

What Happens to You When You Die?

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(In this quick study, biblical researcher Ya'acov Natan Lawrence is not offering the reader an exhaustive treatment of this topic, but rather a quick synopsis based on his extensive research in pursuit of truth. In doing so, he has evaluated biblical, linguistic, Christian and Jewish sources.)

IT IS A COMMON BELIEF AMONG MOST CHRISTIANS that upon physical death their soul separates from their body and lives immortally either in heaven or in hell fire. Is this view correct in light of a Hebraic understanding of the Scriptures? If it is not, then from what sources does the idea of the immortality of the soul originate?

Does Man Possess an Immortal Soul?

In the Garden of Eden at the Tree of Knowledge, the serpent, in enticing the woman to eat from the forbidden fruit, told her that “you shall not surely die” even though YHVH had told Adam and Eve that they would die if they ate of it. Was the serpent the originator of the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, or was this concept an acceptable aspect of Old Testament theology?

An Analysis of the Hebrew Word *Nephesh*

Upon careful analysis of *all* the Scriptures on this subject found both in the Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament or OT) and Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament or NT) several things become clear. Man possesses a soul, but nowhere does Scripture state that his soul is immortal. An understanding of how Scripture uses the Hebrew word *nephesh* and the Greek word *psyche*—both translated as “soul” in our Bibles—reveals that to come to the conclusion that the soul of man is immortal is to overlay Scripture with a concept that is foreign to Hebraic biblical thought. Neither the OT nor the NT indicate that the soul is immortal, but rather that the soul is simply that part of man that defines who he is: his personality, his character, his emotional make-up, his mental capabilities and the volitional or will part of him.

According to *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (9:917ff), *nephesh* in Scripture is equated with the *breath* of man, the *blood* of man and the *person* of man. In the latter, it is used as a term for the total nature of man, for what he is, not just what he has. The same cannot be said of the spirit, heart or flesh part of man. The classical text in Genesis 2:7 clearly expresses this truth when it calls man in his totality a *nephesh hai-yah*. The *nephesh* has no existence apart from the body. Hence the best translation in many instances is “person” comprised in corporeal (relating to the physical body, as opposed to one’s spirit) reality. *Nephesh* can denote what is most individual in human nature, namely, the ego (Ibid, p. 620).

Nephesh as used in the OT can also be an expression of the will. The *nephesh* is manifest in orientation to an object, whether this be the elemental realities of hunger and thirst on the one side (Deut 12:15,20; 1 Sam 2:16, etc.) or the lofty aspiration of yearning for Elohim on the other (Ps 103:1). *Nephesh* can refer to the sex drive (Gen 34:3; Jer 2:24), to hatred (Ps 27:12), to pain and sorrow (1 Sam 1:10; 30:6), to the will (Gen 23:8), and the supreme striving of man for Elohim (Isa 26:9; Ps 63:1; 84:2, etc.) (Ibid., pp. 621–622).

Based on these definitions of the word *nephesh* as used in the OT, we can conclude that the we are on biblically solid ground when we refer to the *soul* as the mind, the will and emotions of a person. It refers to who he is as a person or his personality. It is in this Hebraic sense that the writers of the NT would be using the term *soul* (e.g., 1 Thess 5:23). We *cannot* assume that in using the term *soul* that the apostolic writers would be inferring all the Hellenistic (pagan Greek) concepts of the immortal soul.

