament teach that, though we might exist in a spiritual state for a time, there will be a full, physical resurrection of our bodies, just as Christ was resurrected. According to the Scripture, this is what we ought to be expectantly awaiting; not the release from our bodies at death. The Church ought to be praying fervently not just for the salvation of the souls of humans, but for the salvation, redemption, resurrection, and recreation of the world.

Platonic dualism found its roots in Christianity primarily through the Alexandrian tradition and the teachings of theologians from that region - Philo, Clement, Origen, and

¹⁰⁶ Eschatology is only a small portion of the ideas encompassed within dualism - it is far more reaching than just afterlife theology. I intend to discuss only those parts of dualism that pertain to eschatology in the early church.

Augustine. In this chapter, I will examine their work and see how their ideas of eschatology are influenced by platonism. I will also look at Dante's *Divine Comedy*, as it is the foremost work in Christian eschatology, though it does not fall into the "Alexandrian Tradition" mentioned above.

Dualistic Eschatology in the Early Church

Dualistic Christianity, or *Christoplatonism* as Randy Alcorn has dubbed it,¹⁰⁷ has firm roots in the work of Philo of Alexandria. For example, in his *Questions and Answers in Genesis*, Philo writes

For the food of the body brings pleasures of the earth and rightly so, it would seem. For there are two things of which we consist, soul and body. The body, of course, has been formed from the earth, but the soul belongs to the upper air, a shard detached from the Deity: "For God breathed into [Adam's] face a breath of life and man became a living soul" [Genesis 2:7].¹⁰⁸

"Living soul" at the end of this quotation is a direct translation of the Septuagint's ψυχὴν σὰν (psuchein zosan) in that same verse. In the Hebrew, however the words used are נִפְשׁ חַיָּה (nephesh hayyah) which is so much better translated as "living being" rather than "living soul."¹⁰⁹ Here the platonic ideas are not subtle, but overt and obvious.

Philo's assertion that the soul belongs to the "upper air" is a direct attempt, on his part, to link platonism to the creation story. As we have already studied, to Socrates and Plato the

¹⁰⁷ Alcorn, Randy A. *Heaven*. Eternal Perspective Ministries. 2004. See appendix on the topic, "Christoplatonism's False Assumptions," 475–82.

¹⁰⁸ Philo, *Questions and Answers in Genesis*. vol. 3. Loeb Classical Library, 1961. XVI.

¹⁰⁹ Note: KJV also uses "living soul."

soul is immortal and the body is created of inherently evil matter. Philo here attempts to blend those concepts into Christianity by use of the Septuagint.

Philo's work was a great influence on Clement, who really was the first Christian Platonist, as Philo was Jewish. Clement was well-versed in both the Bible and the works of Plato. As Jeffrey Burton Russell states, "The great Greek fathers of Alexandria, Clement and Origen, firmly grounded in Scripture, were also influenced by Platonism and Stoicism."¹¹⁰ Albert Outler claims of Clement that he "went as far as any orthodox Christian ever did in his appropriation and use of hellenistic philosophical and ethical concepts for the expression of his Christian faith. Plato was his favorite philosopher."¹¹¹ This Christoplatonism permeates every part of Clement's worldview, including his ideas about the nature of death. As Philo before him, Clement thought of the soul as transcendent to the body, and that death would be the final release of the soul from the body. Unlike Plato, of course, Clement did not believe the soul would ascend to partake of the "forms," but would exist in communion with God.¹¹² Patristic scholar Robert Casey states that, for Clement,

the goal of Christian life, which is reached by the performance of its appropriate duties and requirements, is that rest in God which comes from a perfect unity of

¹¹⁰ Russell, Jeffrey Burton. *A History of Heaven: The Singing Silence*. Princeton University Press. 1997. pp. 69.

¹¹¹ Outler, Albert. *The "Platonism" of Clement of Alexandria*. "The Journal of Religion" vol 20, no. 3. The University of Chicago Press. 1940.

