



An Intermediate State?

{An extract from Chapter 6, from A Biblical Anthropology by Michael Bieleski.}

One of our initial questions concerning the nature of man was whether he naturally survived death as an immortal being. In the Genesis creation narrative, man died through disobedience and that death was carefully defined as the dissolution of the body. There was no mention of what happened to man after death. By contrast, the idea of the natural immortality of man raises the possibility of an intermediate state, which might exist between death and the resurrection. From Paul's teaching, this seems very unlikely, but it is still important to examine all the issues. What does the rest of Scripture say about the period between death and any possible future existence?

In Psalm 6:5 it says, "In death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise?"¹ Throughout the Old Testament, the word sheol is sometimes left un-translated and sometimes the word grave is used. Sometimes it is translated by the English word hell. However, the concept of hell, influenced by extra-biblical mythology, does not correspond to a scriptural definition of sheol. From its use in various contexts, it would appear that sheol is the grave.

The Psalmist says that in death, no one will remember God, and he rhetorically asks who can give God praise. The rhetorical nature of the question suggests that the writer is making the point

that there is no one in sheol to give praise. To suggest otherwise would contradict the purpose of rhetorical questions; which are used without expectation of a reply, because the answer should be obvious. In this case, the answer is made even more obvious by the previous statement that the dead would not remember God. It is not likely that those in sheol are incapable of remembering God. Rather, the rhetorical nature of the Psalmist's comment simply suggests that praise and cognisance are elements of the living and not the dead.

The idea that death leads to a loss of existence was a familiar theme in the Old Testament. Job compared those going down to the grave as a cloud that fades and vanishes. Those who went down to sheol did not come back up because they ceased to exist.² In Psalm 88:11, these ideas are supported in rhetorical fashion. "Shall your loving kindness be declared in the grave? Or Your faithfulness in the place of destruction?"³ In this verse, the grave is synonymous with destruction. If the grave is a place of destruction, then it is unlikely that anyone actually has any form of existence, and therefore they are not in a position to remember God.

In Isaiah 14:11, it says that those brought down to sheol have the maggots as a bed beneath them, and worms as their covering. This suggests that the grave is the end of man, because he is destroyed through the process of decomposition, confirming the Genesis story that the consequence of sin was the dissolution of the body back to dust.

While David described the sorrows of sheol surrounding him,⁴ the full context explains that this passage was about David's deliverance from the hand of Saul. David was not saying that he was in sheol suffering, but rather that he was close to death, and yet God had rescued him. This is supported by David's

acknowledgement that in his distress, he cried out to God, and the Lord had heard him. Context is always important in our understanding of the use of the word sheol. For example, in the rebellion and judgment of Korah,⁵ it says that they went down alive into sheol, and yet afterwards it says that they perished when the earth closed down over them. In this case, the idea of going into sheol was the equivalent of being buried alive.

The emphasis of Scripture is that sheol is a gloomy non-descriptive end to the life of man. Job melancholically states, “Shall we have rest together in the dust?”⁶ The rhetorical nature of the question expects no answer, because it is obvious that it is not possible to rest if you are dust. Many passages reflect on sheol in the context of the fear or danger of death that surrounds oneself, and the sorrow and trouble that it presents. The hope was always deliverance from sheol or the grave, and to live again in the land of the living. In Psalm 116:3-9, the Psalmist says that the pains of death and the pangs of Sheol are laying hold of him and bringing him trouble and sorrow. His response was to call on the Name of the Lord for help, which enabled him to joyfully declare the expectation that his soul would be delivered from death. His hope was that he would eventually walk before the Lord in the land of the living.

There was no sense that man expected to exist in any shape or form in sheol. It was a place of ‘nothingness’ and something from which to be rescued. “For the living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward, for the memory of them is forgotten.”⁷

However, the hope was that God would be able to defeat the power of the grave and rescue man from its clutches. As the Psalmist says, “God will redeem my soul from the power of sheol.”⁸ The Teaching of the Old Testament is that man

understands his final destination is the grave and a state of existence, which is the antithesis of a life to which he hopes to return.

