

What Happens After You Die: The Changing Doctrine of Eternal Life in Judeo -Christian Theology

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Introduction

What happens to a person after he dies? This is one of the most basic issues of life. It serves as a basis for much of philosophy and theology. It is one of the central questions in most religions. Psychology sees one's beliefs about death as one of the underlying issues that influence mental health or mental illness. Ernest Becker has hypothesized that, for the West, it is our extreme rationalism and lack of belief in a God or life after death that lies at the root of much that damages our psychological make-up.¹

What happens after you die? Were you to ask a cross-section of people throughout the world that question you would receive widely varying answers:

Hindu: Your spirit separates from your body and you go on to be with your ancestors and with the gods.

Buddhist: Your spirit spends a brief period of time in an intermediate state and is then reborn into another body. You continue this cycle until you achieve enlightenment and can spend eternity in heaven.

Muslim: If you are good, your body will be resurrected. In the intermediate time you are given a glimpse of paradise and then your soul returns to the grave to await the resurrection.

Orthodox Jewish: If you obey the Law faithfully you will be resurrected on the last day. In the intermediate time you go to a place called Sheol which may or may not include conscious awareness.

Traditional Christian: At death the immortal soul departs from the body to be with the Lord in heaven. At the resurrection the immortal soul is reunited with a resurrected body to spend eternity together in heaven. The Roman Catholic Church additionally has purgatory as a temporary place where our sins can be atoned for. (Note: while each example cited above focuses on the blessing of the afterlife provided for the righteous, there are, equally, punishments of varying degrees for the wicked.)

Atheist: When you die, you're dead; that's the end.

A Christian with a strong adventist/millennial conditionalist emphasis such

¹ Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*, New York: The Free Press, 15-19.

as an Advent Christian, Christadelphian, Jehovah's Witness or advocate of Abrahamic Faith: The whole person sleeps in the grave until the resurrection when the whole person will be raised to eternal life in the Kingdom of God or destruction in Gehenna.

How do we account for such diversity within a group which claims a common heritage and common base of information, and how do we account for areas of similarity among groups that are ethnically and theologically diverse? Why is it that some adherents of mainstream Christianity have more in common with Hindus theologically than they do with members of the Abrahamic Faith? This is certainly a paradox. If Christians share a common base of history and theology with Judaism, why is it that some Christians possess a theology of personal eschatology that more closely resembles a Buddhist's perspective?

In this article we will attempt a brief survey of the development of Western thought regarding life after death, beginning in Egyptian and Mesopotamian civilizations, extending through Hebrew traditions, Persian and Greco-Roman times and on into the Christian tradition. We will be paying particular attention to ways in which there has been a shift from the early Hebrew understanding of the resurrection of the body at the end of the age to a belief within popular Christianity in the immortality of the soul and its ascension to heaven immediately at death. We will consider what influences may have caused that shift to occur and consider some key biblical texts which support the belief that the Christian hope is in the resurrection of the whole person at the coming of Jesus Christ to establish the Kingdom of God upon the earth.

A Survey of the Development of Beliefs about Life after Death

Egypt

One of the oldest civilizations that had a powerful influence on the nation of Israel was Egypt. The Egyptians were far from monolithic in their understanding of the nature of life after death, but a survey of Egyptian literature shows a gradual progression of thought on the subject. According to the pyramid texts dated from the time of the Old Kingdom (2686-2160 BC), the Egyptians believed that Pharaoh, who was a god, would leave this earth and ascend to the heavens. "The doors of the sky are opened for you, the doors of the starry sky are thrown open for you."² It appears that at this time the common Egyptian did not possess a hope of life after death in the heavens, but rather a kind of shadowy existence down below or in a mythical place known as the Field of Reeds. Heaven was considered to be an exclusive place attainable only by the pharaohs.

