

Great Themes of the Bible

Volume 2

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Preface

The Bible is a rich and varied collection of writings developed over thousands of years. Those who wrote the Bible were people who celebrated, lamented, worshiped, and tried to make some sense of life in reference to God. These people lived in diverse cultures and spoke a variety of languages seldom learned in our time. They have left us a legacy whose meaning continues to be debated. The very intensity of debate points to our continued passionate engagement with the God of these writings.

This volume has been created to explore biblical writings by using various themes as “probes” to get below the surface, make connections, and notice nuances of meaning. It is not designed to immerse readers in the scholarly debates that abound in regard to almost every biblical phrase. Decisions about some of those debates do shape the volume, but detailed analysis of them would not be possible or even useful in these thematic probes.

It has been my particular pleasure to work in both Old and New Testament because New Testament theologians, from Mary to Jesus to Paul to the disciples to members of the early communities we call Christian, claimed the Old Testament as their Scripture. It is from the Old Testament as Scripture that they sought God more deeply, not least in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This book offers a wonderful opportunity to dig more deeply into

the long history of God's interactions with humankind and to see God's steadfast purpose for the thriving of creation.

I hope that this volume provides a jumping-off point for Bible study as a lifelong process. I hope even more that it helps readers catch a glimpse, at least, of God's faithfulness as grounds for human hope and commitment to a flourishing creation.

I must offer thanks to friends and colleagues who have continued to expand my understanding of the Old Testament; to Luther Seminary, which provided sabbatical time enabling me to do this work; and to Donald K. McKim for his calm support through the process.

Death

When you take away their breath, they die and return
to their dust.

Ps. 104:29

None of us really “gets” death. We know persons who have died. Perhaps we have been with or seen them at the time of death. In death we come face to face with the greatest mystery: what once was is no longer. Did a living being, a tapestry of memories, expectations, responses, emotions, simply cease to be? Our minds and hearts wrestle with the utter strangeness of death. There must be something more, we think, some life after this one. Humans experience light, sounds, visitations, and encounters with those who have died. If we are waiting with longing for justice, if we have seen lives end in an untimely way, we wonder why a just God would deprive people of God’s own gift of life.

We imagine some sort of life in death and have many ways to express our hopes of life beyond biological death. People “pass on,” “pass over,” “pass away,” “go home” to realms beyond our own. We also use “death” to describe persons and places who seem not fully alive in their earthly existence. Think of “dead to the world” as a description of sleep; the deadening of pain; a room is “dead” when sounds do not resonate; a nonresponsive audience may be “dead.”

In this patchwork of ways in which we think of and imagine

death we follow those who went before us. In the Bible, there are as many different ways of considering and talking about death as there are among us. Two differences between contemporary folks and our biblical ancestors, however, should be noted. First, our ancestors were more intimately acquainted with death. People died younger and more publicly than we are accustomed to. Wars, plagues, lack of sanitation, the dangers of childbirth, and diseases were constant companions. Second, our ancestors believed more easily than we in transcendent realms and their invisible but quite real inhabitants. Their questions about death generated an even wider array of responses than among us. We find many of these responses in the Bible.

Old Testament

In the Old Testament we will be working with English translations of quite a few terms that describe death, dying, perishing, and even sleep as death (Deut. 31:16). Sometimes these terms refer to biological death. At others they seem metaphorical for a state akin to biological death but not identical with it. In addition, biological death itself was weighed differently in Israel over the centuries of the Old Testament's writings. Although death could be seen and accepted as a natural (albeit often quite sad) part of God's order, it was also sometimes identified as a consequence of sin, a punishment for sin, or simply the work of a power contrary to God. Death might come through old age, battle, trickery, punishment, illness, hunger, or murder. The dead generally were dead or "sleeping"; no immortal soul lived on, returned to God, or reunited with another body. The dead do live in their ongoing descendents and the legacy of their lives.

Biological Death

Human beings died natural deaths, often at great ages, in the Old Testament. The stories of Genesis provide a good starting place. First Sarah, then Abraham died in Canaan (Gen. 23:1–25:8), both very old and much blessed. For both, as for their descendents in

Genesis, death is not represented as enemy. Long life is a gift of God, but death is not the withdrawing of the gift or an expression of God's anger. Abraham is said to have been "gathered to his people" after burial, an unusual phrase applied also only to Jacob and Isaac (Gen. 35:29; 49:33). If it is a reference to an afterlife, it is certainly an oblique one that gives no information.

These deaths are related along with genealogical information suggesting that dead persons lived on to some degree through the life of the family. This sensibility gives added pathos to Jacob's reluctance to send Benjamin, the only surviving son of his beloved Rachel, into Egypt (Gen. 42:38; 44:20). Were Benjamin to die, Jacob believed his last living link to Rachel would have died with him. Psalm 128 summarizes the happiness that is available to "everyone who fears the LORD." It bespeaks a modest, domestic peaceable kingdom with everything working as it should. When things did not go so well, when untimely death made impossible fertility, family, or peace, more explanation was needed.

