



Death and Judgement: Jewish and Early Christian Traditions

HPHP4006 Myths and Mythology

Death and Judgement in Jewish and Early Christian Traditions

1. What do biblical texts have to say on this topic?
2. What do they not say?
3. What about perceptions of the Bible's teaching on death, judgement, and the afterlife?



1: Death and Judgement in the Hebrew Bible



The Finality of Death

No teaching about afterlife (heaven or hell) in the Hebrew Bible.

Many texts in the Hebrew Bible appear to deny the existence of an 'afterlife', emphasizing rather the inevitability and finality of death.

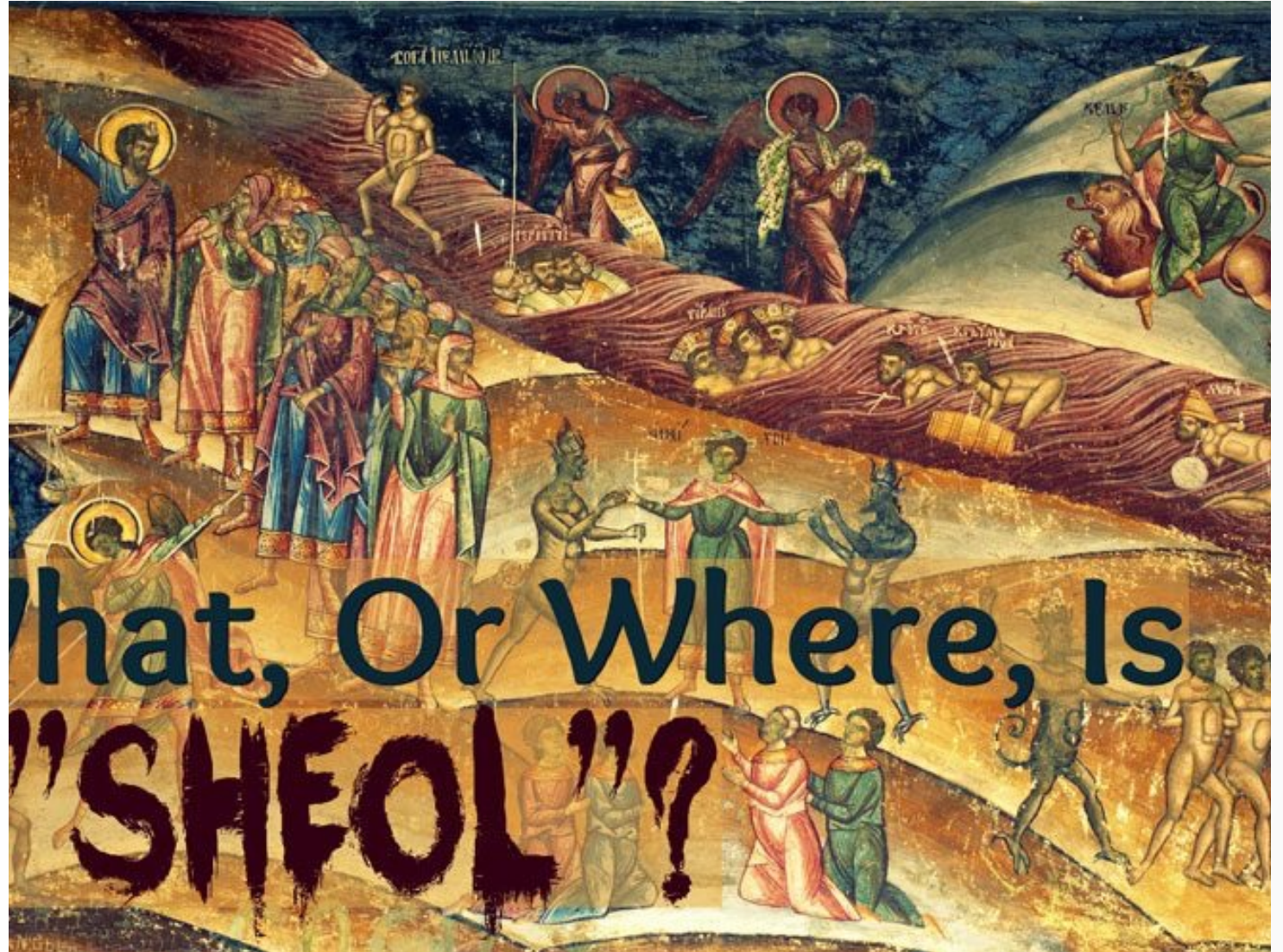
‘By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; **you are dust and to dust you shall return**’ (Genesis 3:19).