This narrow view of the afterlife appears to have evolved during the period of the Middle Kingdom (2040-1633 BC) where a number of coffin texts, picture stories located inside the coffins of common Egyptians, provided detailed instructions for how to ascend to the heavens. With this development it appears that a belief in a heavenly afterlife was extended to a wider range of people.

² J. Edward Wright, *The Early History of Heaven*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 3.

The next stage of development occurred during the New Kingdom (1558-1085 BC) and is recorded in a collection of texts known as the Book of the Dead. At this time the Egyptians viewed life after death as a dangerous journey. After death a person's *ka* (soul or spirit) went on a journey by boat and encountered many dangers designed to test the strength of their character. If the person was successful and proved to be righteous, then they would be escorted by a god up to the heavens where they would enjoy many of the same benefits and blessings which they experienced on earth. Those who were found to be unjust were consigned to the nether regions of the world to face torture and punishment. Those who were fortunate enough to escape the punishments of the netherworld and experience the celestial joy were free to interact with friends and relatives.

The Egyptians possessed a clear dualistic view of the person, with the physical body being a complete and separate entity from the soul or essence of the person. Their afterlife reward was directed at the soul, not the body.

Mesopotamia

Among the earliest cultures in Mesopotamia were the Sumerians. It was out of this culture that Abraham, and with him the Semitic peoples, emerged. It appears that in this tradition there was little hope for life beyond death. The hero of one of the great Sumerian epics, Gilgamesh, is told that he will not achieve the immortality that he sought. Death was to be the destiny of all humanity and there was no promise of immortality somewhere beyond the grave. Only a limited number of people, either gods or super-human heroes, had the hope of attaining life in a place of paradise called the land of Dilmun (some scholars have located Dilmun as the modern-day Bahrain in the Persian Gulf).

We can categorize the key differences between the Egyptian view of the afterlife and the Sumerian view. Firstly, who can be granted immortality? For the Egyptians it was those who proved themselves worthy by their character after death or who had gained access to special knowledge, secret codes and prayers. For the Sumerians immortality was limited to the gods or those who were super-human in character, who proved their worthiness while still on earth. The Egyptians held a dualist view of humanity, body and soul, while the Sumerians were more monistic (believing in the unity of body and soul as one person). The Egyptian paradise was celestial, in the stars in the heavens, while the Sumerian paradise was located terrestrially. Finally, the Egyptians viewed life after death as consisting of either bliss or torture, while the Sumerians saw death as the complete cessation of life for all but the gods and a chosen few.

Assyria and Babylonia

The Assyrian and Babylonian civilizations apparently retained much of the Sumerian understanding of the afterlife. There was clearly no hope of a celestial afterlife up among the gods of heaven. Whatever existence there might be beyond the grave was in a gloomy netherworld. Heaven was limited to the abode of the gods; no human was believed ever to have ascended there.

Syria and Canaan

Among the people living in Syria and Canaan in ancient times there was a belief about life after death consistent with the Sumerian, Assyrian and Babylonian peoples. Death was the final abode for all people, in an underworld ruled by Mot. Death was believed to be inescapable, gloomy and wet, but it was not a terror to be dreaded. It was certainly not a place of torture or a burning hell. There is evidence of the living providing the dead with food, drink and material possessions that they would need for the next world, but that post-mortem world would not be in the heavenly abode of the gods.

The Hebrew Tradition

Most scholars of the Hebrew tradition tend to agree that its conception of the afterlife was far from monolithic. They recognize that the Hebrew culture came under the influence of the surrounding cultures (Sumerian, Assyrian, Egyptian, Babylonian, Canaanite and later Greek and Roman). There appears to be a development in the belief about the afterlife that can be generally divided into several phases.

