

This post is free for anyone who wants to look. Every week on the blog I post five times, dealing with all sorts of issues connected with the New Testament and early Christianity. Interested? Why not join? It doesn't cost much, you get tons for your money, and every nickel you pay goes to deserving charities.

I'm excited about my next book, being published on March 31, Heaven and Hell: A History of the Afterlife. It's already getting good reviews in the trade journals, the publications that announce which books are soon to come out and have experts review them in advance, so that book sellers, book stores, libraries, and so on know whether they want to buy them, and for book sellers and stores, in what quantities. So that's all good.

A while back I decided to try to encapsulate the essence of the book in a short essay, a kind of 2000 word summary of what it's all about and why it matters. I will give it here, over the course of two posts. Here's the first half.

The fear of death has been among us for as long as we have had human records, from history's oldest surviving tale, the Epic of Gilgamesh, to the now final season of the Good Place, soon to enter its own eternal rest. The views of these two cultural artefacts are wildly different, but they share a constant. The eponymous hero of the Mesopotamian epic writhes in agony at the prospect of spending eternity groveling in dust being eaten by worms; Eleanor Shellstrop desperately works to avoid the afterlife she deserves, in the Bad Place and its eternal torments.

Today few people may share Gilgamesh's actual concern of being conscious forever in the dirt. Plenty, however, tremble with morbid fear before eternal nothingness, entering the void with no hope of return. Yet others cannot stand the uncertainties of the unknown, unsure of what will happen, pleasant, painful, or oblivious to both. But the majority Americans continue to anticipate some version or other of the alternatives portrayed in The Good Place. 72% of Americans continue to believe in a literal heaven and 58% in a literal hell. Even for those who think most people will avoid the torture chambers of the underworld, some will go there, and how can anyone be sure they will make the cut? No wonder there is such fear.

Most of those who hold such views, of course, have received them from the Christian tradition - whether through personal allegiance or osmosis. You die and your soul goes one place or another, based on your faith, your morality, or both. And nearly everyone assumes these views are Christian because they are set forth clearly and forcefully in the Bible.

As it turns out, that's not true. The idea that a person dies and goes to heaven for eternal reward or hell for everlasting punishment is never taught in the Old Testament. Even more surprising, it is not what Jesus himself preached. Or his earliest followers.

Then where did it come from?

Start at the beginning. The Old Testament does not speak with just one voice on any topic, the afterlife included. It comprises thirty-nine writings produced over many centuries by numerous authors with wide-ranging views on just about everything. Even so, the vast bulk

of the Old Testament has no real concept of any kind of life after death. Life is available now, before death. When it is over, it is over. After death is only death, for everyone, equally. There is no punishment or reward, just a kind of non-existence.

Many of the Israelite authors hated the thought and lamented it: the joys, pleasures, and experiences of life are all here and now. Afterward there is no physical pleasure and no social life - no family, friends, communities. Even worse there is no more contact with God. He forgets those who have died and they can't even worship him any longer.

Sometimes poetic authors of the Hebrew Bible use the mysterious word "Sheol," to speak of death. We don't know where the word comes from or even what it means exactly. In some passages Sheol seems to be a shadowy netherworld where everyone gathers together with nothing to do, bored out of their minds for all eternity. But in most places it appears to refer simply to the grave, the final resting place for everyone, the Hebrew equivalent of Gilgamesh's dirt and worms.

But is that kind of postmortem existence fair? If someone is a good person and lives for God, shouldn't they get something good out of it in the end?

It turns out that ancient Greeks had the same problem. Our oldest Greek literature comes in Homer's Iliad and Odyssey. Here too there is no real "life" after death. The soul does continue to exist without the body, but it is just a shadow of its former self, with no strength, wit, or capacity for pleasure. For Homer, though, souls are not simply abandoned in the grave. They are gathered together in the underworld, in a place called Hades. Everyone goes there, for the same mind-numbingly dull fate, with only a handful of exceptions.

At some point in the Greek tradition after Homer, thinkers began to raise the question of justice. Surely differences now will be manifest then. Isn't there some kind of inbuilt system of rewards and punishments? Don't the gods care about how a person lives, about basic morality, religious practices, or celebrated virtues such as honor, bravery, and strength? Surely some people deserve better than others. It can't be right that I'll be treated like that schmuck next door.

More than anyone in the Western tradition, it was Plato who popularized an alternative. Several of his dialogues contain self-designated "myths," actual descriptions of the afterlife. One of them narrates the most famous description of a Near Death Experience from antiquity. A soldier named Er, killed on the battlefield, is restored to life and describes, then, the realms of the dead he has just observed.

His description is meant to serve an ethical purpose: the realities of death reveal the proper approach to life. Most people, the story suggests, live for pleasure, concerned almost exclusively with enjoying bodily life in this world, pursuing pleasure and power. In doing so, they neglect their souls. But since the soul is what ultimately matters, neglecting it now will lead to horrible punishment in the life to come.

A few people, on the other hand, live for their souls, not their bodies, pursuing moral and philosophically reasoned lives, virtue, justice, and the relentless pursuit of truth. These will be rewarded with glorious afterlives. Unlike the others, they will not resent the loss of their physical existence; quite the contrary, they have spent their lives trying to distance themselves from the body and its addictive pleasures. Their souls will therefore be rewarded in the life to come.

I will pick up here in my next post.



[Heaven and Hell in a Nutshell: Getting into the Kernel
Why Are Their Differences in the Gospels? Does it Affect Their Inspiration? Guest Post by
Mike Licona](#)