Death is initially associated with the departure of Adam and Eve from Eden. The harmony of a domestic and agricultural life was interrupted by their attempt to deceive God. Deceit disrupted their existence and brought death in many forms. Adam and Eve would die at much younger ages. They were exposed to the dangers of a world with poisonous snakes (animals had become dangerous to humans) and to bodies where much could go wrong (as in childbirth). More importantly, inexplicable motives drew human beings to kill one another, as in the story of Cain and Abel. Death had great power to destroy all that one might hope for in life. When death did not come at the end of a long and fruitful life, it could be a punishment from God; the work of some malevolent power, superior to humans but inferior to God; the result of chance; or the consequences of misbehavior. In such cases God might be called upon to restore the dead to life, as we shall see.

Death Wielded by Harsh Powers

In one apocryphal story (Tob. 6:10–18) a demon had killed off seven husbands of a young woman on their wedding nights. Their

deaths were not attributed to misbehavior or wickedness on the part of the bridegrooms. Rather, they were victims of a demon whose criteria for killing, whatever it may have been, did not operate by God's code. Demons or other invisible powers could and did bring about death. Because of their power, the righteous as well as the unrighteous might be felled by death.

The most important struggle over undeserved death in the Old Testament takes place in the book of Job. Through a malevolent power (Job 1:6–12) Job, a profoundly devout man, loses to death his family, his livestock, and very nearly himself. Weak, ill, and bereft of all the joys of his righteous life, Job knows and will not be persuaded otherwise that the calamities which have beset him are not because of his failings. He had been and should have continued to be the contented family man from Psalm 128. Yet, assailed by the power of Satan, Job's life becomes such a misery that he wants to die just to be free of God's eye and power. Job could barely stand to live in a world of injustice where the good and the innocent are slain at whim. Where is God in such a world? (Job 3:3). Convinced that death would take him to a place where God would no longer see or "target" him, Job wished for death as a kind of substitute peace for the peaceful life he had lost. In 7:20–21, he challenges God to tell him what unpardonable sins he has committed that have resulted in his cruel punishment. Job is mistaken (somewhat) in attributing his misery to God. But it is telling that Job cannot believe that the God he knew and worshiped would be so unjust, so unfaithful, so egregiously cruel. Job himself experiences a kind of death of his confidence, hope, and trust in God. He might as well be biologically dead (see also 9:22–24).

Job's complaint is never really answered, but he does not die. God speaks to him finally, challenging him with the question, "Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?" (Job 38:17). A human being is not able to understand the ways of God. Where cause and effect seem clear to us and important in creating a reliable universe, God cannot be reliably predicted in the creating of life or death. Job is chastened

for imagining that he knows enough to understand the mysteries of God even though God's own self-description and covenants ought to be the source of Job's hope for a reliable universe.

Death as Part of the "Scheme of Things"

The difficulty of coming to grips with death and "understanding" it, whether as reward, punishment, or random event, is at the fore in two other Wisdom books. In Proverbs, the way of the loose woman, or foolishness—that is, straying from the path commanded by God—leads to death (Prov. 2:18; 5:5; 7:27). All who hate wisdom "love death" (8:36). All who love wisdom find that righteousness "delivers from death" (11:4; 12:28; 13:14). Did Job believe that the teaching of the wise is a "fountain of life" enabling one to "avoid the snares of death"? No wonder he was so angry, so betrayed, so desirous of death. For Job, real foolishness had been to trust in these words. Yet Proverbs holds to this message. For its writer, truth is told here—death is held at bay by wisdom and righteousness. Perhaps he means that one's reputation will ensure that one is remembered and "lives" on in that way. He does not say. The two views of death are side by side in Scripture.

Meanwhile, Ecclesiastes (also called Qoheleth) disagrees with Proverbs. The writer has two premises: (1) human beings cannot know their end, when or how it will come; and (2) God's ways are inscrutable. Ecclesiastes therefore enjoins a modest life on God's followers. They are to eat, drink, and enjoy their work, in other words, enjoy God's creation, and not strive for glory. The writer's position does not spring from naiveté. His words could be those of the bitterly experienced Job: "And I thought the dead, who have already died, more fortunate than the living, who are still alive; but better than both is the one who has not yet been, and has not seen the evil deeds that are done under the sun" (Eccl. 4:2–3). He observes that one has no more power over the day of death than over the wind (Eccl. 8:8), suggesting that walking in the ways of righteousness may not matter as much as Proverbs proclaims. "The same fate," he says, "comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and

the unclean. . . . The same fate comes to everyone” (9:2–3). Nonetheless, life is good and death is not. Death is the end of everything; there is no reward. (On the emptiness of Sheol, see 9:10.) Yet death is not in and of itself evil. When one dies, “the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it” (12:7). This writer does not imagine that God uses death as punishment or test. It is just the end.