In the earliest phase, during the times of the patriarchs, there was a strong communal sense of life. Death was a time of rejoining one's ancestors, being "gathered back to one's people." Hence, it was important for the patriarchs to be buried along with their fathers. Clearly, there was no notion of life after death in heaven, with Yahweh. There does appear to be some limited belief that the dead could carry out some of the functions of the living. There is archeological evidence of post-mortem funeral practices which included providing food and libation for the dead. There was also a practice of attempting to communicate with the dead, as evidenced in the story of Saul and the witch of Endor who attempted to make contact with the deceased Samuel. The numerous laws against consulting the dead contained in the law of Moses seem to give clear indication that this was a widespread practice. It may be that the practice of consulting the dead originated with the Egyptians and was brought to Israel by the Hebrew slaves following the Exodus. But scholars generally agree that at this time death was seen as the absence of life and as final.

Many Hebrew scholars see a stage of development progressing from a simple gathering to the ancestral tombs to a corporate place of the dead called Sheol. The etymology of this word is uncertain. Sheol was a place where all the dead went and there was no judgment attached to it. It seems many believed existence continued in Sheol but in a greatly diminished capacity. The person was a whole being while alive as a *nephesh hayah* or "living being," and in Sheol became a *nephesh met* or "dead being." It is almost universally recognized, however, that the Hebrews were monistic in their understanding of the person. A person is not a body with a soul, but rather a person is whole, and it is the whole person who goes to Sheol.

In the next stage of development, Sheol is seen as a place of judgment with

different locales for the dead. Sheol becomes a place of either reward or punishment. The emphasis is not so strongly placed on the future of the communal nation. That remains, but there emerges the notion of one's individual reward or punishment before God.

As there continued to develop a notion of individual life after death within the Hebrew tradition, at the same time we must be aware of national eschatological hopes. Israel lived with a sense of being a favored nation with Yahweh. They expected collectively to experience an age of Shalom, a time of peace and wholeness, rest from their struggles and a cessation of war against their enemies. This Golden Age was tied to their land. This began with Abraham's faith that he would inherit the land, and was continued through the times of the Egyptian captivity and Babylonian exile. The people hoped for a time when together they would share in the blessings of God.

In a final stage of synthesis these two trends, toward individual life after death and communal life in a Kingdom ruled over by God's anointed, merged into a hope for the blessing of both the living and the faithful dead. The hope of the faithful being resurrected to participate in the blessings of life in God's kingdom emerged as the pinnacle of Jewish hope for life after death. The writings of the prophets Isaiah, Ezekiel and Daniel best expressed this hope. The vision of a restored paradise, a return to Edenic perfection, was carried into the intertestamental period.

Persia, Greece and Rome

While the Jewish views of life after death were becoming clearly oriented toward both individual and national participation in paradise, with those who had died being resurrected to become full participants, the empires of Persia, Greece and Rome were developing and influencing to a large degree the religious ideas of the region.

Persia was the home of "mystery religions" such as Zoroastrianism and Mithraism. There was a strong astrological interest in the stars. The Zoroastrians had a dualistic view of man which taught that after death the immortal portion of man, or the soul, went out into the stars of heaven to make its home among the gods. It was believed that Zoroaster had first existed in the heavens as a spirit, then journeyed to earth to live in a body, and finally returned to the heavens as a pure spirit. It was believed that this was the journey that all humans took. Death was a transition from this temporary earthly abode back to our pre-incarnate state up in the celestial abode. This was a Greek view as well. It is not completely clear whether these notions of the afterlife shared by the Greeks and Persians developed independently, or if the Greek teaching influenced the Persians (the Persian texts which document these beliefs are later than the Greek texts). As the Romans ascended to power in the regions formerly held by the Greeks and Persians they incorporated these beliefs as well as many of the mystery religions into their culture.

During the spread of Persian and Greek culture (basically from the end of

Babylonian power until the beginning of Roman power), the Hebrews came under the influence of their philosophy and culture. During the time between the writing of the Hebrew Bible and the time of Christ there emerged a collection of writings known as the Apocrypha. These writings demonstrate changes within the Hebraic system. Varied and often contradictory notions of life after death began to emerge. During the previous 1500 years of their history the Hebrews had generally held to a monistic view of the human person. The whole person went to Sheol and the whole person was resurrected at the end of the age (Dan. 12:2).

