

To Be Absent From the Body

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The emerging Messianic movement today is a theologically maturing movement. As the Lord convicts more and more Believers that a lifestyle of Torah obedience is for them, and our numbers grow, God will refine our theology and we will become more established. This is something that has to take place over time, and we have to keep in mind the fact that there are people from all over the theological and doctrinal spectrum that are entering into the Messianic community. Consequently, old theological debates and arguments have reared their heads, which are not necessarily related to the Messianic movement proper, and they require us to examine them to see if they are Biblically accurate.

There has been an incredible amount of discussion in various Messianic circles relating to the Biblical nature of human beings and our existence. Believers are being rightfully convicted that the Torah is to be followed, and are studying parts of the Bible that have been generally overlooked by Christianity, such as the Tanach or Old Testament. However, some of the same when studying the Tanach are coming to conclusions about humanity's existence and purpose that are not fully Scriptural. In fact, these conclusions are quite foreign in view of both Jewish and Christian teachings about mankind. Furthermore, these views are foreign in light of the First Century Pharisaical Judaism that the early Messianic movement arose out of.

Some in the Messianic community are advocating the belief that human beings exist in what is called a "holistic" existence, meaning that the body, soul, and spirit of a person cannot be separate at any time. These people skew the Bible's teachings as they relate to the fall of man and the afterlife. In regard to the subject matter at hand, such individuals do not believe that those who have faith in Messiah Yeshua and are spiritually regenerated go to an intermediate Heaven upon time of death. They believe, rather, that they just wait in the ground in their graves until the resurrection. Some Messianics who believe in an afterlife are often accused of denying the reality of the resurrection, and furthermore denying the reality that God's Kingdom is coming to Earth.

Our ministry has received some criticism for adhering to various beliefs as they relate to our existence, the fall of man, the resurrection, and the afterlife. We have been accused of adhering to "Catholic doctrine" or being "Hellenistic" or any number of accusations as they relate to humanity's existence. We have even been told by a few in the Messianic community that we have not thoroughly researched this issue and are presently "unenlightened." Surely, as the Torah demands that truth be confirmed by the witness of two or three (Deuteronomy 19:15; Matthew 18:16; 2 Corinthians 13:1), we have researched this issue and now provide our analysis of the intermediate state of Believers in Yeshua who have died in the faith.

Is the issue the resurrection of Believers who have died in the faith? No. The Sadducees of the First Century denied the Biblical reality of the resurrection, whereas the Pharisees adhered to it. The Apostle Paul proclaimed before the Sanhedrin, "Brethren, I am a Pharisee, a son of Pharisees; I am on trial for the hope and resurrection of the dead!" (Acts 23:6). He also wrote, "But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Messiah has been raised; and if Messiah has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain" (1 Corinthians 15:13-14). The clear teaching of the Prophet Daniel is that "Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace *and* everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:2). The issue at hand is not whether or not Believers who have died in the faith will be physically resurrected. The issue is what happens in the intermediate state to Believers who have died. Do Believers wait in the grave until resurrection, or do their souls leave their bodies and exist in an intermediate Heaven with Yeshua and His host?

It is only appropriate that we state our position on this issue before going any further. We do not want to give any vague idea about what we "*might* believe." We believe in an intermediate Heaven, and that Believers who have died in the faith will be with the Lord prior to the resurrection. We do not hold to the idea that upon time of death one's "being" sleeps in the grave, but rather it is a person's body that sleeps, and that the spirit and soul go to the intermediate Heaven until the time of the resurrection. At the time of the resurrection, the righteous dead will receive glorified bodies similar to Yeshua's. (Likewise, following the end of the Millennium, the condemned dead will be resurrected to experience eternal separation in the Lake of Fire.) Certainly these issues have been debated among rabbis, priests, ministers, teachers, and theologians for centuries. But, the Messianic movement would be wrong not discuss this subject adequately, keeping in mind the theology of the First Century Messianic community.

Hermeneutical Issues

Before we begin our analysis of the issues at hand, there are some hermeneutical issues that relate to why some deny the Biblical reality of an afterlife for Believers in Yeshua. There is one fundamental interpretational problem that most advocates of soul sleep hold to—and it is one that we as Messianic Believers must not forget: we must remember God’s progressive revelation.

There are Biblical understandings and doctrines that are not fully revealed to us in the Hebrew Tanach, that the Apostolic Scriptures make perfectly clear to us. In many cases, an Apostolic teaching, while appearing to be “New Testament revelation,” is something that developed in the milieu of First Century Judaism. Menahem Mansoor indicates, “Pharisaic doctrines have more in common with those of Christianity than is supposed, having prepared the ground for Christianity with such concepts as Messianism, the popularization of monotheism and apocalypticism, and with such beliefs as **life after death, resurrection of the dead, immortality, and angels**” (*EJ*).¹ However, even though true, from the Scriptural account itself the Apostolic Writings do clarify and fine tune many things that the Tanach does not deal with fully.

Please understand that what is often called “progressive revelation” is *not* dispensationalism nor is it connected with it. Dispensationalism is the false concept that has God dealing with different groups of people in different ways during different times periods. What is termed progressive revelation, on the other hand, is the idea that God has not fully revealed His entire plan to mankind at one time and has shown it in bits and pieces throughout the centuries. This is readily spoken of by the author of Hebrews, who says that God speaks to mankind “in many portions and in many ways”:

“In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world” (Hebrews 1:1-2, RSV).

Understanding this concept is important because as some Messianic Believers study the Torah and the Tanach, they fail to interpret its *older* revelation in the light of the *newer* revelation of the Apostles. The Torah and the Tanach form the foundation of the rest of Scripture, but they by no means make up “all of Scripture.” On that same note, we cannot take an overly simplistic view of any text of Scripture, nor form our theology on selective verses.

Yeshua, the Word of God made flesh, said, “Do not think that I came to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I did not come to abolish but to fulfill” (Matthew 5:17). We know that this means that He came to perfect the Torah, by interpreting it properly for us and living it without error becoming our perfect sacrifice. Yeshua is the dénouement of the Torah, its acme and consummation. He came to show us things that were not clearly defined in the Hebrew Tanach and amended their understanding. For our analysis here, it notably includes things such as the nature of human beings and the afterlife, even though a belief in a hereafter for the righteous was a mainstay of First Century Pharisaical Judaism, the theology of which the Apostle Paul held to long after his conversion (Acts 23:6).

As we examine the Biblical nature of the Believer and the intermediate state, we cannot make the hermeneutical error of forgetting the newer, and often more defined revelation of the Apostles. The Disciples of Yeshua came from a theological background that advocated life after death. If we forget this, then we run the risk of making serious interpretational mistakes regarding other critical doctrines of the faith.

