

## Some Reflections on Life and Death from the Old Testament

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The Bible is the “Book of Life” and God is its ultimate author, who is also the Creator and Sustainer of Life. But what is this life about and what is its relationship to death and afterlife? In the first part of this essay, I will briefly introduce the Old Testament positions on life, death, and the afterlife. Then, I will focus mainly on the book of Psalms to clarify the positions. In the second part of the essay, I will highlight the question of the afterlife and the resurrection.

A more comprehensive textual treatment of life, death, and the afterlife was recently provided by Philip S. Johnston.<sup>1</sup> An earlier comprehensive discussion of these topics belongs to R. Martin-Achard in 1960.<sup>2</sup> Both of these volumes engage the relevant biblical material and the secondary literature well.

### Life in the Old Testament

The Old Testament is preoccupied with life. Thus, the root “to live” (Heb. *khayah*) is found approximately 800 times in the Old Testament.<sup>3</sup> Life is an “all-encompassing concept” usually centered on the God of

1. *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002). A more general (and massive) introduction to afterlife in western religions is that of Alan F. Segal, *Life after Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 2004). The Old Testament section of Segal is less informed and nuanced than that to of Johnston.

2. See his *From Death to Life: A Study of the Development of the Doctrine of the Resurrection in the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960). See also the treatment of L. Wächter, *Der Tod im Alten Testament* (Arbeiten zur Theologie II/8; Stuttgart: Calwer, 1967), and N. J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (Biblica et Orientalia 21; Rome: Biblical Institute, 1969). For a shorter article, see the fine treatment of M. A. Knibb, “Life and Death in the Old Testament,” in *The World of Ancient Israel*, ed. R. E. Clements (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 395-415.

3. Knibb, “Life and Death,” 395.

Israel, the “living” God.<sup>4</sup> While God creates “living creatures” in Genesis 1:20, the Hebrew word for life (*khayyim*) appears for the first time in Genesis 2:7. God breathes the “breath of life” into Adam, who then becomes a living being. Moreover, God is involved in and sustains the creaturely life that he has created. This is most vividly described in Psalm 104, where bread, food, drink, and water are used as “powerful images of life sustained by God.”<sup>5</sup> Life, however, is fragile and fleeting as a vapor.<sup>6</sup> God ultimately gives life (as a gift) and takes it away (Job 9:22; 12:10).

It is important to realize that the Old Testament makes a distinction, especially in Wisdom literature, between a fruitful and a futile life. Not every life has the same quality before God and the sages. Thus, the term *khayyim* “also refers to the fullness of redeemed life found in God and in God’s wisdom.”<sup>7</sup> In other words, only the life that lives in obedience to God and conformity with Wisdom is both a “real” and fruitful life.<sup>8</sup> Wisdom is depicted in Proverbs as “a tree of life” (see Prov 3:18), “a spring of life” (Prov 4:23), and as “the way of life” (Prov 6:23). Woman Wisdom is “the source and giver of life.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, this usage of “life” in Proverbs is differentiated from the simple life breathed by God into every living being. The biblical imagery of the “good life” includes the fruitful “tree planted by streams of water” from Psalm 1, and this is contrasted with the futile life which is represented by the chaff. The latter is a life which “lacks substance and value” often associated with “darkness” and “stumbling.”<sup>10</sup> For individuals to enjoy the “fruitful life,”

4. See J. Pokrifka, “Life, Imagery of,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 431. For “Living God” see Ps 42:2, and also the oath: “as the Lord (YHWH) lives” in 1 Sam 14:45. The Lord as creator and sustainer of life is most clearly seen in Gen 1-2 and Ps 104. See also God as the “fountain of life” in Ps 36:9, and as preserver in Ps 143:11.

5. Pokrifka, “Life,” 431.

6. For this imagery see especially the book of Ecclesiastes.

7. Pokrifka, “Life,” 432. Knibb, “Life and Death,” 399, also notes that “the concept [of life] often carries with it the notions of prosperity, blessing, health, strength, etc., that is of life in its fullness.” See also Bruce Vawter, “Intimations of Immortality and the Old Testament,” *JBL* 91 (1972): 170: “Not mere existence but meaningful existence is what the OT understands as synonymous with life.”

8. Note in this context the observations of R. N. Whybray about the “good life” in the Old Testament. According to him, the most prominent features of the Old Testament good life are security, a land to live in, power, food and sustenance, a long life, wealth, family, justice, laws, wisdom, pleasure, and trust in God. See *The Good Life in the Old Testament* (London: T&T Clark, 2002), 6.

9. Pokrifka, “Life,” 432.

10. Pokrifka, “Life,” 435.

they have to walk in the wisdom of God by fearing God and obeying his word.