However, under the influence of Greek philosophy, particularly in the Jewish community in Alexandria, Egypt (which was the largest Hebrew community outside of the land of Israel at that time), there emerged a curious blend of Hebraic and Greek thought. Neil Gillman notes:

From their predecessors, then, the talmudic rabbis inherited two doctrines about the afterlife: The first taught that at some point after death, God would raise the body from the grave. The second taught that, at death, the body disintegrates and returns to dust, but the soul leaves the body and lives eternally. The first, of certain provenance, is articulated in three biblical texts. The second, which originated in Greek thought, is not in the Bible. Both appear in the literature of the intertestamental period.³

What emerges, then, is a departure on the part of some Hebraic rabbis from the notion of the wholeness of the human person (monism), which had its roots in the Sumerian tradition from which Abraham emerged and held sway in Hebrew thought for many centuries, to an acceptance of the Egyptian/Persian/Greek view of the dualistic nature of humanity — body and soul which are separable at death. This, coupled with the growing acceptance of individual immortality, led to a concept of death as a time of purgation, punishment or reward. No longer was Sheol the common abode of all the dead, both righteous and evil. Now the souls of the dead went to a place called Gehenna where they were purged of their sinfulness. This purging allowed them to move on to Gan Eden, a temporary paradise where the souls would remain until the resurrection of the dead at the end of days.⁴

Christ and the Early Christian View of Life after Death

Jesus was born at a time when Greek philosophy and culture and Roman politics were dominant influences in the lives of the Jewish people. Many religious and political currents were operating within the Jewish faith, often in opposition to one another. Some of the Jewish elite had risen to positions of power and privilege within the Roman system and were interested in maintaining the status quo. They were content for Judea to remain under the domination of Rome and had achieved

³ *The Death of Death: Resurrection and Immortality in Jewish Thought*, Woodstock, Vermont: Jewish Lights Publication, 134, 135.

⁴ See Simcha Raphael, *Jewish Views of the Afterlife*, Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994, 161.

status by brokering peaceful relationships between their fellow countrymen and their Roman oppressors. Their orientation to this world was generally positive, because they found in the present order a large degree of meaning and satisfaction. They retained their Jewish identity but came under the influence of Greek philosophy.

Others within Judaism sought to live lives in opposition to their Roman oppressors, either by strict observance of the Jewish Law or, in some cases, violent opposition to Rome. The hope of those common Jews who tried to be faithful to Yahweh and the Torah amid the oppression was for a messianic king to come and liberate them from oppression, free the nation of Israel and restore it to a theocracy.

Theologically, there was a high degree of diversity within Judaism which mirrored the cultural and socio-political changes. With regard to belief in life after death, there emerged three distinct strands within this period as articulated by N.T. Wright:

The Sadducees stand out as unusual in that they will have nothing to do with a future life, neither with immortality nor with resurrection. No doubt a substantial and perhaps growing minority of Jews, including those who have quite clearly drunk deeply from the Platonic and general Hellenistic well, could write of the immortality of the soul. But the majority speak of the bodily resurrection of the dead, and frequently address the problem of an intermediate state; this last point is itself strong evidence for belief in bodily resurrection, since only on this premise is there a problem to be addressed. Sometimes, in describing this latter state, they borrow Hellenistic language which in its own context denotes a permanent disembodied state; but they still make it clear that bodily resurrection is the end they have in sight.⁵

Into this world, Jesus was born. The Gospels show how Jesus, from the time he was a young boy, sought to understand God's plan for His people, Israel, and for the world. Jesus, under the leadership and guidance of God's spirit, spent 40 days in the wilderness discerning God's will for his life. How was he to carry out his mission as Messiah? He was tempted to follow means that would result in worldly power, either by joining forces with the dominant culture, or by violently opposing the dominant culture. Jesus discerned that God had called him to a different path. Jesus would become the herald of the Kingdom of God. He would proclaim the future arrival of God's righteous government, and he would demonstrate the effects of God's coming rule on the earth through visible manifestations of God's power in healing the sick, feeding the hungry, raising the dead, and, above all, forgiving sinners.