¹¹² Casey, Robert P. *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Platonism*. "The Harvard Theological Review" vol . 18, no. 1. 1925. pp. 55.

divine and human wills. The purpose of these obligations... pertains to the future happiness after death.¹¹³

Clement is never content with discussing “being.” All throughout his works he talks about the “flesh” part of being and the “soul” part of being - “Jesus Christ our Lord gave His blood for us by the will of God; His flesh for our flesh, and His soul for our souls.”¹¹⁴ He is never willing to fully marry the physical with spiritual. For him these concepts ought to be separate, and at death they finally will be. Yet does not the incarnation itself fully oppose this idea? In the incarnate Christ are physical and spiritual aspects (Christ is a man, and yet also God), yet no distinction is ever made between them in the Scriptural text. To do so is in fact heresy - gnostic heresy that the early church spent much of its time fighting. Yet Clement is considered “orthodox” - a saint in both Eastern Orthodoxy and Anglicanism.¹¹⁵ I argue that this is because the platonic traditions and ideas are difficult to pinpoint as subversive to the original message of physical resurrection because the Scripture, particularly the Septuagint, uses similar language to describe afterlife phenomena, as we have already seen.

Origen of Alexandria, a contemporary of Clement, was also instrumental in blending the ideas of platonism into Christianity. Benedict Viviano says of Origen that he wrought some bold changes in Christian eschatology... and dissolved the Christian expectation of the resurrection of the body into the immortality of the soul, since

¹¹³ Casey, Robert P. *Clement of Alexandria and the Beginnings of Christian Platonism*. “The Harvard Theological Review” vol . 18, no. 1. 1925. pp. 61.

Grant, Robert McQueen, ed. *The Apostolic Fathers: A New Translation and Commentary*. Vol. 6. T. Nelson, 1964. Clement, *Paedagogus*.

¹¹⁴ *First Epistle of Clement*. ch. 49.

¹¹⁵ Clement was a saint in Roman Catholicism too until 1586 when his saintship was stricken from him by Pope Sixtus V.

Christian perfection consists, in this Platonizing view, in a progressive dematerialization.¹¹⁶

Origen's theology of "dematerialization" is perhaps most clearly demonstrated in his commentary the Book of Romans. Specifically in his section on Romans 2:7-11, Origen argues that Paul himself is arguing for a spiritual perfection. In Romans 2:7, the word ἀφθαρσίαν (aphtharsian), usually translated as "immortality" is used. Origen argues that this reference is proof that Paul is calling for believers to seek after spiritual immortality.¹¹⁷ Yet much more commonly the word ἀθάνατος is used to denote immortality of some kind in the New Testament, and ἀφθαρσίαν carries a meaning closer to "incorruptibility," and not necessarily after death.

Origen's teachings, though widespread, pale in comparison to the work of Augustine of Hippo, believed by many to be the greatest theologian of all time, short of the apostles themselves of course. As he was one of the most prolific writers in the church tradition, embarking upon an in-depth study of Augustine is well beyond the means of this thesis. Yet it is possible for us to see that platonism is a recurring theme throughout his work. In fact, a section of Augustine's *Soliloquies* is entitled "On the Immortality of the Soul." In this work, Augustine attempts to prove immortality of the mind or soul. He argues that the "life breath" given of God to Adam in Genesis 2 is the soul, and as it is that which gives life, it cannot be the recipient of life, and therefore must be immortal, *even after the death of the body*. He says

¹¹⁶ Viviano, Benedict T. *The Kingdom of God in History*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002. pp. 39.

¹¹⁷ Origen *Comm. Rom.* 2.5.5; S I, 115.