The Existence of Mankind

When we Biblically determine the nature of human beings and our eternal destiny, be it good or bad, we are faced with the age old question of: Why did God create me? Each person has to answer this himself. Throughout the ages every person has reacted to this question differently. Many rightfully seek the Father through His Son Yeshua the Messiah (Jesus Christ) and find salvation. Others choose to blaspheme the Creator wanting nothing to do with Him. Many others simply choose to deny the existence of a Supreme Being, believing that humanity was formed as a result of a “cosmic accident.”

¹ Menahem Mansoor, “Pharisees,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica. MS Windows 9x*. Brooklyn: Judaica Multimedia (Israel) Ltd, 1997.

Among those who claim to follow the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, there is the strong conviction that He is sovereign and He has orchestrated the universe for His pleasure. But yet are we pawns in a cosmic game, or does He seek an individual relationship with each one of us? We know our Heavenly Father is righteous and wants each one of us to be redeemed. But likewise, those who reject, mock, and blaspheme Him are to be punished—significantly.

It is a fact that if the Lord does not return while we are still alive that we will all die. Sooner or later our body of flesh will give way to physical disease, ailment, or old age. It is guaranteed that our present time on Planet Earth will end. What happens after one dies has been an age-old question that many following the Lord have had varied opinions and doctrines relating to. As it will relate to our analysis in this article, there are two ideas that presently work against one another and have been highly contested:

1. The spirits and souls of the righteous dead are in the intermediate Heaven with the Lord, and that the spirits and souls of the condemned dead are in Hell (*Sheol/Hades*). At the time of resurrection, the righteous will be reunited with their bodies and exist eternally with the Messiah, and the resurrected condemned will be thrown into the Lake of Fire to be punished eternally with Satan and his minions.
2. The dead, righteous or unrighteous, are in the grave until the time of their respective resurrection. Upon resurrection, the righteous attain “eternal life” and can exist eternally with Messiah, and the condemned are awakened only to be thrown into the Lake of Fire and destroyed.

In our analysis, we will be discussing some of these views as they relate to the Believer who has put his trust in Messiah Yeshua. When you are finished reading, you can stand rest assured that born again Believers do indeed go to the intermediate Heaven to meet the Lord at the time of death, prior to the resurrection. Those who would have problems with this idea are shown to have rather unclear or uncertain motives.²

The Fall of Mankind

When we begin to discuss the eternal destiny of mankind, and whether or not the deceased will spend time in an intermediate place called Heaven or Hell, it is important that we analyze the fall of humanity as recorded in the opening chapters of the Book of Genesis. If Adam and Eve had not eaten the forbidden fruit, there would be no death, no disease, and no sin. But yet as “death,” the proper understanding of which is being contested, we must understand what occurred at the Fall to gain a fuller picture of what we are each individually redeemed from as saints of the Most High.

After Adam was created, the Lord issued a strong warning to the man: “The LORD God commanded the man, saying, ‘From any tree of the garden you may eat freely; but from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat from it you will surely die’” (Genesis 2:16-17).

In Genesis 3:19, the most obvious of all the consequences of Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit is emphasized, *physical death*: “By the sweat of your face you will eat bread, till you return to the ground, because from it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”

Satan, who is the father of lies, tempted Eve by telling her that if she ate from the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil that she would not die:

“The woman said to the serpent, ‘From the fruit of the trees of the garden we may eat; but from the fruit of the tree which is in the middle of the garden, God has said, “You shall not eat from it or touch it, or you will die.”’ The serpent said to the woman, ‘You surely will not die!’” (Genesis 3:2-4).

In a particular way, Satan was correct in that when Eve ate the fruit; she did not “drop dead.” When she and Adam ate the fruit the two of them *died spiritually*. Their eyes were finally opened to the concepts of good and evil and they could knowingly choose to worship the Creator or the Accuser:

“When the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was desirable to make *one* wise, she took from its fruit and ate; and she gave also to her

² The issue of eternal punishment is addressed in the editor’s article “Why Hell Must Be Eternal.”

husband with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loin coverings” (Genesis 3:6-7).

According to the definition of “death” that God gave Adam and Eve when they both ate the forbidden fruit, they “died.” Or did they? By the medical definition of death, Adam and Eve did not die upon eating the fruit; their hearts and brains were still functioning. But when they ate the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil, their eyes were “opened,” meaning that their prior innocent state was gone and they could no longer commune fully with God. Adam and Eve were thus ejected from the Garden of Eden. For this reason, all of us must seek redemption in Yeshua, the Son of God, as was indeed foretold by God to Eve after her eating the fruit:

“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, and you shall bruise him on the heel” (Genesis 3:15; cf. Romans 16:20; Revelation 12:17).

“A Living Being”

One of the contested issues as it relates to the fall of mankind is the composition of a human being’s body, soul, and spirit. According to Genesis 2:7, “Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” The Hebrew word for “being” is *nephesh* (נֶפֶשׁ), which has very wide connotations of meanings in Biblical Hebrew, all contingent on context: “throat,” “neck,” “breath,” “man, men, person, people,” “personality, individuality,” “life,” “soul” as seat & support of feelings & sensations” (*CHALOT*).³ *Nephesh* is first used in Genesis 1:20 when God says “Then God said, ‘Let the waters teem with swarms of living creatures [*nepheshot*], and let birds fly above the earth in the open expanse of the heavens.’”

We know that man is not merely a “creature” or animal in the strictest sense of the word. We do not exist on a so-called evolutionary plain related to apes, gorillas, chimpanzees, or Neanderthals. We are told in Genesis 1:26, “Then God said, ‘Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’” Humankind is created in the *tzelem* (צלם) of God, meaning “likeness,” “of a man as the צלם of God...i.e., he is God’s viceroy, representative or witness among the creatures” (*HALOT*).⁴ It is the root for the modern Hebrew word *tzelemach* (צלמח), which means “camera.” Nahum Sarna describes the unique place of mankind in the order of God’s Creation:

“A human being is the pinnacle of Creation. This unique status is communicated in a variety of ways, not least by the simple fact that humankind is last in a manifestly ascending, gradual order. The creation of human life is an exception to the rule of creation by divine fiat...Human beings are to enjoy a unique relationship to God, who communicates with them alone and who shares with them the custody and administration of the world.”⁵

We are unique beings, so unique that unlike other “animals,” we must seek redemption—something that your pet dog, cat, or fish does not have to do, as they are not sentient life forms.

The most common translation of *nephesh* in Scripture as it relates to human beings is in the form of “soul,” as it is in the KJV rendering of Genesis 2:7: “And the LORD God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” Other translations such as the NIV tell us, “Then the LORD God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.” The understanding of *nephesh* as “being” is also consistent with most Jewish translations as well.