A strong case can be made that life is the special gift of God, who gives it in the sanctuary, the place of his presence. This is a point made by both W. Zimmerli and Gerhard von Rad.<sup>11</sup> According to Zimmerli, Ezekiel 18:5-9, which describes a righteous man who does what is just and right and “shall surely live” as a consequence, points to an event in the sanctuary. Von Rad argues that the individual received the assurance of life within the cultus (based on Deut 30:15, 19; and Deut 31). The promise of life in the presence of God is found clearly in Amos 5:4, “For thus says the LORD to the house of Israel: ‘Seek me and live; but do not seek Bethel, and do not enter into Gilgal or cross over to Beersheba; for Gilgal shall surely go into exile, and Bethel shall come to nothing.’”<sup>12</sup> While the priests of Bethel promised life to pilgrims who traveled to their sanctuary (“Seek Bethel and live”), Amos (like Ezekiel) “was concerned to stress the conditional character of this promise of life.”<sup>13</sup> He also stresses the importance of the right sanctuary. Thus, Amos 5:14 reemphasizes the importance of right conduct for life, and also associates it with the presence of God: “Seek good, and not evil, that you may live; and so the LORD, the God of hosts, will be with you, as you have said.”<sup>14</sup>

### Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament

The Bible takes death seriously without developing a theology of death.<sup>15</sup> Peter Berger asserted that “the power of religion depends, in the last resort, upon the credibility of the banners it puts in the hands of men as they stand before death or, more accurately, as they walk, inevitably, toward it.”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the Bible addresses the issues of an afterlife and a resurrection.<sup>17</sup> However, as it will be clear from the follow-

11. See Knibb’s discussion in “Life and Death,” 401-402. The discussion about Zimmerli and Von Rad is based on these pages from Knibb.

12. All the Bible quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV), unless otherwise noted.

13. Knibb, “Life and Death,” 401.

14. See also Ps 133:3 for “life forevermore” in the presence of God, this time in the context of pilgrimage to the Temple.

15. The main root used for death in the Old Testament (*muth*) is found about one thousand times. See Knibb, “Life and Death,” 395.

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

17. See Isaiah 26: 19 and especially Daniel 12:2. Because these texts affirm future bodily resurrection, many scholars date the texts late. See the dis-

ing presentation, the Old Testament by itself, does not provide a clear picture of the afterlife (or the destiny after death). The resurrection, however, is clearly affirmed at least twice in the Old Testament

While it is debatable whether or not man was created immortal, Genesis 3:19 (after the fall) clearly reflects the view that death is the inevitable fate of humankind, “you are dust and to dust you shall return.”<sup>18</sup> In the Old Testament, death appears in association with “destruction,” “Abaddon” (place of destruction), “the pit,” “Sheol,” and “the grave.” It is “never satisfied” (Prov 27:20 etc.); its realm is one of darkness, bitterness, terror, distress, forgetfulness, and inactivity (Eccles 9:10). People are cut off from the Lord, and they cannot praise him (Ps 6:6; 30:9; 88:5, 12; 115:17). Death is also “the ultimate expression of chaos.”<sup>19</sup> Yet, again, the Bible is unclear on what death leads to and the attitude towards death is ambivalent.

Shannon Burkes, for example, believes that the Israelites considered death as the end of one’s personal existence. It was not a crisis if death came in a natural way and “in the fullness of time.”<sup>20</sup> The Israelites were fairly content in the face of a natural death because their culture had forms of continuity: through one’s descendants, through the survival of the nation, and through the memory of a good name. According to Burkes, Qoheleth is the first Israelite who is obsessed with death and for whom death “represents the chief flaw that embraces and subsumes all other problems in the world.”<sup>21</sup>

While it is certainly true that Qoheleth is the most outspoken and focused author on the problem of death, it is doubtful, in my opinion, that the Israelites did not see death as a fearful and problematic thing,

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cussion of John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah: Chapters 1-39*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 485-487, especially note 46 and Knibb, “Life and Death,” 407-408. Some scholars see this as a later interpolation or as referring metaphorically to the restoration of Israel (like Ezekiel 37). See also the relevant comment on Isaiah 26:19 of John F. A. Sawyer, “Hebrew Words for the Resurrection of the Dead,” *Vetus Testamentum* 23/2 (1973): 234: “This is a reference to the resurrection of the dead which no-one but a Saducee, ancient or modern, could possibly misconstrue.”

18. See also Ecclesiastes 9:10, 1 Kings 2:2 and Job 14:1-2. See the discussion of Knibb, “Life and Death,” 402-403 about the creation of man and resources on the theme of death.

19. F. J. Mabie, “Chaos and Death,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 52. My summary is based mainly on the article by Mabie.

20. S. Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period*, SBLDS 170 (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1999), 1-2.

21. Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 2.

even if it took place naturally and “in the fullness of time.”<sup>22</sup> I would argue that every cry of mourning after a deceased person is a protest against death.<sup>23</sup>

The question of the “problem” of death is strongly related to the belief in the afterlife. What is the destiny of humans after they die? This important question needs a clear answer, and should help clarify the Israelites’ attitudes toward death. If the Old Testament Israelites believed (or at least hoped) in a blessed afterlife, where the righteous and the wicked would be justly judged, their apparent calmness and resignation before death is justified.<sup>24</sup> However, if these beliefs (or at least hopes) did not exist, an alternative explanation must be found for the apparent silence concerning death before Qoheleth’s arrival.<sup>25</sup>

One way to address the issue of afterlife in ancient Israel is by using archaeology to analyze burial practices and the religion of neighboring cultures, especially that of the neighboring Canaanites. This should be supplemented by the Biblical text, as has recently been done by Elizabeth Block-Smith, Theodore J. Lewis, and Brian B. Schmidt, among others.<sup>26</sup>

22. See the relevant statement on this subject by Graham Ward, “Death,” in *The Oxford Companion to Christian Thought*, ed. Adrian Hastings, Alistair Mason, and Hugh Pyper (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 153: “Death is the one inevitability facing every person, and it appears to be natural to fear it. Such fear attaches to death itself, to what might lie beyond it, or to the sense that, if death is the end of all consciousness, achievements in this life have no lasting meaning, and wickedness and injustices go for ever unrecompensed. . . . At the heart of all religions is a solution to the problem of death.”

23. See for example Gen 23:2, 50:1-11, Deut 34:8.

24. See Ward in n. 21 and the discussion below.

25. Note that Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 3, sees Qoheleth as being the first who “systematically knocks down every means of continuity his culture had to offer, through children, community, or memory, and he denies that one’s moral status and actions have any bearing on the manner or timing of death.” The Biblical text supports this assertion. The question is if Qoheleth believed, or at least hoped, in some kind of afterlife and a post-mortem judgment. Note that the conclusion of Ecclesiastes strongly supports the belief in afterlife and judgment of all. See Ecclesiastes 11:9 and 12:14.

26. For burial practices see Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs About the Dead* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992) and “The Cult of the Dead in Judah: Interpreting the Material Remains,” *JBL* 111/2 (1992): 213-223; E Theodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), and Brian B. Schmidt, *Israel’s Beneficent Dead: Ancestor Cult and Necromancy in Ancient Israelite Religion and Tradition* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr [Siebeck], 1994). For the possible relationship between Israel and other ancient Near Eastern cultures (especially Ugarit), see K. Sprong, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and the Ancient Near East*, AOAT 219 (Kevelaar and Neukirchen-Vluyn: Butzon & Bercker, 1986); Mark S. Smith and Elizabeth Bloch-Smith,

There is no doubt that there was a cult of the dead in Canaan. Deuteronomy 26:14 makes it clear that the Israelites will encounter in Canaan the idea that the dead need sustenance. When they brought their tithes and offerings, they were supposed to say the following before the Lord, "I have not eaten of the tithe while I was mourning, or removed any of it while I was unclean, or *offered any of it to the dead.*" The remains of grave goods also seem to suggest that "people were believed to exist in some sense after death."<sup>27</sup>

However, scholars disagree over the implications of the archaeological remains and of the texts that relate to their discoveries. Thus, Schimdt and Spronk think that "caring for, feeding, and commemorating the dead" did not necessitate a belief in the powers of the dead or in ancestral worship, or their deification.<sup>28</sup> In Israel, the dead had a "weak and marginal role."<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Block, on the contrary, states: "[t]he biblical record corroborates the archaeological evidence with references to a life after death, in which the dead were thought to possess preternatural powers."<sup>30</sup> She then interprets the data as supporting the existence of a "cult of the dead" in Israel.

In my opinion, Burkes is right when he states that the evidence (biblical and archaeological) "does not reveal a very extensive focus on the dead. This is not to say that the Israelites did not have funerary rituals, mourning practices, and even leave offerings to the dead, but none of these necessarily signifies full-blown ancestor worship."<sup>31</sup> Thus, the archaeological evidence and the texts discussed so far seem to support the belief in some form of existence beyond death that remains to be clarified.<sup>32</sup>

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"Death and Afterlife in Ugarit and Israel," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108 (1988): 277-284. This section of my essay relies mostly on the evaluation of Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 18-33.

27. Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*," 20.

28. Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*," 24. Brian Schmidt believes that the people in Ugarit believed that the dead persisted physically in some weakened and shadowy form in the netherworld. They had cults for the commemoration of the dead, and the only immortality that existed was the one in memory. See his recent analysis in "Afterlife Beliefs: Memory as Immortality," *Near Eastern Archaeology* 63/4 (2000): 236-239.

29. Schmidt, *Israel's Beneficent Dead*," 282. Cited in Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 24.

30. Smith and Bloch-Smith, "The Cult of the Dead in Judah," 213.

31. Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth*, 26. He also believes that (before Qoheleth) dealt with the problem of death through what he calls "symbolic immortalities," where the children and memory, national survival and quality of life served "as ways of protecting the individual's life in the face of death" (p. 32).