‘When you [God] hide your face, they [created beings] are dismayed; when you take away their breath they die and return to their dust’ (Psalm 104:29).

Sheol

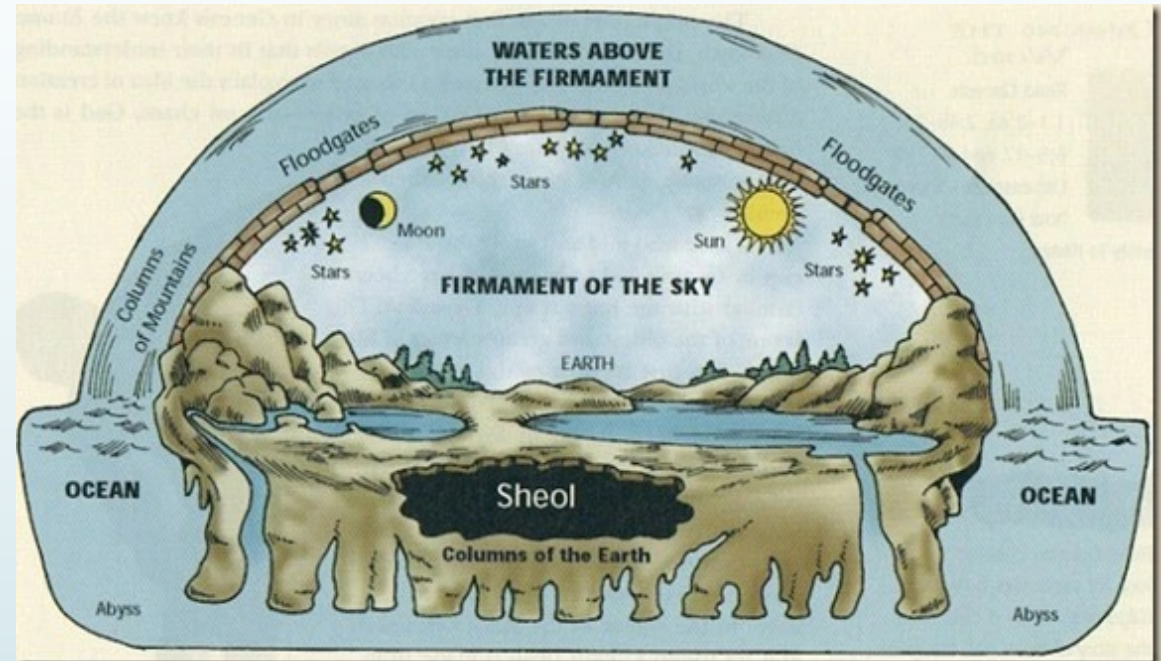
In other Hebrew Bible texts the dead (both the righteous and the wicked) are said to go to Sheol (e.g., Genesis 42:38; Psalm 141:7; Isaiah 14; Ezekiel 31:14-17).

Sheol is said to be a place of 'gloom and deep darkness' (Job 10:21-22; cf. 17:13), 'forgetfulness' (Psalm 88:12) and 'silence' (Psalm 115:17).