The Hebrew verb translated “breathed” in Genesis 2:7 is *naphach* (נָפַח). It specifically means “breathe, blow” (*BDB*).⁶ It is a related term to *nephesh* or “soul.” Those who advocate a belief in what is

³ William L. Holladay, ed., *A Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Leiden, the Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1988), pp 242-243.

⁴ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, eds. *The Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, 2 vols. (Leiden, the Netherlands: Brill, 2001), 2:1029.

⁵ Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 11.

⁶ Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs. *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), 655.

often called “soul sleep” will say that since God breathed life into man, and man became a “living soul,” that a person’s body is his “soul,” in a manner of speaking. Thus, when an individual’s body dies, so does his soul. The idea that human beings have a “soul” is readily spoken against by these people. But this is not what the Scriptures tell us.

Genesis 2:7 first tells us that the Lord “formed man of dust from the ground.” This is very clearly speaking of man’s lifeless body. The verse then continues, as translated in the ArtScroll Tanach, telling us “He blew into His nostrils the soul of life; and man became a living being.” This translation is interesting, as it implies that God “breathed a soul” into the first human. When this happened, man became a “living soul,” something which we point out comes from God and has a part of His eternal or immortal “nature” in it. While the soul is separate from the body, the soul and body are most certainly connected. In this regard, a human being is most certainly a “living soul.” It is interesting that this rendering of Genesis 9:7 should come from the ATS version, as many soul sleep advocates tell us that those who believe that human beings have a soul are embracing non-Hebraic ideas—when this translation comes from the Orthodox Jewish community. Justifying this translation, the *ArtScroll Chumash* offers the following commentary:

“God...made Man out of both lower [earthly] and upper [heavenly] matter: his body from the dust and his soul from the spirit... This soul made Man a *living being*... Accordingly, the life that is unique to Man and which only God could ‘blow’ into him is the rational soul that includes the power of intelligent speech. This is what elevates a human above animal life: the ability, and therefore the responsibility, to use his intelligence in God’s service.”⁷

We wholeheartedly agree with these remarks. Man is on a different level of intelligence than all of God’s other creatures. We are made in His image and we have the ability to use our intelligence and our abilities in His specific service. We are sentient “souls.” To say otherwise is to relegate man to the position of being no different than the animals. To this, Allen P. Ross offers the following observations:

“God’s breathing the breath of life into man transformed his form into a living being... This made man a spiritual being, with a capacity for serving and fellowshiping with God. With this special Creation in mind, the reader can see the significance of the Fall. Since the Fall, regeneration by the ‘inbreathing’ of the Holy Spirit is essential in order for people to enjoy fellowship with God” (*BKCOT*).⁸

We know that when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit, it was not their bodies that initially died. They went from existing as a *nephesh chayha* (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה), or “living being,” to a “dead being.” We inherit the curse of this according to Romans 5:12, “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.”

Although this “death” involves physical death—is it primarily physically death? We do not believe so. Genesis 3:8 tells us that the Lord used to meet Adam and Eve by “walking in the garden in the cool of the day,” and as a primary result of their “death,” He “drove the man out; and at the east of the garden of Eden He stationed the cherubim and the flaming sword which turned every direction to guard the way to the tree of life” (Genesis 3:24).

As a result of the Fall, Adam and Eve were no longer able to have access to the Tree of Life whose fruit would have given them eternal life and the ability to commune with the Lord in the Garden. The true “death” we inherit from Adam and Eve is separation from the Lord, not necessarily bodily death. But the good news of Yeshua is that this separation ends by receiving Him into our lives and accepting His atoning work for our sins on the cross.

Body, Soul, and Spirit

In addition to our *nephesh*, our soul or being, which is made spiritually dead through the Adamic fall, there are other components to our existence. The Apostle Paul writes in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, “Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be preserved complete, without blame at the coming of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah.” We are told in the Apostolic Scriptures (New Testament) that a human being is composed of three specific parts:

⁷ Nosson Scherman, ed., *The ArtScroll Series Chumash, Stone Edition* (Brooklyn: Mesorah Publications, Ltd., 2000), pp 11-12.

⁸ Allen P. Ross, “Genesis,” in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, Old Testament* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 30.

1. Body
2. Soul
3. Spirit

In the Hebrew Tanach, two specific Hebrew words are used for “body,” *meeh* (מַעֵה), meaning “internal organs, inward parts (intestines, bowels)” (*BDB*).⁹ and *basar* (בָּשָׂר), or “flesh” (*BDB*).¹⁰ Their equivalents in the Greek New Testament are *sowma* (σῶμα), translated as “body” in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, and *sarx* (σαρξ), usually rendered as “flesh.”

In order to communicate the idea of “soul” or *nephesh*, the word used consistently throughout the Greek Scriptures is *psuche* (ψυχή). This word means both “life on earth in its animating aspect making bodily function possible,” and “seat and center of the inner human life in its many and various aspects, soul” (*BDAG*).¹¹ What is important to note about *psuche* is that it does not mean “physical life” as soul sleep advocates would want us to believe. The Rabbis who translated *nephesh* in the Septuagint (LXX) as *psuche*, which the Apostles used and were familiar with, understood it to mean the animating force of one’s physical being.

Both the Hebrew and Greek words for “spirit” are also of importance for us, especially as they relate to the present existence of the Believer. The Hebrew *ruach* (רוּחַ) means “breath, wind, spirit” (*BDB*),¹² the usage of which is obviously determinant on context. The Greek *pneuma* (πνεῦμα) likewise essentially means the same thing, as *pneuma* is used in the LXX to communicate the concept of the Hebrew *ruach*. However, is one’s spirit a person’s physical “breath”?

Paul is writing those who have received Yeshua the Messiah into their hearts in 1 Thessalonians 5:23. The spirit which these Believers have has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit, the *Ruach HaKodesh* (רוּחַ הַקֹּדֶשׁ), or the *Hagion Pneuma* (Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα). The Holy Spirit regenerates the fallen person’s spirit, which hence reconciles the fallen person’s soul, his essence, unto God. As it relates to the born again person’s existence, we must understand that the Holy Spirit is not just some form of “wind” that God sends us, but rather it is indeed a distinct manifestation of His Deity as the Spirit can speak through us (Mark 13:11), the Spirit can reveal things to us (Luke 2:26), the Spirit can be blasphemed against (Mark 3:29), and the fact that when Yeshua was immersed by John the Baptist, “the Holy Spirit descended upon Him in bodily form like a dove” (Luke 3:22). We readily point out that the idea that the Holy Spirit is an explicit manifestation of God is denied by a large number of those who believe in “soul sleep.”