32. A very important text in support of some form of existence for the

A similar debate exists in Old Testament studies with regard to the biblical term Sheol. While some believe that Sheol is simply a poetic equivalent to the grave where everybody is dead, other scholars disagree.<sup>33</sup> Eriks Galeniks systematically studied all sixty-six occurrences of the Hebrew term Sheol and other terms associated with it. He concludes the following:

The summary of the current exegesis leads to the basic conclusion that the term Sheol refers to the place of the dead, which by its nature, function and purpose entirely harmonizes with the anthropological, theological, and eschatological paradigm of the Hebrew Scripture. At the same time, the Hebrew Scripture provides no support for the idea that the term Sheol is somehow associated with one's after-death existence in the so-called underworld . . . it is best associated with the grave.<sup>34</sup>

A completely different perspective on death and Sheol is offered by Alec Motyer:

The great assumption of the Old Testament is that life continues beyond the grave. It lies behind the beautiful description of Abraham who 'died a good old age, and old man, and full of years, and he was gathered to his people' (Genesis 25:8). We might expect something different to be said of the great man of faith—that he went to be with God, for example—but the description as it stands is *a telling revelation of the reality which life after death possesses for those ancient times*. He went to join the company of all his who had gone before . . . Jacob too nourishes the same hope in respect of

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dead (or the spirit of the dead) is found in 1 Sam 28. Here the dead Samuel (who is brought back to life by the medium of En-Dor) was thought to have special knowledge. See the discussion of Burkes, *Death in Qohleth*, 22-25. R. P. Gordon, makes the following relevant comment on 1 Sam 28:2, "Saul's request to the woman to conjure up a spirit reflects the common view of the ancients that the dead dwell in the underworld—'Sheol' or 'the Pit', in Old Testament terms. There the effete spirits of the deceased experience some kind of somnolent existence (*cf.* Ps. 88:3-12; Ezk. 26:20)." See R. P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, The Library of Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1986), 195. Of course the practice of calling and communicating with the dead (necromancy) is strictly prohibited in the Bible (see especially Deut 18:10-12).

33. The most forceful defender of this position currently is Eriks Galeniks, "The Nature, Function, and Purpose of the Term שְׁאוֹל in the Torah, Prophets, and Writings," (PhD diss., Andrews University, 2005).

34. Galeniks, "The Nature, Function, and Purpose," 621.

his son Joseph whom he presumed dead: 'I will go down to Sheol to my son mourning' (Genesis 37:35).

Sheol in the Old Testament is a place-name and *ought never* – notwithstanding the NIV – *to be represented as 'grave' or 'hell' or anything else*. It is the name of the place to which the dead go, and all alike go there. . . . It is the place of dead alike, good and bad, dying in their beds or in battle, belonging to the people of God or outside that privileged company.

What testimony this is to *the fact of life after death. All live in Sheol*. David expected to meet again the infant who died soon after birth (2 Samuel 12:23). . . . While the opinions differ on the interpretation of what the Old Testament tells us about *the nature of life* in Sheol, *there can be no disputing its insistence on the fact of life in Sheol*.<sup>35</sup>

These previous two quotes cannot present a greater contrast to the existence of life after death. They are both looking at the same biblical texts. They both agree that *all* go to Sheol. Yet, why is there a great divergence about the nature of life after death, and more specifically, in Sheol? Additionally, a third argument is made that Sheol is a place only for the wicked. Junia Pokrifka states the following:<sup>36</sup>

Job and Psalms present the contrasting motifs of the destruction of the wicked in Sheol and the enduring life of the righteous in divine presence. Against the view that Sheol in these writings is simply a place where all the dead are confined, its usage pressures us toward the interpretation that Sheol is *a place for the wicked*, from which the righteous are redeemed. An ancient sage reflects, "The path of life leads upward for the wise, that he may keep away from Sheol below" (Prov 15:24 NASB). The "life" that wisdom offers and the "death" that folly guarantees, then, ultimately point to immortality and everlasting destruction respectively. . . . The eventual fate of the wicked is compared to "the beasts that perish" and is contrasted from the righteous, who will be received by God and will "see the light" beyond this life (Ps. 49:15, 19-20; 73:16-27). Having been cut off from the presence of God (Job 27:8), the souls of the wicked are abandoned to Sheol. . . .

From the variety of views on the notion of Sheol (and afterlife in general), it is clear that the biblical data is not easily interpreted. The fact that most of the verses referring to Sheol are found in poetic passages make evaluations even more difficult.<sup>37</sup> Pokrifka argues that Sheol

35. A. Motyer, *After Death: What Happens When You Die?* (Fearn: Christian Focus Publications, 1996), 18-19. Italics are mine.