Further Study of the Hebrew word *Nephesh/Soul* from Various Lexicons

- ☞ *The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* offers an extensive definition of the word *nephesh*, and can be summarized as follows: In the *TWOT*'s comprehensive discussion of how the word *nephesh* is employed by the OT writers, nowhere does it indicate that the soul is anything but mortal. In fact, the *TWOT* states that the OT contains many passages referring to the “saving” of a man’s *nephesh*, and the need to have a man’s *nephesh* delivered from death. Clearly, these biblical passages would be meaningless if the *nephesh* were immortal. At the end of its article on the *nephesh*, the *TWOT* feels the need to give the Christian teaching of the immortality of the soul a nod when it states, “It must not be concluded from this study of *nephesh* that the OT presents man as physical only. There are other OT ideas to be considered in this connection: (1) the OT teaching concerning the “spirit” of man; (2) the OT teaching concerning the heart (*lev*) of man; (3) the subject of the image of Elohim (see *selm*) in man; and (4) the picture as given of man’s relation to Elohim” (p. 1395).
- ☞ *Wilson’s Old Testament Word Studies*: In its terse study of *nephesh*’s in the OT, we find no indication that is immortal. It is merely the inner being or personality of man.
- ☞ *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew Lexicon* under the word *nephesh* lists ten subsections of meaning, but not one of them even suggests that the soul is anything more than a person’s self life including their “person, desire, appetite, emotion and passion.”
- ☞ *Gesenius’ Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament* defines *nephesh* and provides corresponding OT passages, as does *BDB*, and like the latter, gives no examples or hints of its being immortal.

More Hebrew Scholars on the Immortality of the Soul

In his book, *Judaism*, by Harvard professor, George Foot Moore, the author asserts that in ancient Israel there was no concept of the afterlife. The abode of the dead was the grave (*sheol*). The only hope of life after death was expressed in the notion of the resurrection of the righteous sometime in the future. (vol. 2, pp 287–292)

The Greek thinkers postulated the dual nature of man where it was believed the man’s true self was an imperishable soul, which during what we call life is the inmate of the mortal body. At death the soul leaves this tenement, while the body dissolves into its material elements and perishes. The soul then flits away to the realm of spiritual or noumenal existence to which by its essential nature it belongs. The ideas of immortal souls and of the happy lot to which the souls of the good go at death seemed to some Jews to fit in so well with their own religious conceptions as to belong to them. (Ibid., pp. 292–293)

The Wisdom of Solomon or *Pseudo Solomon* (an apocryphal writing probably written in Alexandria Egypt in the first or second century B.C. (3:1–6; 5:5,15–16) makes reference to the immortal soul. In these passages, we see Hebraic thought of the rewards for the righteous dead wedded with the Hellenistic concept of the immortal soul. (Ibid., pp. 293–295)

The Jewish-Greek philosopher Philo who lived in Alexandria Egypt during the intertestamental period discusses the philosophical implications of the immortality of the soul. (Ibid., p. 295)

The apocryphal book of *Four Maccabees* (written in the first century A.D.) also discusses the immortality of the soul. These writings are examples of Hellenistic Judaism, which was prevalent among Greek-speaking Jews. (Moore, p. 295)

Moore argues that though the Hellenistic philosophy of dualism, which espoused the immortality of the soul, held great sway over the Jewish philosophers of Alexandria Egypt such as Philo and some of the authors of the intertestamental writings, orthodox Judaism, especially as exemplified by the sect of the Pharisees, remained uninfluenced by Hellenism. The prominence of Greek thinking in the ancient pre-Christian world did, however, bring to the forefront the debate as to the state of the dead and retribution as it pertains to the afterlife of man. As a result, the concept of the bodily resurrection as pondered and prophesied about by some of the OT writers, which had laid latent, if not been scorned by mainstream Judaism, became a cardinal doctrine of Judaism. This led to the bitter debate between the two prominent sects of Judaism—the Pharisees and Sadducees—as to the state of man after his death. (Moore, p. 295ff)

According to Rabbi Neil Gillman, leading Jewish religious thinker and educator, “For much of the past two millennia, the Western world, Jews included, has characterized death as the soul’s separation from the body. This view stems originally from Greek philosophy, certainly from Plato and possibly from the earlier mid-sixth century Orphic religion” (*The Death of Death*, p. 75). It was not until the intertestamental period (several centuries before

the birth of Yeshua) when the Jews were being forcibly hellenized by their Greek conquerors that concept of an immortal soul began to make its way into Jewish literature. Gillman sees this in a reference to the immortal soul in the apocryphal book *The Wisdom of Solomon* (2:22–24), which was written toward the middle of the first century A.D.