Moreover, mind is a certain life, so that all which is animated lives. But every inanimate thing which can be animated is understood to be dead, that is, deprived of life. Hence the mind cannot die. For if anything can lack life, this thing is not mind which animates, but a thing which has been animated.¹¹⁸

Essentially, Augustine posits that since the mind gives and not receives life, it cannot die or else it would have to receive life from somewhere else. It is not possible for the mind to lack life. Therefore it is immortal. As we have seen with other authors, Augustine organizes all of this in terms of Christian teaching and doctrine and sights the Scripture text heavily. Yet, despite this reliance on Scripture, there are undoubtedly platonic dualist overtones in his works.

In his most prominent work, *The City of God*, Augustine lays out a comprehensive philosophy which carries many of the characteristics of platonism. For example, the central premise of the 22 volume work is that there are two cities: the city of man and the city of God. The city of man is physical, temporal, evil, and corrupt, to be destroyed at the last judgment. The city of God, in contrast, is ethereal, eternal, and good. Believers in the gospels will gain entrance into the city of God, and though they may continue to live for a time in the city of man, they are ultimately strangers there, belonging to the spiritual city of God. According to *The City of God*, Christians longingly await the point in which they will be free of the city of man and fully enter into the city of God in heaven: the moment of their deaths.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁸ Augustine. *Basic Writings of Saint Augustine*. Vol. 2. Kessinger Publishing, 2006. "On the Immortality of the Soul: Soliloquies" IX.

¹¹⁹ See Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans* Book XX and XXI where he fleshes out these ideas most fully.

Thus Augustine was attracted to the spiritual interpretation of the kingdom we have already seen in Origen. Indeed, ultimately for Augustine, the kingdom of God consists in eternal life with God in heaven. That is the *civitas dei*, the city of God, as opposed to the *civitas terrena*.¹²⁰

These ideas are dangerous to the true theology of the Scripture. Though it may be the case that the soul does go to be with the Lord at the moment of death, nowhere in the Bible is that the fullest expression of the “city of God.” As I have argued, the true city of God will be achieved after the Last Judgment. All the dead have been resurrected, their bodies reunited with their souls, Death and Hades have been undone and defeated, and God in all his glory reigns supreme over the new creation. This is not an abandonment of the corrupt city of man, but a redemption and restoration of it, as God intended in saying of his original creative work “it is good.”

Dante’s Divine Comedy

No study of Christian eschatological thinking would be complete without a look at Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. The *Divine Comedy* is usually considered the preeminent work of Italian literature, and is valued by many as one of the greatest writings of all time. The *Divine Comedy* is a narrative work about Dante’s journey through the afterlife; hell, purgatory, and paradise.¹²¹ Dante’s poem is highly allegorical, and as a result it is difficult to pinpoint specific concepts that Dante wishes to convey about the nature of the afterlife. However, there are certain passages that are more instructive than others.

¹²⁰ Viviano, Benedict T. *The Kingdom of God in History*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002. pp. 52-53.

¹²¹ I will not be discussing the origins of the doctrine of purgatory in this thesis. Traditionally, purgatory finds its roots in the *Apocalypse of Peter*. For a treatment of this pseudepigraphal work, see Kyratas, Dimitris J. *The Origins of Christian Hell*. “Numen” 56, no. 2. 2009.

It is clear throughout the *Divine Comedy* that Dante thinks of the different levels of the afterlife as physical places. The Inferno is supposedly located under Jerusalem, and Mount Purgatory on the direct opposite side of the world, while the heavenly spheres of the blessed surround earth.¹²² Yet, under normal circumstances these places are not accessible by living mortals. This reminds us of the Hades of the *Odyssey*, accessed by Odysseus only under special circumstances, but still apparently a physical place.¹²³ There is also the measurement of the passage of time all throughout the *Divine Comedy*.¹²⁴ Despite these physical features, hell, purgatory, and heaven are inhabited by souls. In canto XXXII of the *Inferno*, Dante meets a Friar named Albergio, who he believes to be still alive. Albergio explains that he is in fact dead while a demon inhabits his body back on land.¹²⁵ Derisive this no doubt was to Friar Albergio, it does to serve the purpose of showing us that Dante's underworld is full of souls, not physical bodies.