36. Pokrifka, "Life," 436. Italics are mine.

37. Note that Sheol appears only nine times (out of sixty-six) in non-poetical passages. In is found only in five books (35 times) from the Writings:



“is a place only for the wicked, from which the righteous are redeemed.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, she would probably agree that the righteous also go to Sheol, but that they are redeemed from there. Interestingly, according to Galeniaks, Sheol is the destiny for everyone in two passages (Ps 89:49 and Eccl 9:10), of the righteous in eight passages, (Gen 37:35; 42:28; 44:29, 31; Isa 38:10; Ps 88:4; Job 17:13, 16), and for the wicked in twenty-six passages.<sup>39</sup> The evidence supports Galeniaks’ belief that everyone experiences Sheol.<sup>40</sup> Will the righteous, in contrast to the wicked, be redeemed from there? Is there hope for the righteous after death? I would like to attempt to answer these questions by looking at some selected texts from the Psalter.

### The Hope of the Righteous after Death in the Psalter<sup>41</sup>

Alec Motyer argues mainly from the book of Psalms for an Old Testament hope beyond death. He is aware that there are psalms used

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Psalms (16 times), Job (8 times), Proverbs, Canticles, and Qoheleth. See Galeniaks, “The Nature, Function, and Purpose,” 3. It is more difficult to precisely define a term in poetical literature because poetry is “heightened speech,” and there is a tendency for hyperbole and embellishment. Some of the language may also be phenomenological.

38. Pokrifka, “Life,” 436.

39. See Galeniaks, “The Nature, Function, and Purpose,” 600. He relies for this information on a table from Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 80.

40. In my opinion, all of these passages could be debated. Note, first of all, that in *all* of these cases the “going down” to Sheol is hypothetical. The Bible *never* says that a righteous person went to Sheol.

41. Notice that Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms I:1-50*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1966); *Psalms II: 51-100*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1968); and *Psalms III: 101-150*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1970), is the scholar who has argued most forcefully that the belief or resurrection and immortality is widely reflected in the Psalter (speaking of some forty texts). He was relying in his argument on the interpretation of Ugaritic texts. His interpretation of many of these passages has been well refuted by both Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 324 ff. and Vawter, “Intimations of Immortality,” 158-169. See also the evaluation of Knibb, “Life and Death,” 409-411. While Psalm 1:5 (“Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgments, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous”) will not be discussed in this essay, Sawyer makes a powerful argument in my opinion that this passage (see also v. 6) refers to the Day of Judgment (after death). See F. A. Sawyer, “Hebrew Words for the Resurrection of the Dead,” *VT* 23 (1973): 232. In this case, the very beginning of the Psalter sets the stage for a Day of Judgment when only the righteous will rise from the dead. Other passages that are thought to refer in some way to life after death, but are not discussed by me, are found in Pss 16:10-11, 17:15, and 73:23-28. See the useful discussion some of these psalms by P. S. Johnston, “Afterlife,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament*:

to indicate that the Old Testament did not entertain hope after death (6:5; 30:9; 88:10ff; and 115:17). He argues that the psalmist understood himself to be dying under divine displeasure in nearly all of these texts except Psalm 115. In Psalm 115, Motyer argues that it would be wrong to interpret verse 17 as speaking about a lack of hopeful expectation, because verse 18 envisages praise “forevermore.”<sup>42</sup> I intend to analyze these texts in the first part of this section. Is it true that there is a real lack of hope in these passages, and that these are always related to a person “dying under divine displeasure”? In the second part of this section, I will present briefly some recent research on the psalms of Korah and how these contribute to our understanding of the afterlife in the Psalter.

In Psalm 115, Motyer agrees that there is no evidence for divine displeasure with the psalmist. This is a hymn urging God’s people to trust and worship the LORD alone. It is also a hymn for the glory and eminence of Yahweh (the LORD).<sup>43</sup> Our focus is on the last three verses (17-18):

The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do they who go down in silence.  
But we will bless the LORD from this time forth and forevermore.  
Praise the LORD!

The tension in these verses is clear. On the one hand, there is a firm statement that “the dead do not praise the Lord.” On the other hand, the next verse states that the psalmist, together with the congregation, “will bless the LORD forevermore.” Weiser makes the following relevant observations for this section:<sup>44</sup>

These two trains of thought are placed side by side without being harmonized with each other, and no attempt is being made to resolve intellectually the tension that exists between them. And yet the conclusion of the psalm indicates the perspective from which alone it is possible to overcome the power of death, that is, the eternal Being of God and the community’s permanent living relationship as the people of God with their almighty Creator, who is also the Lord of the *Heilsgeschichte*. The consummation of that, however, and the final personal victory over the

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*Wisdom, Poetry & Writings*, ed. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove: IVP, 2008), 5-8.

42. See Alec Motyer, *After Death: A Sure and Certain Hope* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 1996), 20 n. 1.

43. See again Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 66-150*, CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 376 and A. Weiser, *The Psalms*, OTC (Philadelphia: Westminster), 713.

44. Weiser, *Psalms*, 717-718.

power of death lie beyond the scope of the Old Testament, in the divine mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ.

Weiser is correct; the unresolved tension is clear in the last two verses of this psalm. However, the psalm cannot be used to argue for a complete loss of hope in the face of death. Doubt may be said to be mingled with hope for an eternal praise of the everlasting God.