Jesus the prophet rejected a religion that embraced the popular culture. He rejected any violent opposition to the popular culture. Jesus called upon his disciples to bring the life of the coming kingdom into the present age and begin living that life now. Jesus believed and taught the coming of a future government of

⁵ Wright, 331.

God upon the earth, with the nation of Israel being restored and incorporating the faithful from among all nations. He taught that the dead would be resurrected and judged, the righteous would enter into eternal life, and the wicked would be destroyed in Gehenna.

Against the Sadducees, who did not believe in the resurrection, Jesus clearly affirmed his belief in a bodily resurrection (Matt. 22:30). He was also clear that following the resurrection there would be a change in the natural order among humans. Marriage would not be a part of the post-resurrection life. Jesus also affirmed his belief that the post-resurrection life would be eternal (Matt. 25:46). In doing so, Jesus clearly sided against the Sadducees and their belief in total extinction at death. Jesus also opposed those in the Jewish community who were so steeped in Greek philosophical thought that they accepted the Platonic doctrine of the immortality of the soul. Jesus taught the resurrection of the whole person, not the immortality of a disembodied soul.

As to the question about the intermediate state, there is little in the recorded words of Jesus that either affirms or refutes the notion that the dead have some sort of conscious existence between death and the resurrection. Jesus was certainly familiar with that strand of Jewish tradition that taught that there was a conscious existence after death and prior to the resurrection. His parable of the rich man and Lazarus demonstrates that awareness. In the parable Jesus assumes the worldview that portrays the righteous dead as conscious and aware of their circumstances in a place called Abraham's side, while the unrighteous dead are in a place of torment called Hades (the Greek form of the Hebrew Sheol). Does Jesus' telling of this parable mean that this was his understanding of what happened after death? Does this mean that Jesus agreed with those Jews who, while holding to a firm faith in the resurrection of the dead at the last days at the arrival of the Kingdom of God, believed in a conscious, albeit shadowy existence in Sheol or Gan Eden? Perhaps and perhaps not. It is problematic to form dogmatic opinions about what Jesus believed on the basis of his parables. Jesus is noted for using satire, hyperbole, and paradox in his parabolic teachings ("it's easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God").

Throughout the early period of the post-Easter Christian community, the Church maintained its historical and theological continuity with the Hebraic tradition. The apostolic community maintained the expectation that the Lord would bring about the restoration of the kingdom to Israel (Acts 1:6; 3:19-31). The Kingdom of God was the dominant theme of the apostolic kerygma (Acts 8:12; 28:31). Jesus fulfilled the Messianic expectation of Israel. He would be the man appointed by God to judge the world (Acts 17:31).

The eschatological dreams of Israel were not discontinued with the coming of Christ; they were simply expanded to embrace all the people of God, both Jew and Gentile. Gentiles were given access to the people of God through faith in Jesus Christ and baptism into the body of Christ. Together, Jew and Gentile would inherit the Kingdom of God. The long line of Abrahamic promise would continue through Christ to all people who embraced faith in Christ (Gal. 3:26-29).