The Holy Spirit is our “connection” to God the Father. When understanding that at the time of a Believer’s death, “the spirit will return to God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7), the spirit which has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit and reconciled the soul unto God, the Holy Spirit is gone. The Believer’s soul (*nephesh/psuche*), a non-corporeal element of human beings given to us by God, which has been regenerated through our acceptance of the Messiah, also leaves. Just as the spirit (*ruach/pneuma*) returns to Him, so does the soul (*nephesh/psuche*). The person who dies can now have true eternal “life,” or communion with God in the intermediate Heaven. The person then only awaits the redemption of his body at the time of the resurrection. He also awaits his rewards with Believers from all times at the resurrection.

(Likewise in a similar manner, the soul [*nephesh/psuche*] of the condemned person goes to “torments” or Hell, to wait for the time when he will be resurrected to receive his punishment at the Great White Throne judgment of Yeshua the Messiah.)

Greek Dualism?

One of the claims that is often levied against those who adhere to the belief that at time of death both a person’s soul goes to either an intermediate place of bliss or torment, is that it is an idea contrived from Platonic Greek philosophy. As is the common accusation, those who adhere to the notion that either the righteous or the condemned go to Heaven or Hell upon time of death are embracing the

⁹ *BDB*, 588.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 142.

¹¹ Frederick William Danker, ed., et. al. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, third edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), pp 1098-1099.

¹² *BDB*, 924.

concept of Greek dualism, in which a person's soul is innately trapped inside his body. We do not believe that this assessment is entirely accurate. Consider the following Scriptures:

“For I joyfully concur with the law of God in the inner man, but I see a different law in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin which is in my members” (Romans 7:22-23).

“Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16).

“For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth derives its name, that He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man” (Ephesians 3:14-16).

“I consider it right, as long as I am in this *earthly* dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder, knowing that the laying aside of my *earthly* dwelling is imminent, as also our Lord Yeshua the Messiah has made clear to me. And I will also be diligent that at any time after my departure you will be able to call these things to mind” (2 Peter 1:13-15).

Both the Apostles Paul and Peter saw a distinction between their Earthly bodies or the “outer man,” and the “inner man” or their souls, as their bodies eventually terminated their physical functions. But did they embrace “Greek philosophy”? They certainly did not. For as Paul writes in Romans 8:22-23, “We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time. Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, **the redemption of our bodies**” (NIV).

The redemption of our physical bodies is the ultimate consummation of our salvation in Messiah—unlike what the Ancient Greeks believed. Platonic Greek philosophy insisted that man's soul was trapped inside his body and seeking a final release to the underworld or Hades. Once a body was dead, it was commonly treated as a mere “empty shell” to be dispensed with as garbage, something which is entirely foreign to the Scriptures. In the Hebrew Scriptures and in Jewish tradition we see an innate desire on the part of people to give respect to a corpse, as each human being is created in the image of God.

A large number of Believers today believe that the dead body of someone should be treated with respect and buried in a grave, as is consistent with the Bible. We do not deny that the dead bodies of Believers will one day be resurrected, as some soul sleep advocates will often insinuate. They ask what the need for a resurrection is if one goes to Heaven upon time of death. But the issue is bigger than that. The issue is that if there is no afterlife than human beings who have died are no different than a dead dog or cat. It is degrading to the human person who has been created in God's image, and has abilities and reasoning that no animal has. Furthermore, it is degrading to our Creator, who wants to dwell with us, be that in an intermediate Heaven or in His restored Kingdom on Earth. Our desire should likewise be to be with Him, wherever that may be.

The Greeks and Romans commonly cremated human remains, as they believed that they would no longer be necessary. Judaism today strongly discourages cremation as human beings are created in the image of God. Part of this is based in an Orthodox Jewish superstition that God is unable to resurrect one who is created. Our Infinite Creator can certainly reassemble human ashes into a body, and even those who are cast into the sea (Revelation 20:13), possibly having been eaten and excreted by its ecosystem. Many Christians today oppose cremation because it degrades the human body, the pinnacle of God's creation.

A person's soul (*nephesh/psuche*) will one day be reunited with his body. Any Believer who has put His faith in Messiah Yeshua will rule with Him in the eternal state in a redeemed physical body. Scripturally, man does not exist with “two” beings, but the soul will be temporarily separated from the body in the intermediate Heaven until time of the resurrection.

Do Human Beings Posses a Soul?

As is consistent with the idea that those who believe that the souls of the dead go to an intermediate place prior to the resurrection is whether or not human beings have a soul, meaning a non-corporeal element of their existence. In other words, does a person possess something that will “continue” after his physical body dies?

Most Jews and Christians are of the conviction that human beings do possess souls, and soul sleep advocates believe the contrary. Some say that those who believe that a person's soul is separate from his body are in actuality holding to Platonic or Roman Catholic teaching that states that man has an "immortal soul."

Their denial of the reality that human beings possess a non-corporeal part of their makeup is primarily based on Ezekiel 18:4, where God tells us, "Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine. The soul who sins will die." Soul sleep advocates take the phrase, "The soul who sins is the one who will die" (NIV), and reason that all souls or beings are to die. We agree that all are to die, but in *what context* are all members of the human race to "die"? Notice that the Lord says in the same text that those who live righteously will live:

"But if a man is righteous and practices justice and righteousness, and does not eat at the mountain *shrines* or lift up his eyes to the idols of the house of Israel, or defile his neighbor's wife or approach a woman during her menstrual period—if a man does not oppress anyone, but restores to the debtor his pledge, does not commit robbery, *but* gives his bread to the hungry and covers the naked with clothing, if he does not lend *money* on interest or take increase, *if* he keeps his hand from iniquity *and* executes true justice between man and man, *if* he walks in My statutes and My ordinances so as to deal faithfully—he is righteous *and* will surely live,' declares the Lord GOD" (Ezekiel 18:5-9).

When Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit *they died*—but they did not "drop dead" all of a sudden. Inside they experienced a spiritual death, a separation from God that resulted in their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. This separation from God is the death that we inherit from them. Eventually, their physical bodies would die, but that was not the primary result of their actions. If we as Believers have been forgiven of our sin through the sacrifice of Messiah Yeshua, we do not have to experience "death." We can live righteously and uprightly through the empowerment of the Holy Spirit and live, having communion with the Almighty as was intended back in the Garden. We do not have to experience the separation from God that death is.

In confronting the false concept that one's soul "dies" in physical death, we are confronted with the Biblical reality demonstrated in the Apostolic Scriptures that after death, one's being indeed goes somewhere—a place of intermediate bliss or torment. This is most readily realized when Yeshua encounters Moses and Elijah on the Mount of Transfiguration:

"And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him. Peter said to Yeshua, 'Lord, it is good for us to be here; if You wish, I will make three tabernacles here, one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah'" (Matthew 17:3-4; cf. Mark 9:4-5; Luke 9:30-33).