Psalm 6 is usually classified as an individual lament, but some scholars include it with the penitential psalms.<sup>45</sup> This psalm of David starts in the following way: “O LORD, rebuke me not in your anger, nor discipline me in your wrath.” The start of this psalm makes it clear that the psalmist is under divine anger and wrath. Some scholars classify Psalm 6 as a penitential psalm, thus supporting Motyer’s argument that the person in this psalm is “under divine displeasure.” He is also sick, “Be gracious to me, O LORD, for I am languishing; heal me, O LORD, for my bones are troubled.” To further Motyer’s point, Arthur Weiser offers the following title to this psalm: “A Prayer of Lament Arising out of Sin and Suffering.”<sup>46</sup> Also, while the first part of the psalmist’s reference to Sheol is certain, the second part is formulated as a question, “For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?”

It is more difficult to argue that the psalmist in Psalm 30 is under divine displeasure. This psalm is a prayer of thanksgiving; God delivered the psalmist from the peril of death.<sup>47</sup> Similar to the previous psalm, the psalmist seems to have been sick (v. 2) and under the anger of God (v. 5). Thus, the verses that are especially relevant to our topic are 3, 9 and 10:

O Lord, you have brought me up from Sheol; you restored my life from among those who go to the pit. . . . What profit is there in death, if I go to the pit (or to corruption)? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?

45. See the *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008), 946-947. See also the comments of Peter C. Craigie *Psalms 1-50*, WBC (Waco: Word Books, 1983), 91. He recognizes that the tone of the psalms is appropriate for penitence, but classifies it as a psalm of sickness.

46. Weiser, *Psalms*, 129. Hans-Joachim Kraus classifies it as a prayer intended to avert the anger of God. See *Psalms 1-59*, CC (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 159.

47. So Weiser, *Psalms*, 265. See also Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 250, who sees it as a prayer for deliverance from the danger of death.

While this psalm is not very clear about the divine displeasure over the psalmist, it also cannot be used to indicate a loss of hope for the psalmist in Sheol. Based on verse 3, one can argue the opposite, that we have strong evidence here of the possibility of redemption from Sheol. Note again, that the verses that are supposed to argue for a loss of hope (vv. 9-10) really only pose a rhetorical question, even if the answer to the question is “no.”

### Afterlife in the Psalms of the Sons of Korah<sup>48</sup>

In 1997, David C. Mitchell published a monograph that argued that the agenda of the Psalter was eschatological.<sup>49</sup> The full picture that emerged from his analysis was that of a coming king (Psalm 45), Israel gathered in (Ps 50), the nations gathering for war (Pss 73-83), the king being cut off (Ps 89), the rescue by the messianic king (Ps 110), followed by the praises of messianic victory (Pss 111-118), and the ascent of all Israel to celebrate the feast of the tabernacles (Pss 120-134). His analysis moved the discussion of the Psalter “in the right direction.”<sup>50</sup> However, one critique is that he left out large portions of the Psalter (including the Korahite psalms) from his overall argument. In a more recent article, Mitchell comes back to the Psalter to establish the role of the Korahite psalms and complete his “eschatological agenda.”<sup>51</sup> He brings strong arguments for identifying the sons of Korah with the descendants of Korah the Levite. These sons of Korah did not die (Num 26:11) when Korah, the rebellious Levite, and his followers “went down alive in Sheol” (Num 16:33). Since the sons of Korah “were redeemed from Sheol . . . They bore this memory high on their heart.”<sup>52</sup> The theme of redemption from Sheol is dominant in the Korahite tradition.

48. This section of my essay relies mainly on the work of David C. Mitchell, “‘God Will Redeem My Soul from Sheol’: The Psalms of the Sons of Korah,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30/3 (2006): 365-384.

49. *The Message of the Psalter: An Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms* (JSOTSup 252; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

50. See for example the reviews of S. Gillingham in *RBL* 02/15/1999. [http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/2468\\_1677.pdf](http://www.bookreviews.org/pdf/2468_1677.pdf) (accessed July 5, 2009) and Mark D. Futado in *JETS* 1999. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_qa3817/is\\_199912/ai\\_n8861112/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3817/is_199912/ai_n8861112/) (accessed July 5, 2009).

51. See his article in note 48.

52. Mitchell, “God Will Redeem My Soul from Sheol,” 369. He also thinks that Hannah (Samuel’s mother) was a Korahite (at least in spirit). Notice her great statement of faith in redemption from Sheol: “The Lord kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up” (1 Sam 2:6). See Mitchell, “God Will Redeem My Soul from Sheol,” 371 and the discussion below.