Though Dante's afterlife is a spiritual one, he does place great influence on the coming bodily resurrection, much more than any of the others we have discussed in this chapter. For example, in canto XIII of the *Inferno*, Dante meets those who committed suicide, who have transformed into trees:

Then stretched I forth my hand a little forward,

And plucked a branchlet off from a great thorn,

¹²² For a full treatment of the Cosmology of the *Divine Comedy*, see Blair, Matthew. *Points and Spheres: the Innovative Cosmology of Dante's Divine Comedy*. Baylor University Press. 2015.

¹²³ In cantos XXV and XXVI, Ulysses in fact attempts to sail to the shore of Mount Purgatory, but is shipwrecked by the Lord.

¹²⁴ Although not in the final cantos of the *Paradiso*, where Dante finally encounters God himself, outside of time.

¹²⁵ At the time of writing, Friar Albergio was indeed alive. Thus, Dante is in fact claiming he is a demon.

And the trunk cried, “Why dost thou mangle me?”

After it had become embrowned with blood,

It recommenced its cry: “Why dost thou rend me

Hast thou no spirit of pity whatsoever?

Men once we were, and now are changed to trees;

Indeed, thy hand should be more pitiful,

Even if the souls of serpents we had been.”¹²⁶

The tree-soul explains to Dante that because the souls of the suicides rejected the bodies originally given to them by God, they will not be given a new body in the final resurrection. The implication of this is of course that all others will be given a new body. We see later in *Paradiso* that the souls long expectantly for their new bodies. All throughout the text are souls singing joyfully about the final plan of redemption that God plans for the world. Dante does not attempt to describe this resurrection, but its significance in the *Divine Comedy* makes Dante’s eschatology fall decisively more in line with Scriptural teachings than the other authors we have read. As I began this section by saying, it is difficult to quantify the exact nature of eschatology in the *Divine Comedy*, and many have arrived at different conclusions. However, though Dante’s afterlife is a spiritual one, pre-resurrection, this is close to the vague picture presented in the Bible and does not fall into the Christoplatonism of the above mentioned authors.

¹²⁶ Dante, *Inferno*. canto XIII ln. 33-39.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I have touched upon the eschatological beliefs of many prominent early Christian thinkers in order to show that the dualistic ideas surrounding a fully spiritual afterlife do indeed pervade Christianity. These ideas are contrary to those of the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. As I have shown, this is partly a linguistic problem, with the Septuagint superimposing Greek words onto Hebrew ones, even if those words do not necessarily convey the same meaning. It is also a cultural problem, with platonic ideas being far more widespread than Judaic ones. With many of the authors discussed in this chapter being unfamiliar with Hebrew ideas, it is unlikely that they would have been able to distinguish between the Greek ideas and the Christian ones.

I here wish to clarify a point: I am not claiming any of the Christian authors or works expressed in this thesis to be heretical based on these eschatological principles. These authors are not teaching a doctrine contrary to that of Scripture, but merely placing too much emphasis and expectation on the wrong part of the afterlife. Augustine for example longs to be free of his sinning body and to finally be fully in communion with the Lord. Yet, according to the Scripture, this will not necessarily happen at the moment of his death, but at the moment of his corporal resurrection. God's creation is good, and not to be abandoned. Everything returns to this point: that creation is good. To conclude, Oscar Cullmann says this:

The Greek doctrine of immortality and the Christian hope in the resurrection differ so radically because Greek thought has such an entirely different interpretation of creation. The Jewish and Christian interpretation of creation excludes the whole Greek dualism of body and soul. For indeed the visible, the corporeal, is just as truly God's creation as the invisible. God is the maker of the

body. The body is not the soul's prison, but rather a temple, as Paul says (I Corinthians 6:19): the temple of the Holy Spirit!¹²⁷

¹²⁷ Cullmann, Oscar. *Immortality of the Soul; Or, Resurrection of the Dead?*. Epworth Publishing. 1958. pp. 14.

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