What is apparent here is that both Moses and Elijah obviously existed as they appeared before Peter, John, and James. It is true that according to 2 Kings 2:11 that Elijah did not experience physical death, at least as we know it, but rather "went up by a whirlwind to heaven." But Moses did clearly die: "So Moses the servant of the LORD died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the LORD. And He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows his burial place to this day" (Deuteronomy 34:5-6). When Yeshua and the Disciples saw Moses, what did they see? Moses, who physically died, appeared before Yeshua and the Disciples. Did Messiah see Moses' "soul"? Some claim that they only saw a vision, based on Yeshua's words, "Tell the vision to no one until the Son of Man has risen from the dead" (Matthew 17:9). But *horama* (ὄραμα) clearly means, "*that which is seen, a sight, spectacle*" (LS).¹³

Human beings do not have an "immortal soul" as the ancient pagan Greeks and Romans advocated they did, where the soul was trapped inside of the body seeking release. However, Adam, the first human being, had his soul breathed into Him by God and is thus an entity made of corporal flesh, and an immortal soul emanating from the Creator.

When "the soul that sins" dies, it dies spiritually, as did Adam and Eve's when they ate the fruit. As inheritors of the Adamic fall, our souls too are dead until we receive the gift of eternal life in Yeshua for the forgiveness of our sins that we might eternally commune with God, as did the first man and woman before the Fall.

No one initially possesses an "immortal soul," as we may call it, because true immortality comes via true communion with God, something that was abrogated when our eyes were opened to good and

¹³ BibleWorks 5.0: Lidell-Scott Lexicon, CD-ROM, Norfolk: BibleWorks, LLC, 2002.

evil by Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit. However, we do possess a soul that will exist outside our bodies following our death in an intermediate state of bliss or torment. This concept is reemphasized for us in Revelation 6:9-10 when it speaks of the souls in Heaven who cry out to God to avenge them for the evil that had been done to them on Earth:

“When the Lamb broke the fifth seal, I saw underneath the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God, and because of the testimony which they had maintained; and they cried out with a loud voice, saying, ‘How long, O Lord, holy and true, will You refrain from judging and avenging our blood on those who dwell on the earth?’”

All of the soul sleep advocates we have encountered have problems with these verses from Revelation as they attest that the souls of Believers are in the intermediate Heaven, even if the only souls mentioned here are those of martyrs. One common tactic that soul sleep advocates use is to say that Revelation 6:9-10 is not to be interpreted literally, and most of their interpretations of the Book of Revelation are very erratic. The other tactic we have discovered is that some soul sleep advocates believe that these are actual souls, but that these “souls,” meaning physical persons, were brought to Heaven via the pre-tribulation rapture. But neither one of these tactics around the Biblical concept of an afterlife is valid.

Eternal Life

Consistent with the false idea that the souls of born again Believers do not go to Heaven upon time of death is a totally misconstrued idea about eternal life. The vast majority of soul sleep advocates adhere to the notion, knowingly or unknowingly, to the medical definition of “life” which is that a person’s heart is beating and brain is functioning. Thus, they say eternal life is being alive, physically, for eternity. This runs into some serious problems when we consider the entire scope of the eternal life that God has given Believers who have experienced the new birth and received Messiah into their lives.

In John 5:24 Yeshua tells us, “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.” This statement from the Messiah contradicts the words of many who believe that eternal life is attained at the resurrection of the saints. He also says in John 11:25-26, “I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in Me will live even if he dies, and everyone who lives and believes in Me will never die. Do you believe this?”

Our Lord tells us that we have eternal life if we have believed in Him. The verb *echei* (εχει) appears in the present active indicative tense, indicating that it is something that all Believers possess *right now!* Eternal life is not necessarily something that we wait for at the time of the resurrection, because if we have been regenerated by the Holy Spirit we can presently commune with our Heavenly Father and petition Him daily in the name of Yeshua, similar to what Adam and Eve could do before the Fall. Our bodies one day may die, but our souls will exist in the presence of the Lord at the time of our deaths. Our “eternal life” that we have as regenerated Believers cannot be lost after our death. The Apostle John reemphasizes that we presently have eternal life in 1 John 5:11-13:

“And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

Scores of soul sleep advocates say that Believers who have died in the faith presently do not possess eternal life because of a vague admonition by Qohelet in Ecclesiastes 9:5, “For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten.” According to this, they say, the souls of either the righteous dead or the condemned dead are only in a physical grave until time of the resurrection. But this is not the case when we consider the entire scope of what Qohelet is saying in Ecclesiastes. In v. 9:3, he is speaking from an Earthly perspective, concerning physical life “under the sun.” Later in his dissertation we are told that upon time of death, “the dust [body] returns to the ground, as it was, as the spirit returns to God Who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7). As it is the Holy Spirit that has regenerated the Believer’s soul it is that Spirit that returns to the Lord. And what of the soul? Obviously, if it is something that is non-corporeal breathed into Adam from God, it returns to the Lord as well. It is the dead human body that will “know nothing.”

We have extreme problems with those who trivialize eternal life to being “physically alive for eternity.” At the very least, these people reveal a lack of understanding the supernatural. Messiah Yeshua told us in John 10:8-10, “All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not hear them. I am the door; if anyone enters through Me, he will be saved, and will go in and out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

What does Yeshua mean when He tells us that He came to give sinners life, and indeed have life more abundantly? If we follow the logic of “life” being “physically alive” as soul sleep advocates believe is accurate, this would imply that all those who believe in Him are to be physically fit. In other words, by believing in Messiah alone we should not be prone to disease, ailments, or being overweight. But this is obviously not true. Yeshua came to give sinners life, meaning communion with the Father, and that we might have that life, communion with the Father, more abundantly.

What is the spiritual motive of soul sleep advocates here? Do not the Scriptures tell us that if we have received Yeshua into our lives that we already possess eternal life and can eternally commune with God? We fear that those who deny this fundamental principle of faith are uncertain about where their eternal destiny lies. They do not appear eager to see the Lord at the time of death. Rather than saying that they have repented and confessed of their sins and presently possess eternal life, their idea is that eternal life is something to be attained in the future at the time of the resurrection. What are they trying to prove behind this? It is possible that their desire is to not be with the Messiah in Heaven? We may never know.