The collection of Korahite psalms comprises less than ten percent of the Psalter.<sup>53</sup> These psalms feature six of the seven occurrences of *YHWH of hosts* in the book of Psalms.<sup>54</sup> In addition, the underworld also features prominently in Korahite texts. The Sheol language is concentrated in the “closure psalms of each Korah group (Pss 49 and 88) and in the quasi-Korah Psalms 86 and 89 at the end of the collection.”<sup>55</sup> These statistics clearly show a special concern with death and the afterlife. Mitchell lists the following three possibilities for interpreting the language of redemption from Sheol. Firstly, the language is figurative for rescue from the threat of death. Secondly, it could indicate the actual resurrection of the dead. Finally, it may allow for “a limited resurrection, either in duration – like Samuel – or limited only to a few individuals.”<sup>56</sup> To choose the right explanation (if possible), we must look at the closure psalms in the Korah collection.

Psalm 49 is very important in the afterlife debate.<sup>57</sup> Mitchell calls this “a manifesto on the Sheol theme.”<sup>58</sup> The term, Sheol, appears three times here; no other psalm mentions it more than once in a single biblical chapter. This psalm is usually classified as a wisdom psalm. Therefore, we are not dealing with a person crying out to God from Sheol.<sup>59</sup> Instead, this could be classified as a didactic psalm that intends to offer instruction. The following are verses 1 to 4:

Hear this, all peoples! Give ear, all inhabitants of the world, both low and high, rich and poor together! My heart shall speak wisdom; the meditation of my heart shall be understanding. I will incline my ear to a proverb; I will solve my riddle to the music of the lyre.<sup>60</sup>

53. There are two groups of the psalms of Korah: psalms 42 to 49 and 84 to 88. Psalms 86 (of David) and 89 (of Ethan the Ezrahite) are grouped with these and could be considered affiliates of these. The statistics include both of these groups (with 86 and 89). Psalm 43 (without heading) must also belong to the sons of Korah. See Mitchell, “God Will Redeem My Soul from Sheol,” 366-368, 376.

54. The seventh time is in Psalm 24:10. Notice that Elijah and Elisha (probably a Korahite) also use the expression *YHWH Tsevaot* and they both resurrected the dead!

55. Mitchell, “God Will Redeem My Soul from Sheol,” 376.

56. Mitchell, “God Will Redeem My Soul from Sheol,” 371.

57. This is recognized by most commentators. See the discussion of Motyer, *After Death*, 21-23 and Knibb, “Life and Death,” 408.

58. Mitchell, “God Will Redeem My Soul from Sheol,” 374.

59. But see the possibility that the psalmist is surrounded by enemies in v. 5. I think this is hypothetical. But see Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 481.

60. I believe that Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, 356, rightly titles this as “A Wis-

The most important verses for our discussion are 14 and 15:

Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd, and the upright shall rule over them in the morning. Their form shall be consumed in Sheol, with no place to dwell. But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.

This is a key text for Motyer who argues convincingly that these verses speak of two distinct sets of people: the ungodly (“them”) and the godly (“me”). The wicked and the foolish have death as their “shepherd.” Meanwhile, the psalmist is ransomed from the power of Sheol. The very last part of verse 15 “for he will receive me,” is also important because it uses a Hebrew verb (*lqh*), which is associated with the “taking up” of both Enoch (Gen 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kgs 3:3-10) from death. The same verb is used in Psalm 73:24, “You will guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will *receive* [or *take*] me to glory.”<sup>61</sup> It is debatable if these verses refer to deliverance in time of peril (or before death as in the case of Enoch and Elijah), or actual deliverance from Sheol. The conclusion of Weiser in this matter is a very balanced one:

On the basis of this text alone it is not possible to give a definite answer to the question of whether what is at the back of the poet’s mind is the idea of being taken away before death . . . or a deliverance from Sheol (the underworld), perhaps through the resurrection as in Isa. 26.19 or Dan. 12.2. For the poet, at any rate, his trust in the God who alone has the power over death and his hope of eternal life founded on that trust is at the centre not only of his thinking but of his life as well. The religious certitude of which he speaks is for him not so much a knowing what is going to happen but rather a power that sustains him and enables him to proceed steadily even when he cannot see clearly the course which his life is going to take. The certitude that at his death some other Being than man and his power will decide on his life is his comfort and help . . .

The other major passage relevant to our discussion is found in Psalm 88:10-12:

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dom Psalm on Life and Death.” See also Weiser, *Psalms*, 385. He sees the purpose of the psalm “to give an answer to one of the very old, recurring riddles of life.” Mitchell, “God Will Redeem My Soul from Sheol,” 375, sees this psalm as a “meditation on Sheol.”

61. This is the other psalm used by Motyer (*After Death*, 23-24) in his argument for hope beyond the grave in the Old Testament. See also Knibb, “Life and Death,” 408 and the references there.