Sheol

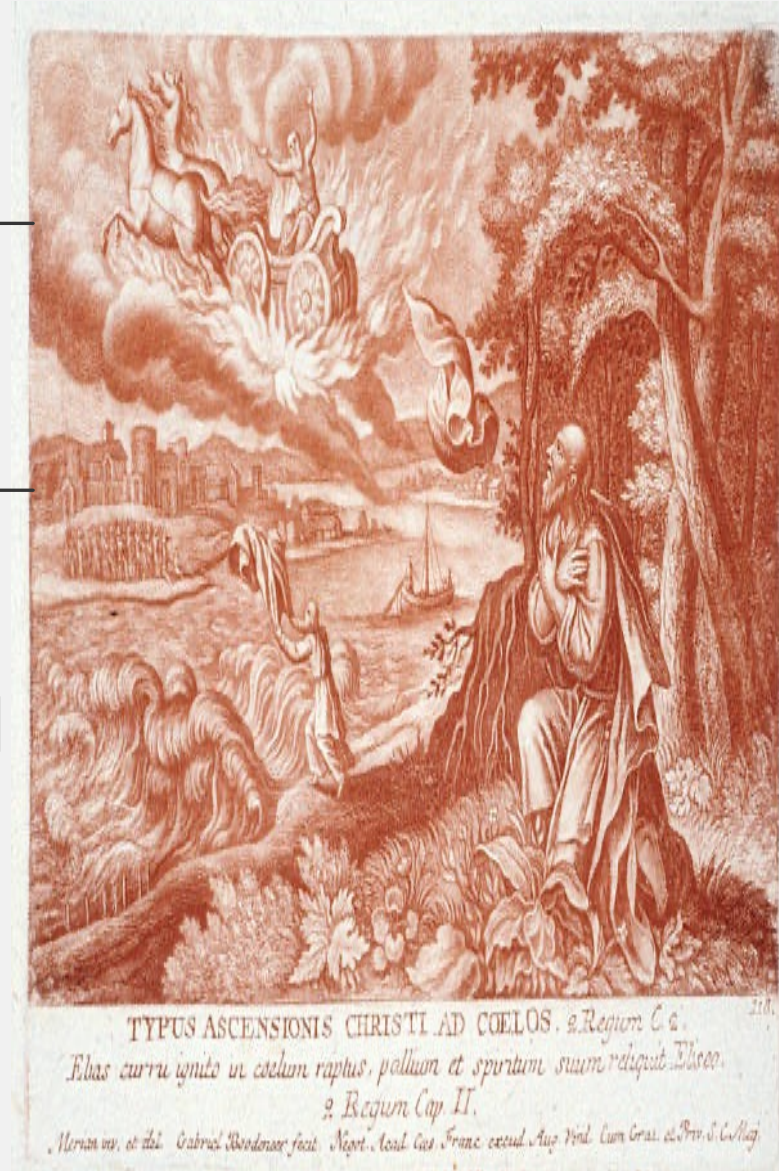
- Sheol is not a place of punishment but the final destination of all souls.
- This is not dissimilar to the Greek concept of the underworld. In the Greek Bible (LXX/Septuagint), 'Sheol' is translated as 'Hades'.



Heaven

Heaven is accessible to humans only in special circumstances.

Elijah is said to have bypassed death and Sheol, going directly from mortal life to be with God in heaven: 'As they [Elijah and Elisha] were walking along and talking together, suddenly a chariot of fire and horses of fire appeared and separated the two of them, and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind' (2 Kings 2:11).



The Day of the Lord

- The Hebrew Bible lacks any reference to immediate post-mortem judgement, but there are many references to an event pertaining to universal judgement (particularly in the prophetic literature).
- The 'day of the Lord' is characterized by global and/or cosmic catastrophe (e.g., Isaiah 13; 24; 34; Jeremiah 4:23-28; Joel 2:30-31; 3:14-16; Amos. 5:18-20; Zephaniah 1).

The Day of the Lord

‘See, the day of the Lord comes, cruel, with wrath and fierce anger, to make the earth a desolation, and to destroy its sinners from it’ (Isaiah 13:9).