Oxford scholar, Philip S. Johnston in his book *Shades of Sheol—Death and the Afterlife in the Old Testament* writes that non-canonical intertestamental Jewish literature testifies to an increased interest and speculation concerning the fate of the wicked as well as the righteous, but that the Old Testament Scriptures stop short of this (p. 237).

We find a synopsis of the biblical Hebraic concept of the soul and how the concept of its immortality began to creep into Jewish thought in an article entitled, “Immortality of the Soul,” in the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (published by the Funk and Wagnalls Company in 1901–1906). The article states that the belief that the soul continues its existence after the dissolution of the body is a matter of philosophical or theological speculation rather than of simple faith, and is accordingly nowhere expressly taught in Holy Scripture. As long as the soul was conceived to be merely a breath (“nefesh”; “neshamah”; comp. “anima”), and inseparably connected, if not identified, with the life-blood (Gen 9:4, comp. 4:11; Lev 17:11), no real substance could be ascribed to it. As soon as the spirit or breath of Elohim, which was believed to keep body and soul together, both in man and in beast (Gen 2:7; 6:17; 7:22; Job 27:3), is taken away (Ps 146:4) or returns to Elohim (Eccl 12:7; Job 34:14), the soul goes down to sheol or hades, there to lead a shadowy existence without life and consciousness (Job 14:21; Pss 6:6 [A.V. 5]; 115:17; Isa 38:18; Eccl 9:5,10).

The belief in the immortality of the soul, *The Jewish Encyclopedia* continues, came to the Jews from contact with Greek thought and chiefly through the philosophy of Plato, its principal exponent, who was led to it through Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries in which Babylonian and Egyptian views were strangely blended, as the Semitic name *Minos*, and the Egyptian *Rhadamanthys* (*Ra of Ament* or “Ruler of Hades”) with others, sufficiently prove. A blessed immortality awaiting the spirit while the bones rest in the earth is mentioned in apocryphal books of *Jubilees* 23:31 and *Enoch* 3:4. Immortality, the “dwelling near Elohim’s throne” “free from the load of the body,” is “the fruit of righteousness,” says the *Book of Wisdom* (1:15; 3: 4; 4:1; 8:13,17; 15:3). In *Four Maccabees*, also (9:8, 22; 10:15; 14:5; 15:2; 16:13; 17:5,18), immortality of the soul is represented as life with Elohim in heaven, and declared to be the reward for righteousness and martyrdom. The souls of the righteous are transplanted into heaven and transformed into holy souls (Ibid. 13:17; 28:23). According to Philo, the soul exists before it enters the body, a prison-house from which death liberates it; to return to Elohim and live in constant contemplation of Him is man’s highest destiny (Philo, *De Opificio Mundi*, §§ 46, 47; *idem*, “De Allegoriis Legum,” i., §§ 33, 65; iii., §§ 14, 37; *idem*, “Quis Rerum Divinarum Hæres Sit,” §§ 38, 57).

Does the New Testament Teach the Immortality of the Soul

This author maintains that the apostolic writers were orthodox Jewish in their thinking and lifestyle, and that even their belief and faith in Messiah Yeshua was intelligible in the light of the Hebrew or Old Testament Scriptures. We do not believe that the apostles of Yeshua integrated pagan concepts, such as the immortality of the soul, into their otherwise very true-to-Scripture theological paradigm. We believe that if one is to find what appears to be references to the immortality of the soul in the Apostolic Scriptures (NT), it is because one is viewing those passages through glasses that presuppose the immortality of the soul.