What was the destiny of those Christians who died before the consummation of the Kingdom of God? The Apostle Paul assures the faith community that those who have died will not miss out on the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. At the coming of Christ, the dead will be raised up first to meet Christ. They will be joined by the living members of the faith community who will be instantly transformed (1 Thess. 3:13-18). There is promised a great meeting in the air as the faithful dead and living gather together at the Parousia to escort the Messiah back to earth to rightfully claim his throne. The Messiah will then rule over the earth until such time as the earth has been purified of all sin. At such time, Messiah Jesus will give the throne to God, that God may rule in the midst of His people (1 Cor. 15:20-28). In the Apocalypse the beloved disciple reveals that this period of Christ's mediatorial reign will last for 1000 years following the first resurrection (Rev. 20:6). This will be followed by a general resurrection and final judgment of the wicked. The wicked will be destroyed by fire (Rev. 20:15).

The apostolic community emphasized the centrality of the bodily resurrection. Paul makes it clear that those who are raised after death will possess a body. It will be a spiritual body (1 Cor. 15:44). This resurrection of the body will occur at the "last trumpet." It is at this time that mortal bodies will be made immortal (1 Cor. 15:52-54).

Summary: Christ and the early Christian Church were born out of a Judaism that had some theological diversity regarding life after death. Out of this milieu, Christ and the early Church clearly embraced a communal eschatological hope. Life after death was not simply about the individual, but about the community. The nation of Israel would be restored, not in a limited, nationalistic sense, but in a way that included all people who trusted in God through Christ. Jesus, the Messiah, would come back to the earth and inaugurate God's government over all the earth. The individual believer would become a participant in the kingdom of this new age. This was true whether at the time of Christ's coming the believer was living or dead. The dead in Christ would be resurrected bodily to eternal life and would become active participants in the government of this kingdom. The faithful who died would not miss out on the hope of the kingdom. Immortality would be granted to the dead and to the living at the coming of Christ. Those who are outside the community of faith would be judged and destroyed in the lake of fire which is a second, final death.

Intermediate State?

What happens to the Christian believer in the interval between his or her individual death and the resurrection at the coming of Christ? About this, the New Testament has little concrete to say. One of the common Hebrew terms for death is sleep. Both Jesus and the Apostles continue to use this term to describe the condition of those who have died. Jesus uses the term sleep to describe the condition of his friend Lazarus, who had been dead and buried for four days. The Apostle Paul uses the term "sleep" to describe the condition of believers who have died and await the coming of Christ (1 Thess. 4; 1 Cor. 15:51).

There are a few passing references in the Gospels and epistles which allude to the possibility of a conscious existence in death. In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus the deceased Lazarus is described as being at “Abraham’s side” while the rich man is in Hades. We have already noted the problems of trying to formulate dogmas based on this parable. The thief on the cross is told that he will be with Christ in paradise. Does Jesus mean that they will be in the Gan Eden of intertestamental Hebraic thought later that day? It seems impossible to make a case for this, since Jesus declared that he would be in the heart of the earth for three days (Matt. 12:40). In the New Testament it is said that Jesus preached to the spirits “in prison” (1 Pet. 3:19), but this preaching cannot have been carried out while he was dead. Sheol in Scripture refers simply to the grave, the place of all the dead. The view which seems to be most consistent with other teachings in the New Testament, particularly the teaching of Paul, is that Christ was asleep in the grave waiting for God to resurrect his whole person.

What then is the state of the dead in the interim between death and the resurrection at the coming of Christ? They are not said to be with Christ. Oscar Cullman maintains that the dead are “in special proximity to Christ,”⁶ and that because the believer has the Holy Spirit, he has Christ. “The horrible abandonment in death, the separation from God . . . no longer exists, precisely because the Holy Spirit does exist. Therefore the New Testament emphasizes that the dead are indeed with Christ, and so not abandoned.”⁷ This helps to clarify Paul’s statement to the Romans that nothing in all creation, including death, can separate us from the love of God (Rom. 8:38). We have, in some sense, already been made alive with Christ. Cullman concludes: “Nothing is said in the New Testament about the details of the interim conditions. We hear only this: we are nearer to God.”⁸ Here, Cullman, a staunch advocate of the resurrection of the dead, as opposed to the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul, finds himself flirting with dualism in order to reconcile this apparent paradox.