Do you work wonders for the dead?  
 Do the departed rise up to praise you?  
 Is your steadfast love declared in the grave,  
 or your faithfulness in Abbadon?  
 Are your wonders known in the darkness,  
 or your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness?<sup>62</sup>

From the very beginning it is clear that the verses pose a series of questions. There is uncertainty about what will happen to the dead, but there is no definitive statement here for communion with the LORD after death (cf. 16: 10-11; 17:15, and 73:23-28). Mitchell believes that the answer to this question is “yes,” but others are not so sure.<sup>63</sup> Thus, Kraus correctly notices: “God would have to perform a miracle. He would have to raise a dead person to life. Will he do it? With this question a petitioner reaches the extreme limit of the OT.”<sup>64</sup>

It is important to notice the uncertainty in the psalmists’ understanding of afterlife.<sup>65</sup> This is understandable in light of the Christian view of progressive revelation. Especially in the matter of the afterlife, 2 Tim. 1:10 affirms that Christ Jesus is the one “who abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.” This implies that before the gospel, the understanding of afterlife was in the dark, or at least in the shadows.

However, what was never in the dark (or even in the shadows) was that the God of Old Testament was the author and the giver of life who had real power over death and Sheol.<sup>66</sup> God could certainly “kill and bring to life” (1 Sam 2:6) living creatures. Another constant, with which Psalm 89 starts and is often repeated throughout the Psalter, is the greatness and surety of God’s steadfast love (grace in the NT), “I will sing

62. See above and n. 43. I left this psalm last because it is analyzed by David C. Mitchell and is part of my last section of the essay connected to the sons of Korah.

63. Mitchell, “God Will Redeem My Soul from Sheol,” 375. He concludes that the Korah collection as a whole holds forth a promise of resurrection before the crisis of the whole book of Psalms in Ps 89 (p. 383). This promise is later fulfilled in the Messiah’s resurrection (Ps 92) and his appearance from heaven (Ps 110).

64. Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 194.

65. There are a few exceptions but these are difficult to interpret because of the figurative language.

66. This is something that Galeniaks acknowledges, despite his view that Sheol is equivalent to the grave. See the following verses about Yahweh’s omnipotence as related to Sheol and death (Deut 32:22; Num 16:33; 1 Sam 2:6; Job 14:13; Job 26:6; Ps 139:8; Prov 15:11; Dan 12:2; Amos 9:2; Isa 7:11, etc.). Galeniaks, “The Nature, Function, and Purpose,” 592-597.

of the steadfast love of the Lord, forever." Note that Psalm 89 itself, immediately following the last rather pessimistic psalm of Korah, asks toward the end (v. 48b) a similar question, "Who can deliver his [man's] soul from the power of Sheol?" There is no answer to this question, but the psalmist continues to appeal to the steadfast love of the Lord. This constant was never in doubt in the mind of the psalmists.

It is significant that when Jesus was asked about the resurrection of the dead (Matt 22:31-33) he did not quote the Old Testament but rather referred to the nature of God as the God of the living: the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob. These comments should provide us with "the ultimate hermeneutical reference for any work on understanding the Hebrew Bible's view of death and afterlife."<sup>67</sup> Because the God of the Old Testament is the God of the living, and because of his power and faithfulness (which is constantly repeated in the Psalter and throughout the Old Testament), it is more logical and consistent to understand "the gathering to one's fathers" as a gathering to the company of the living than to that of the dead.

### Conclusion

Death is a reality that is acknowledged in the Old Testament life of faith, and poses a problem not only for Qoheleth, but also for other men of God (including the psalmists). Johnston may be correct when he notices that the Old Testament does not have a well developed theology of death and the afterlife. Death seems to lead to a "shadowy, insubstantial existence," where all are reduced to "somnolent inactivity," and where the persistence in Sheol is closer to "non-life" than to an afterlife."<sup>68</sup> However, there is hope after death even in the Old Testament.

In the Psalter, the extent of hope is not always clear. It is usually timid, as is demonstrated by many of the unanswered rhetorical questions concerning the dead. However, the hope is visible "in the calm certainty that the communion with Yahweh cannot be ended by death, because of his faithfulness."<sup>69</sup> In a society where life was so highly valued, this is the only explanation for the statement of the psalmist, "your steadfast love [*khesed*] is better than life" (Ps 63:3). The steadfast love of God (or the grace of God) is better than life, because the character and power of God give the believer a real and certain hope for communion with God *forever*. The foolish, who put their hope in themselves, will ultimately be

67. See the review by N. E. Barry Hoffstetter of Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, in *Westminster Theological Journal* 65 (2003): 372-373.

68. Johnston, "Afterlife," 5.

69. H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1974), 109. Cited in Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 483.



shepherded by Death (Ps 49). But the faithful, who have the LORD as their Shepherd (Ps 23), have a real hope because even though they walk through the valley of the shadow of death, fear is to be resisted, for God is with them!

This line of argumentation is in agreement with the comments of Jesus about death and resurrection (Matt 22:29-31):

And as for the resurrection of the dead, have you not read what was said to you by God: "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob?" He is not the God of the dead, but of the living.

Since the Old Testament God is God of the living, the patriarchs are now living. And since the faithful and gracious God of the Bible has power over death and life, the believer may be assured that the communion with God that started in the present fallen world will continue *forever*.