‘I will show portents in the heavens and on earth, blood and fire and columns of smoke. The sun shall be turned to darkness, and the moon to blood, before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. Then everyone who calls on the name of the Lord shall be saved’ (Joel 2:30-32).

The Day of the Lord

‘I will utterly sweep away everything from the face of the earth, says the LORD. I will sweep away humans and animals; I will sweep away the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I will cut off humanity from the face of the earth, says the LORD...The great day of the LORD is near, near and hastening fast; the sound of the day of the LORD is bitter, the warrior cries aloud there. That day will be a day of wrath, a day of distress and anguish, a day of ruin and devastation, a day of darkness and gloom, a day of clouds and thick darkness, a day of trumpet blast and battle cry against the fortified cities and against the lofty battlements. I will bring such distress upon people that they shall walk like the blind; because they have sinned against the LORD, their blood shall be poured out like dust, and their flesh like dung. Neither their silver nor their gold will be able to save them on the day of the LORD’S wrath; in the fire of his passion the whole earth shall be consumed; for a full, terrible end he will make of all the inhabitants of the earth’ (Zephaniah 1:2-3, 14-18).

Transformed Creation: New Heaven and New Earth

Scenes of destruction are tempered by visions of a new or transformed creation in some texts (see, for example, Isaiah 65:17-25; Ezekiel 34:25-29; Joel 3:18).



Isaiah 65:17-19

¹⁷ See, I will create
new heavens and a new earth.
The former things will not be
remembered,
nor will they come to mind.

¹⁸ But be glad and rejoice forever
in what I will create,
for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight
and its people a joy.

¹⁹ I will rejoice over Jerusalem
and take delight in my people;
the sound of weeping and of crying
will be heard in it no more.



The Resurrection of the Dead

- The Book of Daniel is the only Hebrew Bible text to express such a belief (see Daniel 12:1-4).
- Clear evidence of growing interest in the post-mortem fate of the individual in what is known as the late intertestamental period (ca. 250 BCE-70 CE).
- By the end of the 1st century CE, belief in a general resurrection of the dead was well established.