Reichenbach believes that this seeming paradox can be reconciled if we see this proximity to Christ not in terms of objective time, but rather as one’s subjective experience of time. He contends that when one dies one ceases to exist altogether. The soul is not asleep; rather the entire person ceases to exist. The resurrection on the last day is, quite simply, an act of re-creating the entire person. But to the person who dies the subjective experience of time ceases; there is no passage of time. Thus the thief on the cross, following his death, was to be recreated entirely at the resurrection and to experience paradise with Christ.⁹ When Paul says that nothing can separate us from the love of God, he means that in death we do not experience any conscious separation from God.¹⁰

It has been demonstrated thus far that the Hebrew-Christian theology

⁶ *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead*, 52.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 53.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

⁹ “Truly I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).

¹⁰ Bruce Reichenbach, *Is Man the Phoenix?* Washington DC: Christian College Consortium, 1978, 176-187.

concerning life after death was not formulated in a vacuum. From the days of Abraham and the earliest Hebrews through the time of Paul and the Apostles, Hebrews and Christians have lived among and been influenced by the religions and philosophies of the dominant cultures. Throughout that time, from the ancient Egyptians, Persians and Greeks, there existed a dualistic notion of human nature which viewed life after death as a disembodied expression of immortality. This had particular influence on the Jewish community during Hellenistic times and it has been argued by some that this influenced the writings of Paul during the first century. For those who hold a high view of the inspiration of Scripture it is impossible to conclude that Platonic teachings influenced the Word of God, but it is not difficult to conclude that Greek philosophy could have exerted a strong influence on the theology of the expanding Christian community.

The Christian Church under the Influence of Platonic Philosophy

As we turn our attention to the post-canonical Church we will see that, just as the period of time following the writing of the First Testament saw the Jewish understanding of life after death embracing Platonic philosophy, so too there was a gradual shift in the Church's understanding from the notion of the future resurrection of the body at the second coming of Christ to a belief in an immortal soul ascending to heaven at death (whether later to be reunited with a body, or not).

According to Kelly there were four key elements in the eschatological teaching of the early post-canonical Church: Parousia or return of Christ, the resurrection of the dead, the judgment, and the end of the present world order. There was a general expectation that the Parousia was close at hand and Christ would return to rule as king. Even at this early stage it appears that some writers, such as Clement and Polycarp, envisioned the faithful as receiving their reward at death.¹¹

In the second century the eschatological doctrine became more fully developed. In defense against a growing Gnostic tendency to reduce the eschatological hope to the immortal soul's ascent to God, many of the Church writers portrayed a strong millenarian approach — emphasizing the thousand-year reign of Christ on earth. Justin Martyr borrowed heavily from Hebraic teaching and emphasized the earthly reign of Messiah. Chiliasm was a primitive form of eschatology which stressed the literal interpretation of passages such as Revelation 20. Irenaeus gave special consideration to the earthly Kingdom inaugurated at the coming of Christ. At this point, theologians were prone to interpret the Scripture literally.

The Church began to be less influenced by Hebraic concepts and more influenced by Greek philosophy and culture, accommodating to the popular ideas of the times. While the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures overwhelmingly emphasized the mortality of man and the resurrection of the whole person, many of the Church "Fathers" began to introduce the immortality of the soul in a dualist setting.

¹¹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*.

¹² Jaroslav Pelikan.