“The Life is in the Blood”

In recent days as some Messianic Believers have sought spiritual insight as a result of studying the Torah and the Tanach, some of the same forget to view these writings in view of the Gospels and Apostolic Scriptures. Too many in today’s emerging Messianic community are following an hermeneutic of the Torah and Tanach being primary to the words of Yeshua. The Torah and Tanach certainly form the foundation that the Apostolic Scriptures rest on, but they do not negate its distinct revelation, either. These people forget to interpret what is shown to us in the Tanach in light of the instruction of Yeshua and the Apostles, sometimes even trivializing these Scriptures that clearly lay out the salvation plan through receiving the Messiah into our hearts. In other words, they often elevate the written Torah above the Word made flesh who is Yeshua.

In the Torah, we are told very clearly that the life of an animal is in the blood and it is for this reason that we are prohibited from eating blood.¹⁴ The view of some Messianic soul sleep advocates is that blood, which gives human beings physical life, is also the “soul.” When the physical body dies, hence the “soul” dies as well. However, once again we emphasize that human beings are not animals. Genesis 1:27 tells us, “So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them” (NRSV). The commandments as they relate to life being in the blood specifically relate to *non-human entities*, unless we somehow deny the Biblical reality that we are made in the likeness of our Creator. When we read Yeshua’s admonition in John 6:53-54, the idea that a human being’s soul is actually his blood runs into some serious problems:

“So Yeshua said to them, ‘Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in yourselves. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day.’”

We know from the Torah that the life of an animal is found in its blood. Eternal life for human beings, however, is found in the pure blood of Messiah Yeshua, which we must have covering us if we have received Him into our hearts. Our eternal life is not found in our own sinful blood that we inherited from Adam, but it is found in the Messiah’s blood which we have “in us,” in a spiritual sense, via the Holy Spirit.

“David Did Not Ascend”

The instruction of the Apostles does not teach us that the righteous dead are presently in the grave. The Apostles teach us that the souls of the righteous dead are in the presence of God. There are, of

¹⁴ Genesis 9:4; Leviticus 17:11, 14; Deuteronomy 12:23.

course, those who deny their revelation, which was fully in concert with the theology of First Century Pharisaical Judaism, telling us that the Apostles meant something else.

One of the first lines of reasoning used by some in the Messianic community who believe in soul sleep is a statement made by the Apostle Peter in Acts 2:29, 34 in his riveting sermon at Shavuot (Pentecost). Peter states, “Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day...For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: ‘THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, “SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND.’” According to this, King David, who was a man after God’s own heart, is presently not in Heaven with the Lord. He is rather dead and buried. This is not an accurate assessment of the context in which Peter reports in Acts 2:

“Men of Israel, listen to these words: Yeshua the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know—this *Man*, delivered over by the predetermined plan and foreknowledge of God, you nailed to a cross by the hands of godless men and put *Him* to death. But God raised Him up again, putting an end to the agony of death, since it was impossible for Him to be held in its power. For David says of Him, ‘I SAW THE LORD ALWAYS IN MY PRESENCE; FOR HE IS AT MY RIGHT HAND, SO THAT I WILL NOT BE SHAKEN. THEREFORE MY HEART WAS GLAD AND MY TONGUE EXULTED; MOREOVER MY FLESH ALSO WILL LIVE IN HOPE; BECAUSE YOU WILL NOT ABANDON MY SOUL TO HADES, NOR ALLOW YOUR HOLY ONE TO UNDERGO DECAY. YOU HAVE MADE KNOWN TO ME THE WAYS OF LIFE; YOU WILL MAKE ME FULL OF GLADNESS WITH YOUR PRESENCE.’ Brethren, I may confidently say to you regarding the patriarch David that he both died and was buried, and his tomb is with us to this day. And so, because he was a prophet and knew that GOD HAD SWORN TO HIM WITH AN OATH TO SEAT *one* OF HIS DESCENDANTS ON HIS THRONE, he looked ahead and spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, that HE WAS NEITHER ABANDONED TO HADES, NOR DID His flesh SUFFER DECAY. This Yeshua God raised up again, to which we are all witnesses. Therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, He has poured forth this which you both see and hear. For it was not David who ascended into heaven, but he himself says: ‘THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD, “SIT AT MY RIGHT HAND, UNTIL I MAKE YOUR ENEMIES A FOOTSTOOL FOR YOUR FEET.’” Therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Messiah—this Yeshua whom you crucified” (Acts 2:22-36).

In Peter’s sermon, he takes the words of David and Biblically establishes the Messiahship of Yeshua, comparing Him to David, because many of the promises that God made to King David are fully realized in the Person of Yeshua, the Greater David. It is very true that King David was not crucified, buried for three days, and then ascended into Heaven as the risen Lord and Savior as soul sleep advocates, who take the Scripture totally out of context, seemingly imply. David’s bodily remains are presently in a place of internment, because David is not the Divine Messiah. David’s body did not ascend to the Right Hand of the Father in Heaven. But this is not substantial justification to assume that the souls of the righteous dead are presently in the grave. The context of Peter’s words deals with the resurrection and ascension of the Messiah, as opposed to David, whose bodily remains are still buried.

“You Will Be With Me In Paradise”

Another method that some soul sleep advocates have employed, which is anything but responsible hermeneutics, relates to Yeshua’s comments to the thief beside Him on the cross: “And he was saying, ‘Yeshua, remember me when You come in Your kingdom!’ And He said to him, ‘Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise’” (Luke 23:42-43).

The tactic that is employed by some is believing that Yeshua was not telling the thief that *that very day* the two of them would be in Paradise, but rather it was a statement attesting to the fact that solely when the Kingdom of God would manifest itself on Earth, the thief would be with Him in that Paradise. Thus, some feel justified moving the English punctuation to read something along the lines of, “Truly I say to you today, you shall be with me in Paradise.” However, neither the Hebrew Tanach nor Greek Apostolic Scriptures include any such punctuation. Our exegesis of the text must be determined primarily by the source text.

This is an extreme liberty that is inexcusable. We cannot arbitrarily move commas in the English text for it to fit our preconceived theological ideas without any basis to do so. There is no substantial basis to do this with the word “today.” The Greek word *seimeron* (σημερον) means, “today, this very day” (BDAG).¹⁵ The vast majority of usages of *seimron* in the Biblical text deal with events that occurred on the same day as “today.” “In Mt. 27:19 Pilate’s wife has had a bad dream today; this is an omen for a decisive day, but the immediate sense is the ordinary one. The usual sense is also present in the petition of Mt. 6:11: believers ask today for their daily bread from God. Similarly in 16:3 the reference is to today’s weather, in 21:28 the father asks his son to work today” (TDNT).¹⁶ This is rendered properly in the Darby Bible as “This day thou shalt be with me in paradise.” Greek scholar Richmond Lattimore renders it in his translation as, “Truly I tell you, this day you will be with me in paradise.”¹⁷ Yeshua the Messiah plainly told the thief on the cross next to Him that he would be with Him in Paradise *that very day*, not just in the future Kingdom of God on Earth.