Death as Punishment

Because God has the power to create and destroy, the relationship of death and deity is an intricate one. God has provided a world and the gift of life to be enjoyed as long as possible, yet to punish or test would be to deprive humans of that which they most value—life.

In the story of Tamar and Judah (Gen. 38) we can see how God’s disapproval is educed as a cause of death. Judah’s sons marry Tamar and die before having any children with her. God is said to have put the first two to death for wickedness (including the wickedness of Onan, who would not beget children that “would not be his”). Judah must give Tamar to his last son as wife in order to have children to carry on his brother’s name. Judah delays out of fear that he too will die. Here there is fear that God may be punishing. Death is unnatural, early, and seemingly—although not actually—unwarranted. The story moves on from this premise, as Tamar cleverly cares for her own future by conceiving a child to continue the family name. Not only do we see that God punishes those who do not keep the law, but we also see the importance of descendents as a way to continue the life of one who has died. We will come back to this principle later.

God also used death as a weapon in the struggle to free Israel from Egypt. Warnings and choices of life or death faced Pharaoh and his people (note that in Exod. 9:20 even Pharaoh’s officers fear God and behave differently from their king). Defiance of God, who was working on behalf of his enslaved people, brought death. Death as penalty for defiance can also be found in the codes of Israel. Exodus 19, 21, and 31 explain that death will be meted out

to those who transgress the boundaries of God's holiness (the holy mountain, the Sabbath) or who bring about the death of other humans. The Levitical code lists which transgressions should result in death. People could know the code and make their choices, even as Pharaoh had done. In all these situations, death came upon those who willfully and knowingly defied God's command in such a way that God and/or God's people in community were in some way diminished or harmed. Destructive injustice could merit the punishment of death—the cessation of human power and relationship. Death might also be a consequence of such behavior rather than a punishment for it.

Typical of the kind of destruction that occasioned death for the perpetrators would be human sacrifice. In Leviticus 20:2–5, God inveighs against the sacrifice of children to Molech. Such sacrifice would both blaspheme God's name and also kill a human being, a part of God's covenant people—both taboo behaviors. In the same way, those who claimed to be mediums or wizards, using the dead to seek knowledge of or manipulate events, could not continue to live. God or God's chosen prophet were to be the only reliable sources of information.

In the terrible episode where Saul defies God's law against the use of wizards and mediums to conjure the dead, Saul forces the medium of Endor to bring up the dead Samuel (1 Sam. 28). Saul broke his own (and God's) laws in his desperate attempt to learn the future to control it. As a result of this deed, Saul himself became as one almost dead; he also received news of death and destruction. Notice that Samuel's shade (ghost) is somehow able to be conjured from the realms of the dead, suggesting that some form of shadowy other-life was imagined by some in Israel. That which arises from the ground is described as a "divine being," which may have to do with its being other than mortal. Samuel is angered that he has been disturbed. The disturbance reminds us that the dead were often understood to be "sleeping" (see also Job 14:12; Pss. 13:3; 22:29, for example).

If a life was destructive to community well-being, God might elect to remedy that situation with death. Consider the deaths of

Goliath, seemingly invincible champion of the Philistines (1 Sam. 17), and of Nabal (1 Sam. 25), whose inhospitable and foolish behavior almost cost the lives of all his young men and therefore his whole extended household. These are but two examples of how the larger community is protected by the death of one person.

God Restores Life from Death

Psalm 104 elegantly pictures God's will for life and God's power to sustain it. Life is God's good gift (Ps. 104:30), and death is simply its cessation (Ps. 104:29). When the wicked and all others die, they are "consumed from the earth" and are "no more." The love of God that "rules over all" (Ps. 103:19) has created intricate order with death as a part. When death occurs out of the "natural order" and is seriously destructive of community, God may elect to forestall or remedy death. The prophets Elijah and Elisha both raise young men from death when challenged by grieving mothers (one widowed and one with an old husband) for whom sons establish them in the community (1 Kgs. 17:8–24; 2 Kgs. 4:32–37). When the widow's (woman not of Israel) son is restored to life, she confesses that Elijah is truly "a man of God, and that the word of the LORD in your mouth is truth." God's power over life and breath (1 Kgs. 17:21) is clear. Just the bones of the prophet Elisha were able to bring a man back to life (2 Kgs. 13:20–21).

Two exceptions to the power of death appear in the Old Testament: Elijah ascends to heaven in a chariot of fire (2 Kgs. 2:11), and Enoch (Gen. 5:24) simply is taken to walk with God. These two who did not die but lived somehow in heavenly realms became important in the history of Jews and Christians as figures able to mediate knowledge. Either may return to earth to announce the coming of the end times.