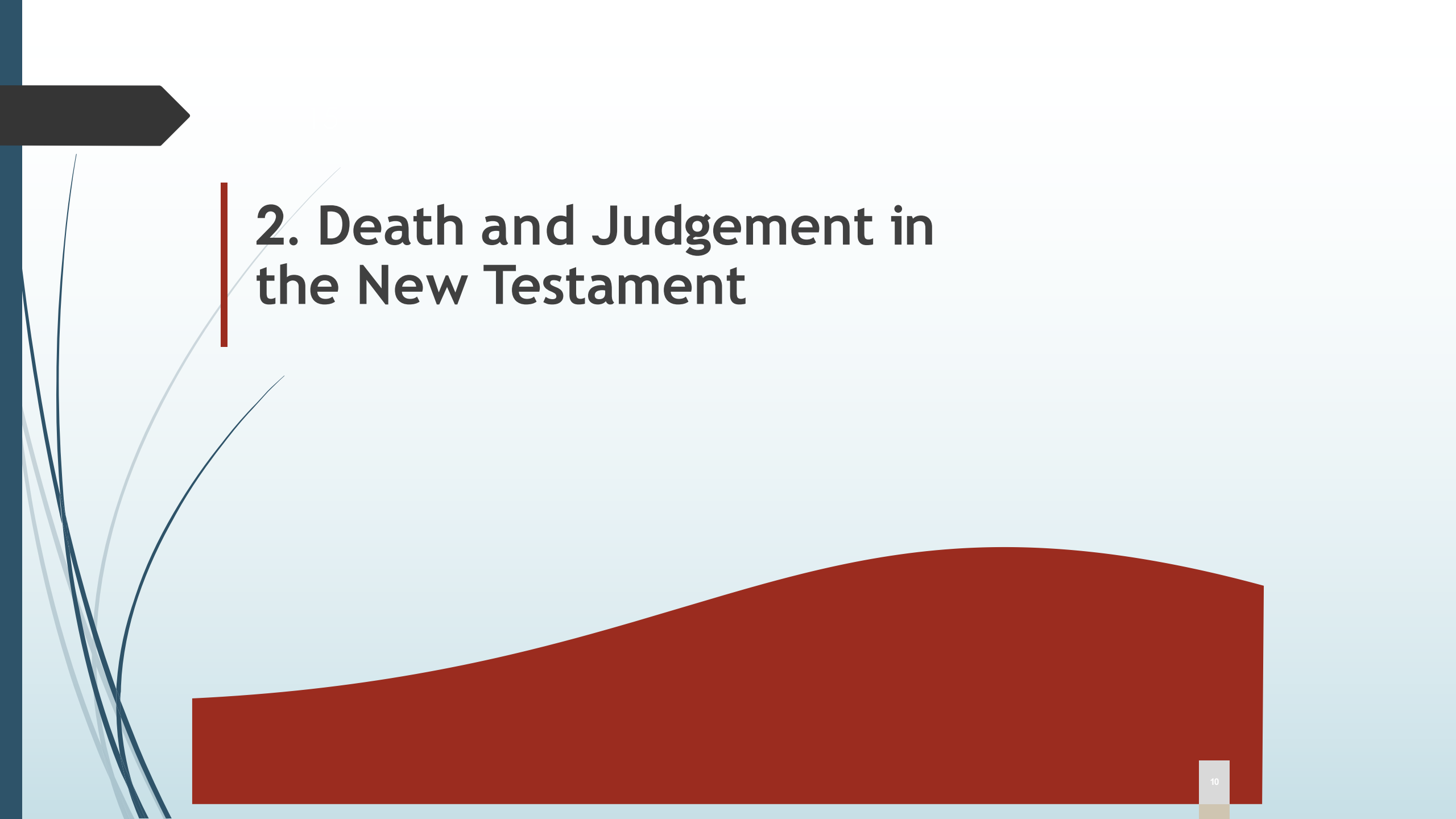
The Resurrection of the Dead

How did this belief first emerge?
Possibly as a response to
suffering and persecution.

Belief in an immediate post-mortem reward/punishment is also evident in some texts from the period (though usually considered an interim state).

Vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones,
Dura-Europos Synagogue





2. Death and Judgement in the New Testament

- When it comes to eschatology, the New Testament largely reflects the same developments as those evidenced during the intertestamental period.
- Eschatology: teaching of the last things (Greek: *eschatos* - last).
- Future eschatology (including the second coming of Jesus, resurrection of the dead, and final judgement) versus 'realized' eschatology.
- Only a handful of verses could be interpreted as referring to immediate post-mortem judgement, but even these are uncertain.

The Second Coming (Parousia) of Jesus

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to him [Jesus] privately, saying, 'Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign of your coming and of the end of the age?' Jesus answered them... 'And you will hear of wars and rumours of wars; see that you are not alarmed; for this must take place, but the end is not yet. ... There will be famines and earthquakes in various places: all this is but the beginnings of the birth pangs...Immediately after the suffering of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light; the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of heaven will be shaken. Then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in heaven, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory...Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming' (Matthew 24).

The Resurrection of the Dead at the Second coming of Jesus

There are references throughout the New Testament to the resurrection of the dead (as a component of Jesus' *parousia*).

The most vivid descriptions are found in the letters of Paul (e.g., I Corinthians 15:20-28, 50-56).



Paul on the Resurrection of the Dead



What I am saying, brothers and sisters, is this: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable. Listen, I will tell you a mystery! We will not all die, 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 (1 Corinthians 15:50-52).

The Resurrection of the Dead

Resurrection of the Flesh, by Luca Signorelli (c. 1500), based on I Corinthians 15:52: And the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and they shall be changed.