There are no scriptures in the Old Testament that clearly and consistently detail conscious existence after death in an intermediate state. While there are a small number of New Testament passages that might seem to support the idea of an intermediate state of existence, there are a number of issues to consider. Sound theology is built on a consistent framework of scriptures that confirm ideas in a way that are understandable and useful. In particular, some passages are used to promote certain interpretations, even though they are not consistent with Scripture.

When other scriptures contradict or contrast these more consistent ideas, then there are likely to be interpretive issues that require special consideration. The most obvious example is the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus.⁹ In this story, the fortunes of a rich man and a poor man are reversed in death; the rich man is suffering in hades and the poor man is enjoying life in 'Abraham's bosom'.

There are a number of problems with this story if it is a valid description of an intermediate stage. The first problem is that the story takes place in hades,¹⁰ which is emptied of its dead and thrown into the lake of fire after the final judgment.¹¹ This means that it cannot be a place of conscious existence. The other problem with this story is also the very thing that ironically seems to give it credibility – a description of the afterlife. The argument might be that this detailed story must describe after death circumstances. It must have been told to reinforce a reality for which all will experience.

However, whereas this circular reasoning might seem to give credibility to this interpretation, this descriptive view of the afterlife actually contradicts Scripture. Besides the fact that Scripture tells us that hades is only full of dead people, there are no other supporting passages. The vivid nature of the story would almost certainly have required some form of commentary or response from other writers. However, there were no comments from any of the New Testament writers on this passage. There was no teaching anywhere that supported the idea that the grave was divided into pleasant and unpleasant compartments, where the righteous and unrighteous could chat to one another.

Because the grave always had vague descriptive statements, the details of a story that has no other supporting commentary should be given careful consideration. If it was not consistent with Scripture, then it cannot be used to reinforce the viewpoint that this was an accurate explanation of the afterlife.

It could be suggested then, that Jesus' use of this material in his story telling might be potentially misleading. However, there seems to have been no confusion to those who were listening because there was no response to the details. In response to this, an argument could be made that Jesus was reinforcing commonly held beliefs about the afterlife. The problem with this is that there was no uniform Jewish view on the nature of the afterlife.¹² Therefore, there would have been further teaching here and elsewhere in Scripture that supports the ideas in this story.

Jesus' teaching always focussed on life from death. It was never about being dead yet alive, which is what an intermediate state suggests. Genesis tells us that death was the dissolution of self, which by inference is the end of existence. If Jesus taught that we rise from the dead to receive life, then it is illogical to accept that the dead are still alive awaiting this event. It is very clear from

New Testament teaching that the resurrection was foundational to Christian belief. Paul was adamant that the dead rose from the dead in new bodies to receive eternal life.

Therefore, this passage was contradictory to teaching on the resurrection. It generated no theological discussion and did not appear to have been used to support a particular view of the afterlife. Then why would Jesus tell this story if it was not a vivid depiction of the afterlife, and a reality that all would get to experience?

The answer is that there was nothing surprising about what Jesus was saying, because they had heard this sort of story before. Jesus often spoke in parables, which always had a key point that often summarised a previous debate or issue with either his disciples, the crowds of people that came to hear him speak or the religious leaders of the day. When Jesus spoke in parables, he used common everyday familiar objects and concepts. It should be no surprise then to learn that the plot of this story was familiar in popular Palestinian stories of Jesus' time.

Hugo Gressman says that there were at least seven versions of this story in Jewish literature. "The plot of the parables, the reversal of Earthly fortunes after death, was familiar in Palestinian popular stories of Jesus' time.One of the most famous Involved a poor student of the Law and a rich publican named Bar Ma'jan."¹³

Its use [ie the story of the Rich Man and Lazarus] was summed up by Froom, who cites the historian Josephus and concludes, "Jesus was clearly using a then common tradition of the Jews to press home a moral lesson in a related field."¹⁴ It suggests that the story was a means to an end and the background details are not as important as the point being made by the story. Jesus' use

of this story would be recognized not in terms of its content, but in terms of its message. The Pharisees would have been expecting the punch line at the end of the story, which was the meaning of the parable.

