

IMMORTALITY OF THE SOUL (Jewish Encyclopedia Article)

The belief that the soul continues its existence after the dissolution of the body is a matter of philosophical or theological speculation rather than of simple faith, and is accordingly nowhere expressly taught in Holy Scripture [Old Testament]. As long as the soul was conceived to be merely a breath ("nefesh"; "neshamah"; comp. "anima"), and inseparably connected, if not identified, with the life-blood, no real substance could be ascribed to it. As soon as the spirit or breath of God, which was believed to keep body and soul together, both in man and in beast, is taken away or returns to God, the soul goes down to sheol or hades, there to lead a shadowy existence without life and consciousness. The belief in a continuous life of the soul, which underlies primitive Ancestor Worship and the rites of necromancy, practiced also in ancient Israel, was discouraged and suppressed by prophet and lawgiver as antagonistic to the belief in YHWH, the God of life, the Ruler of heaven and earth, whose reign was not extended over sheol until post-exilic times.

As a matter of fact, eternal life was ascribed exclusively to God and to celestial beings who "eat of the tree of life and live forever," whereas man by being driven out of the Garden of Eden was deprived of the opportunity of eating the food of immortality. It is the Psalmist's implicit faith in God's omnipotence and omnipresence that leads him to the hope of immortality; whereas Job betrays only a desire for, not a real faith in, a life after death. Ben Sira still clings to the belief in sheol as the destination of man. It was only in connection with the Messianic hope that, under the influence of Persian ideas, the belief in resurrection lent to the disembodied soul a continuous existence.

Hellenistic [Greek] View The belief in the immortality of the soul came to the Jews from contact with Greek thought and chiefly through the philosophy of Plato, its principal exponent, who was led to it through Orphic and Eleusinian mysteries in which Babylonian and Egyptian views were strangely blended, as the Semitic name "Minos," and the Egyptian "Rhadamanthys" ("Ra of Ament," "Ruler of Hades") with others, sufficiently prove. A blessed immortality awaiting the spirit while the bones rest in the earth is mentioned in Jubilees xxiii. 31 and Enoch iii. 4. Immortality, the "dwelling near God's throne" "free from the load of the body," is "the fruit of righteousness," says the Book of Wisdom. In IV Maccabees, also, immortality of the soul is represented as life with God in heaven, and declared to be the reward for righteousness and martyrdom. The souls of the righteous are transplanted into heaven and transformed into holy souls. According to Philo, the soul exists before it enters the body, a prison-house from which death liberates it; to return to God and live in constant contemplation of Him is man's highest destiny.

It is not quite clear whether the Sadducees, in denying resurrection, denied also the immortality of the soul.¹ Certain it is that the Pharisaic belief in resurrection had not even a name for the immortality of the soul.² For them, man was made for two worlds, the world that now is, and the world to come, where life does not end in death.

¹ According to Josephus, the Sadducees denied the resurrection and immortality of the soul, but the Essenes affirmed the immortality of the soul. The three sects of 1st century Judaism represented the 3 views of the afterlife: The Sadducees believed in no afterlife. The Pharisees believed only in the resurrection of the body. The Essenes believed in the immortality of the soul.

² The Jewish Encyclopedia article on the Pharisees adds: "But it was not the immortality of the soul which the Pharisees believed in, as Josephus puts it, but the resurrection of the body as expressed in the liturgy, and this formed part of their Messianic hope."

Other Scholarly Sources:

1. Blackwell Encyclopedia of Modern Christian Thought (1995): "There is no concept of an immortal soul in the Old Testament, nor does the New Testament ever call the human soul immortal."
2. Harper's Bible Dictionary (1985): "For a Hebrew, 'soul' indicated the unity of a human person; Hebrews were living bodies, they did not have bodies."
3. New Bible Dictionary' (1996): "But to the Bible, man is not a soul in a body but a body/soul unity."
4. New Dictionary of Theology (2000): "The notion of the soul as an independent force that animates human life but that can exist apart from the human body—either prior to conception and birth or subsequent to life and death—is the product only of later Judaism."
5. Eerdmans Bible Dictionary (1987): "Indeed, the salvation of the "immortal soul" has sometimes been a commonplace in preaching, but it is fundamentally unbiblical."
6. Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible (2000): "Far from referring simply to one aspect of a person, "soul" refers to the whole person."
7. Encyclopedia of Christianity (2003): "The Hebrew Bible does not present the human soul (nepeš) or spirit (rûah) as an immortal substance."
8. Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church (2005): "there is practically no specific teaching on the subject in the Bible beyond an underlying assumption of some form of afterlife."
9. Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible (2009): "It is this essential soul-body oneness that provides the uniqueness of the biblical concept of the resurrection of the body as distinguished from the Greek idea of the immortality of the soul."
10. Pictorial Bible Dictionary: (1976) "The biblical concept of immortality is not the survival of the soul after bodily death – the bare continued existence of the soul – but the self-conscious continuance of the whole person, body and soul together, in a state of blessedness, due to the redemption of Christ and the possession of 'eternal life.'"