Paul on the Resurrection of the Dead

For this we declare to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, who are left until the coming of the Lord, will by no means precede those who have died. For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever (1 Thessalonians 4:15-17).

Fresco (Istanbul, Turkey):
Christ pulling Adam and
Eve from their coffins



The Resurrection of the Dead

Paul seems to think that only the righteous will be raised, while other New Testament writers anticipate a general resurrection (see John 5:29; Acts 24:15; Revelation 20:4-6).

John 5:28-29

²⁸ Do not be amazed at this, for a time is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice ²⁹ and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned.



The Final Judgement: Jesus as Judge

'He [Jesus] commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God as judge of the living and the dead' (Acts 10:42).

'While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead' (Acts 17:30-31).



The Final Judgement (Book of Revelation)

Then I saw a great white throne and the one who sat on it; the earth and the heaven fled from his presence, and no place was found for them. And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened...And the dead were judged according to their works, as recorded in the books. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it, Death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:11-15).

Last Judgement, Stefan
Lochner (c. 1435), Wallraf-
Richartz Museum, Cologne

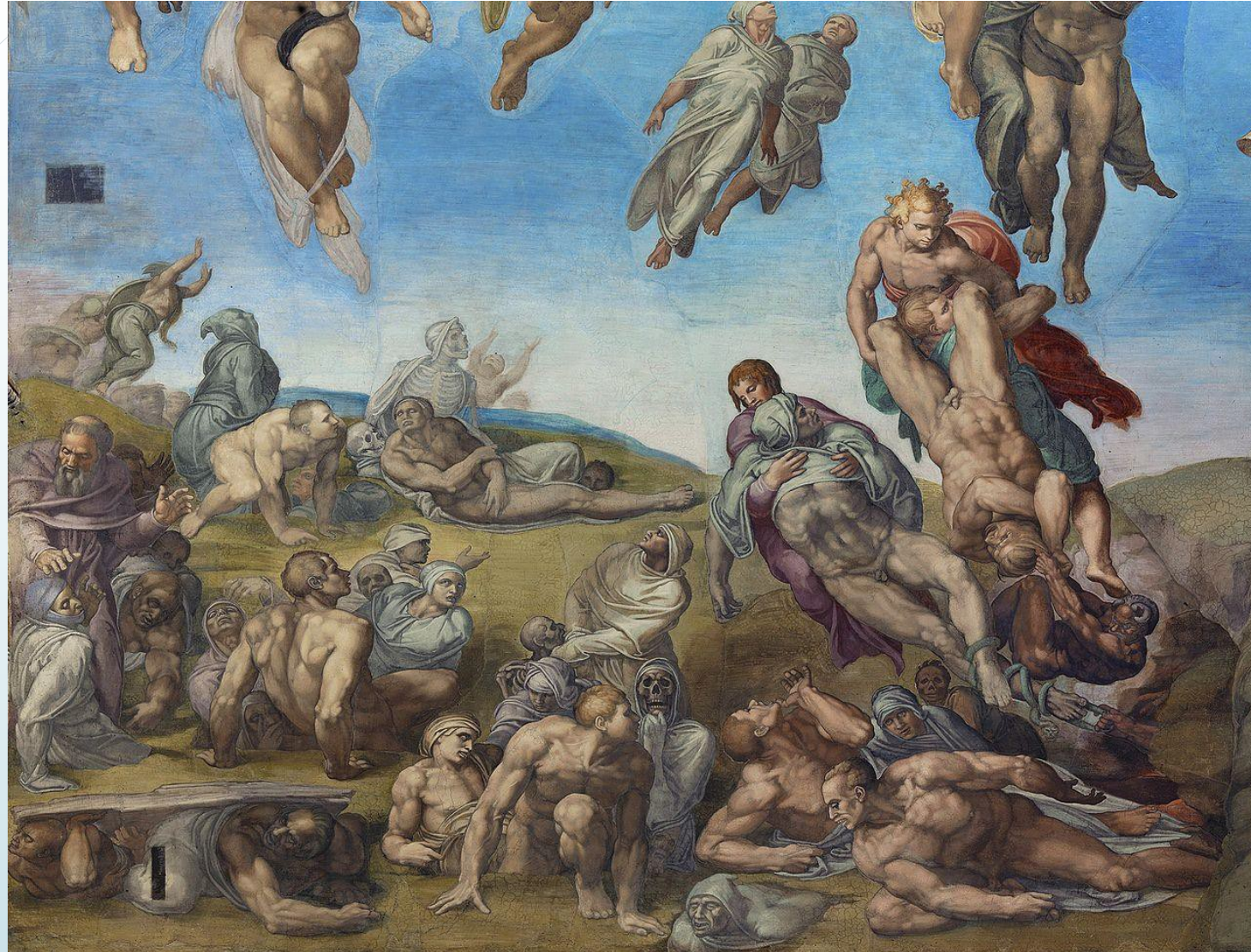


The Last
Judgement,
Michelangelo
(1536-41)

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The Last Judgement, Michelangelo (1536-41)



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The Reward of the Righteous at the Final Judgement

- In keeping with earlier tradition, New Testament writers imagine that the righteous will enjoy a glorified earthly existence in the age to come (possible exceptions can be found in John 14:3 and I Thessalonians 4:17).
- References to the righteous ‘inheriting’, ‘entering’ or ‘receiving’ the Kingdom of God - an unmistakably earthly reality - are prominent in the New Testament (especially in the Gospels and the letters of Paul).
- Several passages also speak of the eschatological ‘restoration’ or ‘renewal’ of the physical creation (Acts 3:19-21; Romans 8:18-23; Revelation 21-22).

The Punishment of the Wicked at the Final Judgement

- Eternal punishment of the sinful plays no part in Paul's theology, rather the wicked are simply destroyed (for example, I Corinthians 15:24-26; I Thessalonians 5:9).