“A Host of Captives”

Those who advocate soul sleep run into a very serious problem with the Apostle Paul’s admonition in Ephesians 4:7-10:

“But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Messiah’s gift. Therefore it says, ‘WHEN HE ASCENDED ON HIGH, HE LED CAPTIVE A HOST OF CAPTIVES, AND HE GAVE GIFTS TO MEN.’ (Now this *expression*, ‘He ascended,’ what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things.)”

This passage is understood by many theologians as meaning that when Yeshua died, He descended into Sheol or Hades, the underworld, also known as Abraham’s Bosom. Luke 16:19-31 tells us that there were two compartments in Abraham’s Bosom: one for the righteous and one for the condemned. When Yeshua ascended to the Right Hand of the Father, Heaven was opened up and the “captives” that the Messiah took with Him were the souls of the righteous dead in Abraham’s Bosom. The only inhabitants now are those presently in the condemned side, which we commonly call “Hell.”

“He Made Proclamation”

Soul sleep advocates run into another serious problem with the Apostle Peter’s admonition concerning the Lord in 1 Peter 3:18-20:

“For Messiah also died for sins once for all, *the* just for *the* unjust, so that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit; in which also He went and made proclamation to the spirits *now* in prison, who once were disobedient, when the patience of God kept waiting in the days of Noah, during the construction of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons, were brought safely through *the* water.”

This is very interesting. As is inappropriately assumed by those who believe in soul sleep, when Yeshua died on the cross, He solely went to the grave. But what Peter tells us in these verses speaks to the contrary. Peter tells us that the Messiah made proclamation to spirits in prison that performed evil deeds at the time of Noah. Although there is a teaching which says that Yeshua preached the good news to these spirits, and thus these are now “saved,” the Scriptures only tell us that He “made proclamation” (Grk. *ekeiruxen*, ἐκήρυξεν) to them. When Yeshua died, if He had been solely in “the grave,” how could He “make a proclamation”? He could not have, and soul sleep advocates to prove their doctrine must allegorize an obviously literal Scripture passage.

The Biblical truth of the matter is that when Yeshua died He was not in “the grave.” He was in Sheol.

¹⁵ BDAG, 921.

¹⁶ E. Fuchs, “*seimeron*,” in Geoffrey W. Bromiley, ed. *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, abrid. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 1025.

¹⁷ Richmond Lattimore, trans., *The New Testament* (New York: North Point Press, 1996), 188.

Were the Apostles Expecting to Go to “the Grave”?

Although it varies among advocates, most who believe in soul sleep believe that the early Believers did not expect to be with the Lord in an intermediate Heaven upon the time of their deaths. Rather, they believe that their expectation was to “fall asleep” and go to solely the grave. This is not what we see in the testimonies of the Apostles who were expecting to see God. Acts 7:58-60 vigorously records the account of the stoning of Stephen, the first martyr of the faith:

“When they had driven him out of the city, they *began stoning him*; and the witnesses laid aside their robes at the feet of a young man named Saul. They went on stoning Stephen as he called on *the Lord* and said, ‘Lord Yeshua, receive my spirit!’ Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them!’ Having said this, he fell asleep.”

There is no indication in this passage of Scripture that Stephen was expecting to go to “the grave.” Rather, he is plainly calling upon the Lord telling Him to receive his spirit. The verb *dechomai* (δεχομαι) means “to receive someth. offered or transmitted by another, *take, receive*,” and “to take someth. in hand, *grasp*” (BDAG).¹⁸ Stephen earnestly cried out to the Lord for Him to take his spirit. When Stephen’s spirit and soul left his body he was then welcomed into the presence of God. At the time that the non-corporeal element of Stephen left, his body died or “fell asleep.”

Likewise, there is no indication in the writings of the Apostle Paul that he expected to go to “the grave” upon time of death. There is every indication that he expected to be resurrected, as he states quite candidly that “we [all] wait eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Romans 8:23, NIV). But at the same time Paul also says, “Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight—we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord” (2 Corinthians 5:6-8). The Greek verb translated “at home with,” *endeimeo* (ενδημεω), clearly means “to be in a familiar place, *to be at home*” (BDAG)¹⁹ or “to live in a place” (LS).²⁰ The RSV renders this text as “we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.” Even though separate from our physical bodies, being in the presence of the Lord, wherever that may be, is far better and preferable.

The Apostle Paul also writes, “For to me, to live is Messiah and to die is gain. But if *I am* to live *on* in the flesh, this *will mean* fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Messiah, for *that* is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake” (Philippians 1:21-24). Paul very clearly tells us in v. 23 that his desire was to depart his Earthly body and be with the Lord, indicating that if he died, he would be in Yeshua’s presence. The verb *analuow* (αναλυω) was used by “the ancient Greeks...to indicate loosing the anchor of a ship in order to sail from a port.” Paul uses it in the sense “to depart by loosing anchor, as it were, and setting sail to a better and a more blessed world, to die” (AMG).²¹ However, do note that Paul also indicates, that for the sake of the Body of Messiah, he needed to remain on Earth as he still had ministry work to perform.

The Apostle Peter, reflecting on his own mortality, did not expect to die and merely go to the grave, but compares his dying to being a “departure”:

“I consider it right, as long as I am in this *earthly* dwelling, to stir you up by way of reminder, knowing that the laying aside of my *earthly* dwelling is imminent, as also our Lord Yeshua the Messiah has made clear to me. And I will also be diligent that at any time after my departure you will be able to call these things to mind” (2 Peter 1:13-15).

Peter compares his “body” (RSV, NRSV) to being “this tabernacle” (KJV, NKJV). He says that He will be putting it off or laying it side via a “departure,” “outgoing” (YLT), or his “decease” (KJV). Literally from the Greek, his departure is an “exodus.” *Exodos* (εξοδος) means “movement from one geographical area to another, *departure, path, course*,” and “departure from among the living” (BDAG).²² *Exodus* (ΕΞΟΔΟΣ) was the term used by the Septuagint Rabbis to call the Book of Shemot (שְׁמוֹת) in the

¹⁸ BDAG, 221.

¹⁹ Ibid., 332.

²⁰ BibleWorks 5.0: Lidell-Scott Lexicon.

²¹ Spiros Zodhiates, ed. *Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga: AMG Publishers, 1993), 154.

²² BDAG, 350.

Torah, because its primary theme is the Ancient Israelites departure from Egypt. The Apostle Peter did not employ the term *exodus* by accident. He likens his Earthly death like the Israelites' departure from Egypt. In order for Peter to depart, *he has to actually go somewhere*—and that somewhere was not the grave; it was the intermediate Heaven to be with the Lord.

Is Going to Heaven a “Pagan Doctrine”?