Ancient Egyptians Beliefs in the Afterlife

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egyptian_afterlife

"The Egyptians had elaborate beliefs about death and the afterlife. They believed that humans possessed a ka, or life-force, which left the body at the point of death. In life, the ka received its sustenance from food and drink, so it was believed that, to endure after death, the ka must continue to receive offerings of food, whose spiritual essence it could still consume. Each person also had a ba, the set of spiritual characteristics unique to each individual. Unlike the ka, the ba remained attached to the body after death. Egyptian funeral rituals were intended to release the ba from the body so that it could move freely, and to rejoin it with the ka so that it could live on as an akh. However, it was also important that the body of the deceased be preserved, as the Egyptians believed that the ba returned to its body each night to receive new life, before emerging in the morning as an akh.

Originally, however, the Egyptians believed that only the pharaoh had a ba, and only he could become one with the gods; dead commoners passed into a dark, bleak realm that represented the opposite of life. The nobles received tombs and the resources for their upkeep as gifts from the king, and their ability to enter the afterlife was believed to be dependent on these royal favors. **In early times the deceased pharaoh was believed to ascend to the sky and dwell among the stars.** Over the course of the Old Kingdom (c. 2686–2181 BC), however, he came to be more closely associated with the daily rebirth of the sun god Ra and with the underworld ruler Osiris as those deities grew more important.

During the late Old Kingdom and the First Intermediate Period (c. 2181–2055 BC), the Egyptians gradually came to believe that possession of a ba and the possibility of a paradisiacal afterlife extended to everyone. In the fully developed afterlife beliefs of the New Kingdom, the soul had to avoid a variety of supernatural dangers in the Duat, before undergoing a final judgment known as the "Weighing of the Heart". In this judgment, the gods compared the actions of the deceased while alive (symbolized by the heart) to Ma'at, to determine whether he or she had behaved in accordance with Ma'at. If the deceased was judged worthy, his or her ka and ba were united into an akh. Several beliefs coexisted about the akh's destination. Often the dead were said to dwell in the realm of Osiris, a lush and pleasant land in the underworld. The solar vision of the afterlife, in which the deceased soul traveled with Ra on his daily journey, was still primarily associated with royalty, but could extend to other people as well. Over the course of the Middle and New Kingdoms, the notion that the akh could also travel in the world of the living, and to some degree magically affect events there, became increasingly prevalent.

Ancient Greeks Beliefs in the Afterlife

http://www.ehow.com/info_8281189_belief-early-greeks-afterlife.html

Early Concepts of Hades: Prior to the eighth century B.C., most Greeks subscribed to one or several of a diverse array of religious beliefs. Common to most of these beliefs was the underlying fear of death. As a result, the belief developed of death as a living being, stalking the earth and ready to take anyone who displeased him. This being became known as Hades, a deity to whom sacrifices were made to stave off death and disaster. It was thought that death always resulted from Hades' displeasure, and a person, once dead, suffered Hades' enslavement.

Appeasing the Gods: Just as Hades developed out of fear of death, belief in other deities was formed partially out of the hope for a more happy afterlife. Greeks believed that the fate of a person after death relied upon her relationship with the gods. A good relationship resulted in a peaceful or heroic passing from this world, and the person would eternally live as a guest in the gods' palaces. One who failed to pay homage to the gods in life, however, would suffer a painful and/or disgraceful death, and suffer eternal punishment in Hades. In either scenario, only the spirit of the person and the objects or persons carried with him would arrive in the afterlife.

Plato [died 347BC]: Plato, one of the first philosophers of the Axial Age, was the first to advance new understandings of religion and philosophy that drastically affected the understandings of the afterlife. For Plato, man existed in body and form, and his form could not die. After death, his soul was released into a state of total spiritual freedom. Ironically, this state would contradict seemingly just consequences for a person's earthly conduct; good persons who enjoyed the protection of law would be distressed by the sudden freedom of the afterlife, while evil persons who resented law would feel joy at the sudden happiness. Plato's views found little popularity of themselves, but they found subscription when combined with religious views more rewarding of good behavior.

Aristotle [died 322BC]: Aristotle expanded upon Plato's concepts of soul and body, purporting a hierarchy of beings in all of existence. For souls, the highest perfection of spiritual beings was a single, all-powerful God, in whose service earthly existence was measured. Good behavior was calculated by a set of morals that the single God embodied, and which Aristotle called virtue. Aristotle's principles of earthly conduct, however, did not receive much subscription, for he propounded the death of the soul as part of his belief. Like Plato's principles, Aristotle's required mixing with other religious foundations before they became popular. Many consider Plato and Aristotle's combined principles to be the framework that made Western civilization receptive to the eventual emergence of Christianity.

Reincarnation <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reincarnation>

Reincarnation is the religious or philosophical concept that the soul or spirit, after biological death, begins a new life in a new body that may be human, animal or spiritual depending on the moral quality of the previous life's actions. This doctrine is a central tenet of the Indian religions and is a belief that was held by such historic figures as Pythagoras, Plato and Socrates. It is also a common belief of pagan religions such as Druidism, Spiritism, Theosophy, and Eckankar and is found in many tribal societies around the world, in places such as Siberia, West Africa, North America, and Australia.

Gnosticism <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gnosticism>

A common characteristic of some of these groups was the teaching that the realization of Gnosis (esoteric or intuitive knowledge) is the way to salvation of the soul from the material world. They saw the material world as created through an intermediary being (demiurge) rather than directly by God. ... The spiritual world is conceived of as being radically different from the material world, co-extensive with the true God, and the true home of certain enlightened members of humanity; thus, these systems were expressive of a feeling of acute alienation within the world, and their resultant aim was to allow the soul to escape the constraints presented by the physical realm.