The important details were that the favoured man was rich, the beggar was poor, and there was a reversal of circumstances in death. The context in which this story was told is also important. Jesus had been teaching about faithfulness and he used stewardship to reinforce the concept. The Pharisees who loved money, scoffed at Jesus' teaching, and therefore he told this story of the reversal of fortunes for one that was rich and one that was poor. The reversal of circumstances in the light of Jesus' ministry becomes essential to understanding the story. Considering all of Jesus' numerable warnings to the Pharisees and the Nation of Israel,¹⁵ it is possible that the reversal of circumstances in this story is also a portrayal of events that would soon befall them.

The rich man in the story could represent the Jewish nation who had enjoyed all of God's favour and goodness. The beggar would represent the gentiles who stood spiritually neglected at the gate of Israel. The rich man had failed to be a good steward of the riches at his disposal, and likewise, Israel had failed to be a good steward of God's promises. In death, their circumstances are reversed, and now the beggar is the favoured one.

This story was a warning of the coming Judgment of Israel and the opportunity for the Gentiles to receive the Gospel. Death defined the finality of the events. The story also pointed out that even if someone were to come back from the dead the wicked would still not believe; therefore, the fortunes of Israel would be reversed, and even a resurrection from the dead would not be enough to prevent this reversal.

This is the punch line that Jesus made at the end of the story when he says, “If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be persuaded though one rise from the dead.”¹⁶

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There are other scriptures such as 1 Peter 3:18-20, which described Christ preaching to the spirits in prison who were disobedient in the days of Noah, when eight were “saved through water.”¹⁷ This passage could be taken to mean that Jesus went into the realm of the dead to preach to Noah’s contemporaries. He went there either to save them or to proclaim his own victory, but there are problems with both of these ideas.

Firstly, there are no scriptures that suggest that one can be saved after death and secondly, why would Jesus need to proclaim his own victory? These two problems require us to carefully examine the interpretive issues. If certain ideas are not confirmed in other scriptures, then we have to ask why? What was Peter trying to say? There are many different explanations and no clear interpretation for this passage. For example, one commentary notes, “The spirits in prison could refer to evil angels, to individuals who have died, or to the people who were alive at the time of Noah....the passage is difficult to interpret.”¹⁸

If difficulties of interpretation exist, then the principles of interpretation suggest that this passage cannot be used to support theological views that might be considered normal. This is particularly relevant when those ideas are contradictory to other passages of Scripture.

There are clues as to what Peter might have been trying to say. Peter was keen to note that only eight people survived this flood, and then went on to make the connection between Noah’s

survival, baptism, and salvation. He wanted his readers to make the connection between the salvation of Noah and their own salvation in times of great wickedness. This makes sense because Peter had just been talking about suffering.

However, what was the wickedness that existed at the time of Noah? Seeking the answer to this question creates more problems. Genesis 6:1-5 says that people began to multiply and daughters were born, the sons of God took wives for themselves, the Nephilim were on the earth, the sons of God went in to the daughters of humans (who bore children to them) and the Lord saw that there was wickedness everywhere! Therefore, the flood was used to destroy everyone apart from Noah and his family. These verses are equally difficult to explain. It is possible that Peter and his readers determined certain understandings from this passage that are not necessarily clear for us. Peter's allusion to the strange events in the antediluvian period may be his opportunity to demonstrate that God is able to destroy wickedness and keep evil in check.

But, this is not the only difficult passage from Peter. Consider 1 Peter 4:6, which says that the gospel was proclaimed even to the dead that they might live in the spirit as God does. This passage might seem to support the argument for the preaching of the gospel to the dead. However, sound Biblical interpretation looks for the overall scriptural emphasis. The consistent teaching of Scripture was that there was no second chance for the dead. It is more likely that Peter was simply saying that the gospel was proclaimed to those in the past. Before Christ, they had received the gospel through faith and had subsequently died. Even though they believed, they died because death remains a judgment in the flesh. The fact that they "might live in the spirit as God does," may mean that they will live again in their spiritually modified bodies, but this does not necessarily mean this has happened yet. Taking

this sort of understanding into account, it is entirely possible that 1 Peter 3:18-20 refers to the preaching of the Gospel by Noah to his spiritually imprisoned contemporaries.