Among the fringe elements in the emerging Messianic movement today, it is not only the Biblical premise of a Believer going to the intermediate Heaven at time of death that is taught against. Some even say that it is a pagan concept consistent with Babylonian, Egyptian, Assyrian, Greek, and Roman views of the afterlife. But those who believe that we get to be with the Lord at the time of death have not adopted the Platonic idea a human being's soul is presently “trapped” inside his body seeking release. But have we accepted “pagan doctrine” as is insinuated by some?

Statements that presently adhere to this notion are along the lines of, as one person states it, “Pagans always believed that they would go into the skies to live with their deities.... It is...important to note what Pagans taught about the ‘spirits’ of the dead being transported to ‘heaven’. That is the heresy that has been accepted.”²³

The error of accepting this statement as being accurate is that if we say that the idea of Believers going to Heaven to be with the Lord upon time of death is pagan, what is keeping us from saying other things where paganism has mimicked Biblical doctrine are unacceptable as well? After all, are not there pagan myths about deities coming down from the sky in the form of humans and performing miracles, which mimic the Earthly life of Yeshua? Should we readily conclude that the Gospel accounts of the Messiah's life are “pagan myths”? No! What do we do about stories like the Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh, which is very similar to the Noadic Flood? Does this make the account of the Flood and Noah's Ark “pagan” all of a sudden? I certainly do not believe so.

We cannot justifiably conclude that the idea of Believers going to Heaven upon time of death, prior to the resurrection where they will be reunified with their bodies is pagan, either. If we do that, we run the risk of later denying that Yeshua is the Divine Messiah, and ultimately that we cannot trust our Bibles. Not surprisingly, this is taking place among some in our day.²⁴

Not surprisingly, the author of the same quotation above writes that at the resurrection, “we are re-born, clothed with immortality,”²⁵ perhaps adhering to the false notion that the born again experience occurs at the resurrection. The Apostle Peter says the opposite: “Since you have in obedience to the truth purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, fervently love one another from the heart, for you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, *that is*, through the living and enduring word of God” (1 Peter 1:22-23). *Anagegennēmenoi* (αναγεννημένοι) appears in the perfect tense, meaning that being “born again” is an action that has already occurred to Believer; it is not an action to take place sometime in the future.

What Happens at the Resurrection for the Righteous?

Consistent with the soul sleep claim that the righteous dead are presently not in the presence of God, but only in the grave, is the idea that at the time of the resurrection Believers are “born again.” This is not what the Apostles teach us. Advocates of soul sleep appear to be very unsure of where they will be spending eternity—because death for the Believer is not something to be afraid of if one is going to be in the presence of God. On the contrary, it is an exciting time to be with the Lord and be reunited with loved ones.

Soul sleep advocates often do make insidious claims against those who believe in an afterlife, saying that we deny the reality of the resurrection. But have I been arguing against the resurrection, and the reality of God's coming Kingdom *on Earth*? No. I have argued, rather, that there is indeed an intermediate place that Believers go to, which we commonly call “Heaven.” But it is very true that **Heaven is indeed coming to Earth!** As a part of that, our physical bodies are going to be transformed, and

²³ Lew White, *Fossilized Customs* (Louisville, KY: Strawberry Islands, 2001), 41.

²⁴ Consult the editor's article “Is the Story of Yeshua Pagan?”

²⁵ White, 41.

there will indeed be a resurrection of the righteous saints. This is exactly what the Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 15:51-53:

“Behold, I tell you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality.”

Paul is clearly talking about the redemption of our physical bodies in this case, as the souls of the deceased saints will be reunited with their bodies at this time. Paul writes, “For if we believe that Yeshua died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Yeshua” (1 Thessalonians 4:14). Yeshua cannot “bring with him those who have died” (NRSV), if Paul is not referring to the souls of the righteous dead to be reunited with their bodies at the resurrection. Those who do not experience physical death at the Yeshua’s Second Coming, in contrast to those who have died, will experience a transformation and receive bodies similar to those that Adam and Eve had originally.

There is some contention, however, concerning Paul’s words, “Now I say this, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (1 Corinthians 15:50). Soul sleep advocates commonly argue that this means that those who are in the faith cannot presently be with the Lord in Heaven. But this would be inconsistent with Paul’s teaching on the whole matter. 1 Corinthians 15 largely deals with the resurrection, and in God’s coming Earthly Kingdom, “Heaven on Earth.” In order to be in that restored Kingdom, Believers will exist in restored, resurrected physical bodies. This does not negate the idea of an intermediate Heaven at all.

Paul writes in Philippians 3:20, “our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Yeshua the Messiah.” The Greek verb *huparchō* (ὑπάρχω), is commonly rendered as “is,” but it can also mean “to begin, make a beginning,” and “to begin to be, come into being, arise, spring up” (LS).²⁶ Consider the implications if we translated Paul’s statement as “our citizenship begins in heaven.” This is more accurate because the intermediate Heaven is not the Believer’s ultimate destination. The intermediate Heaven is indeed a wonderful place where we will get to commune with Yeshua and saints from all generations, but the ultimate place where we will spend eternity is in a restored Kingdom of God on Earth. Although the Kingdom of God is “in Heaven,” so to speak, it has not been fully manifested. It is the redeemed soul that goes to Heaven, but it is the resurrected and renewed physical body reunited with that soul, the redeemed, whole human being, that inherits the Kingdom of God when it comes to Earth.

Conclusion

We who have Yeshua the Messiah resident inside of our hearts should eagerly wait for the resurrection of our departed loved ones and the redemption of our bodies of corrupt flesh. But nevertheless, we should eagerly wait for the time that we are to meet our Savior in Heaven—and we should want that above all else when we die. I am curious of the motives of who would tell us that when Believers die we will only be “asleep” in a place of internment. To me, that denigrates the position of man, who was created in the image of God, to being nothing more than a dead animal. It says that there is no spiritual component of humanity’s existence, which makes us higher than the animals, and thus more responsible.

Why do we have some in the Messianic community today who do not want to be in the presence of Yeshua the Messiah when they die? Are they afraid because they are unsure of their salvation? We do not know, as it is between them and the Lord. If they lack the relationship with the Father that they should have, perhaps death is indeed something that they fear.

The issue of where the Believer goes at time of death ultimately pertains to one’s spiritual motivation. What is inherently wrong with Believers going to Heaven to be with the Lord upon time of death? What is wrong with communing with God? Is there anything evil about this? This is the clear teaching of the Jewish Apostles and the theological milieu that the First Century community of faith

²⁶ BibleWorks 5.0: Lidell-Scott Lexicon.

arose from. Is there something that repels people from wanting to be with God in Heaven? We may never know the answers to these questions.

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