According to Pelikan, “The idea of the immortality of the soul came eventually to be identified with the Biblical doctrine of the resurrection of the body, a doctrine one of whose original polemical targets was the immortality of the soul.”¹²

Origen had “no room for millenarianism.” He “castigates as folly” the efforts of “literalist believers who read the Scriptures like the Jews and cherish dreams of dwelling in an earthly Jerusalem after the resurrection.”¹³ Despite attempts by many, including Jerome, to counter Origen’s spiritualizing Gnostic tendencies, the Church eventually succumbed to his interpretation of eschatology. The final blow to millennialism was dealt by Augustine with his *City of God*. He transferred eternity from a future hope to a present reality in a celestial paradise. As McDonnell and Lang note: “For Augustine and many of his contemporaries, God’s everlasting spiritual kingdom seemed close. Eternal life would commence without a millennial period.”¹⁴ Augustine advocated an ascetic, body-denying form of Christianity that combined elements of Christianity and Platonism. Where other Christian writers were responsible for joining together the disparate concepts of the resurrection of the body and the immortality of the soul, Augustine is responsible for constructing a theology which retains only the immortality of the soul and eliminates the resurrection of the body. For Augustine the millennial reign of Christ is going on now, through the Church.

According to Eusebius, the millenarian view of the earthly Kingdom of God came to be outlawed by the Church. The theology of an immortal soul which ascends to a celestial paradise at death, advocated by Augustine, held sway for the next thousand years of the Church’s teaching. Even after the Protestant Reformation, this dualist, anti-materialist doctrine would remain influential to the reformed Church. John Calvin espoused a form of “Christian Platonism” in his *Institutes of Religion*.¹⁵ Influential philosopher Rene Descartes would later write “I am distinct from my body and can exist without it.”¹⁶

During the past 50 years there has been a critical reexamination of the biblical material regarding the hope of life after death. Beginning with Oscar Cullman and others, there has been a rediscovery of the holistic view of humanity. Monism is winning the battle against dualism within much of the academic community. This is so much the case that scholars such as John Cooper find themselves having to write books to defend the “traditional” Platonic doctrine and do so from the posture of being in the minority.¹⁷

However, the discoveries of the scholarly community take many generations to effectively travel from the seminaries to the pulpits to the pews. The Platonic view continues to be normative within the popular Church establishment. Many churchgoers still profess that people have immortal souls which upon death either ascend to heaven or descend to hell. While there has been a resurgence of

¹³ Kelly, 473.

¹⁴ Colleen McDannell, Bernard Lang, *Heaven, A History*, New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988, 54.

¹⁵ I, XV, 6; 192.

¹⁶ *Meditations*, VI.

¹⁷ See John W. Cooper, *Body, Soul and Life Everlasting*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989.

millennial hope and expectation within some parts of the evangelical community, still, among mainstream Christians the present day celestial City of God popularized by Augustine continues to hold sway.

Conclusion

What happens after we die? What most Christians still believe about immortal souls which ascend to the heavens to live among the gods began with the ancient Egyptians two and a half millennia before Christ. It was introduced to the Hebrews by the Persian and Greek cultures in the last few centuries before Christ, and was embraced by such notable Church Fathers as Origen and Augustine. But it is very different from what was taught by the Hebrew prophets and by Jesus and his Apostles. The biblical answer to the question “what happens when we die?” is that the whole person “sleeps” in Sheol (the grave) until Christ comes to resurrect the dead, granting believers immortality and inviting them to participate in God’s government upon the earth, until such time as evil is destroyed, sin judged and eliminated forever, and death brought to its final end. At that time God Himself will return to a restored Eden-like earth and once again make His home among His people.

What is the fate of those who die before the coming of Christ? While their bodies cease to exist, they will be with Christ in the sense that they belong to him and nothing, not even death, can remove them from the love of God. From the subjective experience of the deceased their next instant following death will be when they are fully recreated and brought into the presence of Christ. This is truly a blessed hope.

Despite the efforts of Platonic philosophers and theologians to abandon the notion of a resurrection of the dead, this hope still lives today among those who share the faith of Abraham, that Semite who first heard the call of God over 4,000 years ago, that man of faith who in his own primitive way has outdone all the brilliant minds of philosophy and theology — for it was Abraham who “reasoned that God could raise the dead” (Heb. 11:19). Let us all seek to embrace the simple faith of Abraham.