There are several passages that seem to indicate that there is conscious life after death. One could cite Yeshua’s Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man, for an example (Luke 16). This, and the other parables of Yeshua, are known as *aggadah* (also *haggadah*)—a very popular literary form during the Second Temple period by which people taught moralistic principles. It was similar to our modern Aesop’s fables. This genre of literature included ethical and moral teaching, theological speculation, legends, folklore, poetry, prayers, historical information, interpreting of dreams, and expressions of messianic faith and longings. Aggadic teachings were nonbinding legally in the theological arena and was to be contrasted from the legally binding *halachic* writings of the same period. Aggadic literature made use of parable, satire, metaphor, personification, and poetry. Aggadah has not systematic philosophy, but dealt in its own way with basic theological and moral problems. The purpose of aggadic literature was not to convey point-by-point doctrinal truths, but to teach a moral.

Most Christian teachers have used the Parable of Lazarus and the Rich Man as a theological basis for the doctrine of the immortality of the soul (an exegetical leap that cannot be substantiated when one understands the nature of aggadic literature) and have missed the true meaning of Yeshua’s teaching. He is not making a

theological statement or halachic declaration on the state of the dead. Rather, Yeshua here teaches there will be many who self assuredly think that their position in the kingdom of Elohim is secure (the rich man), but in reality, the flaming mouth of the lake of fire awaits these hypocrites while those they disparaged and disdained (Lazarus) on the earth will enjoy eternal life (after the resurrection of the dead) in the company of the patriarchs such as Abraham. This is the real message of this parable.

Some will point to the reference in Revelation 6:9 of the souls of men under the altar as proof that man has an immortal soul. This passage is an example of how easy it is to read our own extra-biblical understanding into a scripture before fully studying all that Scripture reveals on that subject. Often what we think a biblical passage means is more based on our past religious indoctrination than on the full counsel of Scripture itself.

In the case of Revelation 6:9, John the apostle does not say *where* the altar is. We cannot assume that it is in heaven. It could be a reference to the earth, which Scripture calls the footstool of Elohim (Isa 66:1). The altar upon which the sacrifices of ancient Israel were sacrificed was called an altar of earth (Exod 20:24), and the blood of the levitical sacrifices was spilled on the ground around the base of the altar. Furthermore, Scripture teaches that the soul or essence of one's life is in one's blood (Lev 17:11). For example, when Yeshua as the Lamb of Elohim came to take away the sins of the world spilled his blood on the ground during his crucifixion, his soul was poured out onto the ground. His soul then went into the deepest sheol or grave to make an offering for our sins (Isa 53:10; Pss 86:13; 88:3,5,6,7,9,15,16.) His soul did not go to heaven, although his spirit did (Luke 23:46). Whether Yeshua's spirit is a reference merely to his physical breath of life, or to something else of a more spiritual nature, we cannot say. Scripture is not clear on this subject.

The Death of Man and the Hope of the Resurrection of the Dead

Scripture is clear, however, that when one dies, his very thoughts cease on that day (Ps 146:4), and Yeshua said that no man has seen the Father in his glory (John 5:37). Furthermore, King David, a righteous man after YHVH's own heart, was still dead and in his tomb at the time of Stephen, which was *after* the resurrection of Yeshua (Acts 2:29).

Scripture does teach that there is a time when the righteous dead will be resurrected from the graves in the last day to receive their immortal or imperishable and glorified bodies. This event will occur at the second coming of Yeshua the Messiah (Dan 12:4,9; 1 Cor 15:35–58; 1 Thess 4:16; 1 John 3:2; Rev 11:15–18.)

The NT clearly teaches that upon receiving redemption, one is saved and can be assured of immortal life. But the NT also teaches that, although the names of the righteous are written in the heavenly Book of Life and are therefore spiritually alive in the mind of YHVH Elohim, they will not receive their immortal and glorified bodies until the resurrection of the dead at the second coming of Yeshua.