The idea of an intermediate state of existence is devoid of any consistent, clear, and specific teaching and we are limited to a few difficult passages. To build a theology of an intermediate state of existence relying on these passages also contradicts other scriptures.

The essential factor in these arguments is the nature of death. Genesis explained death as a consequence for sin without regard for any future existence, and therefore the possibility of life after death is only possible if the curse of death is overturned. This undoing of death is now fully realised and revealed in Christ, and death for the believer no longer holds any power. While we still die, God promises that those that have believed will rise from the grave to inherit eternal life.

There was no sense in this teaching that man continued to exist after death apart from the resurrection. This death was also often described as sleep, which was a nice way of talking about death. “We shall not all sleep, but we shall 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 incorruptible, and we shall be changed.”¹⁹ Comparing “we shall not all sleep” with “the dead will be raised,” explains that this sleep is synonymous with death.²⁰

The reason that some will not die or sleep is explained in 1 Thessalonians 4:15, where Paul tells us that those left alive at the return of Christ would have no advantage over those who had already died. The word advantage means that they would not precede or go before those who were already dead. In other

words, the dead or those who had fallen asleep would be resurrected first before anything else. Then those who were still alive would be transformed. Therefore, those who had died must still be dead. The metaphor sleep describes how death for them will be an unconscious awareness of the period between their death and the resurrection.

The idea that man sleeps in the dust waiting for the resurrection as a fulfillment of promise, also seems to be confirmed by Daniel. “Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt.”²¹ Further on it says, “Go your way till the end; for you shall rest, and will arise to your inheritance at the end of the days.”²² Therefore Man sleeps in the dust of the earth (which is death) to be awakened (at the resurrection) – some to receive an inheritance (to receive that which had been promised which is immortality) – the rest to everlasting contempt (which is a judgment of death). This ‘sleep’ of death is a very safe sleep for the believer is ‘with Christ’²³ or ‘asleep in Jesus’.²⁴ The use of the word sleep then provides a sense of security that God is in control. He will do what he has promised, and that we are not like those who have no hope.

These ideas are also supported by other passages. For example, Hebrews stated that the heroes of faith had died, and had not received the promises.²⁵ Later on, the writer notes, “Apart from us they should not be made perfect.”²⁶ These passages suggest that they had not received what had been promised, because this would only happen when all were made perfect at the end of time. The only thing that would make them collectively perfect, would be the bodily resurrection of the dead, and an incorruptible body leading to immortality.

References:

¹Psalm 6:5 (NRSV)

² Job 7:9

³ Psalm 88:11 (NKJV)

⁴ 2 Samuel 22:6

⁵ Numbers 16:30 (NRSV)

⁶ Job 17:16 (NKJV)

⁷ Ecclesiastes 9:5 (ESV)

⁸ Psalm 49:15 (NASB)

⁹ Luke 16

¹⁰ Sheol (the grave in the Old Testament) and hades were seen to be equivalent because Peter quotes the Old Testament using hades in place of sheol. Acts 2:27 and Psalm 16:10

¹¹ Revelations 20:13,14

¹² Fudge, The Fire That Consumes, 154

¹³ Fudge, The Fire That Consumes, 203-204

¹⁴ Fudge, The Fire That Consumes, 204

¹⁵ See next Chapter on the Judgment of Israel

¹⁶ Luke 16:31 (NKJV)

¹⁷ 1 Peter 3:18-20 (NKJV)

¹⁸ Thomas Nelson, I. 1997, c1995. Woman's Study Bible. (1 Peter 3:18). Thomas Nelson: Nashville

¹⁹ 1 Corinthians 15:51 (NKJV)

²⁰ Besides the obvious parallelism in this verse, some versions also use die instead of sleep in the first part of the verse. "We shall not all die." (NRSV)

²¹ Daniel 12:2

²² Daniel 12:13 (NKJV)

²³ Philippians. 1:23

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 15:18

²⁵ Hebrews 11:13

²⁶ Hebrews 11:40 (NASB)