New Testament

In the New Testament, as in the Old, only God is immortal (1 Tim. 6:16). Everyone else, including Jesus, is subject to death, although Elijah and Enoch seem to be important exceptions to

that rule. (Hebrews 11:5 mentions Enoch. The possibility of Elijah's return creates high expectation about John the Baptist and at the time of Jesus' crucifixion.) At the same time, the New Testament emerged from the high energy of change, expectation, and experience of the presence of God's Holy Spirit that followed the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. The whole New Testament is shaped by the conviction that God has changed the relationship of humans to death by the resurrection of Jesus. The New Testament contends that Jesus is the one in whom all must believe if they are to experience resurrection into joy. Such a claim posits that all humans will truly die. It also alludes to the possibility of a miserable life after death.

The New Testament also uses the language of being "dead" in life. Death is a way of describing distance from God or rejection of God's saving grace (often in the form of rejecting Jesus as God's saving Messiah). Luke's parable of the father with two sons in 15:11–32 speaks of a brother having been "dead" and his coming back to the family as a return to "life." Here biological life and death are not indicated but rather separation—created by the son's rejection—from one's people, one's father, the source of one's identity. John's Gospel also insists that those who believe in Jesus have eternal life in the midst of biological life; those who do not believe are in death in the midst of life. Life and death are metaphors for being connected to God or not, to Jesus, to one's community. The metaphors have power precisely because of the unbridgeable distinction between life and death and our inherent preference for life.

Is Death Real for Christians?

Different ways of describing what happens in death and after it sit side by side in the New Testament. Does one die, as Paul wishes to do, and find oneself "with Christ" (Phil. 1:21–23)? Does one simply "sleep" until that final day comes in which one will be with Christ (1 Thess. 4:13; John 11:11)? In a way, it does not matter. Who really knows and can say what is on the other side of the cessation of breath? Paul most fully and beautifully affirms the truth

that gives the New Testament its reason for being: nothing, not even death (or life for that matter) will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Rom. 8:38–39). Death is real biologically, but it has no final or spiritual power. Real life, the life lived for God, is or will be shared by those who inherit the kingdom through Jesus. Paul is clear that there will be judgment, for which he prays that believers be prepared. But for the righteous, life will be eternal.

Paul, unlike John, does not claim that believers already have eternal life, but that they will be raised to it. Matthew and Luke speak the same way. The power of God demonstrated by Elijah and Elisha is the same power God wields to overcome first Jesus' death and later the deaths of his followers. In Acts 2:24 Peter says, "But God raised him up, having freed him from death, because it was impossible for him to be held in its power." The Creator and Lord of life will sustain the lives of his people baptized into his raised-up Son. Death is a lesser power, no longer to be feared.

Jesus' power to restore to life is evidence of this powerful will of God for life. The same power is wielded by his disciples in Acts, where Peter raises Tabitha from death (Acts 9:40–43), where Paul raises Eutyches (Acts 20:9–10) and even thwarts his own death (Acts 28:3–5). It is healing power super-sized. Being healed or raised does not mean that those who love God will not again grow ill and die. Avoiding biological death is always temporary. Stephen, the first martyr, raises his eyes to heaven and sees the risen Jesus as Son of Man at God's right hand as he dies (Acts 7:56–60). This vision is held out to all believers, a vision that inspires the confidence that death will not have the last word.

Reflections

In the Bible human beings die for various reasons. Whether death is the "wages of sin" or whether it is part of a natural process is not clear. On matters of death, human beings who are subject to it cannot see into its processes and causes. On matters of death, however, human beings dare trust that God is stronger than

death. There are numerous instances where death is reversed or prevented throughout both Testaments. There is a spectrum of beliefs about death from permanency to impermanency. One might continue to live only through honorable memories and descendents or through the restoration of a people.

At the other end of the spectrum is the conviction of bodily resurrection. The New Testament witnesses that for those who are alive to God in Jesus Christ, death has been destroyed. We still experience biological death, however. But that such a death would be the end of our relationship with God is denied. Jesus' resurrection makes a new life, a new creation available universally, although not all will be raised to joy. New life comes in glimpses now, but its full reality awaits either individual death or the "end of days" when God restores all creation.

Questions for Discussion

1. What do you think happens when we die? Does it matter to you? Why or why not?
2. Confident that death is not ultimate, as Luke would say, "How then shall we live?"
3. How and why is it—or is it not—appropriate for Christians to grieve the deaths of their loved ones? What about the catastrophic deaths of others in a natural disaster or a war?
4. What difference does the Holocaust (and subsequent events of genocide, as in Rwanda or the former Yugoslavia) make in your thinking about God as Lord of life and death?