- Other New Testament writers depict the unrighteous being cast into a fiery abyss. It is unclear whether this is intended to convey unending torment (though it would come to be understood in this way by later interpreters).
- The fiery abyss is sometimes given the name *Gehenna* (from the Hebrew: *Ge Hinnom*, 'Valley of Hinnom'), translated as 'hell'.





Hell in New Testament Traditions (Mark's Gospel)

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than to have two hands and to go to hell [*Gehenna*], to the unquenchable fire. And if your foot causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than to have two feet and to be thrown into hell [*Gehenna*]. And if your eye causes you to stumble, tear it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched (Mark 9:43-48).



The Fiery Abyss in the Book of Revelation

‘And the devil who had deceived [the nations] was thrown into the lake of fire and sulphur, where the beast and the false prophet were, and they will be tormented day and night for ever and ever’ (Revelation 20:10)

‘But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulphur, which is the second death’ (Revelation 21:8).



Immediate Post-Mortem Judgement or Interim State?

- There are a handful of verses that could be interpreted as referring to immediate post-mortem judgement (Luke 16:19-31; 23:43, 46; Acts 7:59; 2 Corinthians 5:1-5; Philippians 1:21-23).
- It is more likely that these refer to a ‘holding phase’ before the resurrection of the dead and final judgement (rather than the final fate of individuals).
- The story of the Rich Man and Lazarus in Luke (16:19-31) perhaps is the most disputed of these passages.

The Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)

There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, covered with sores, who longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table; even the dogs would come and lick his sores. The poor man died and was carried away by the angels to be with Abraham. The rich man also died and was buried. In *Hades*, where he was being tormented, he looked up and saw Abraham far away with Lazarus by his side. He called out, 'Father Abraham, have mercy on me, and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in agony in these flames'. But Abraham said, 'Child, remember that during your lifetime you received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in agony. Besides all this, between you and us a great chasm has been fixed, so that those who might want to pass from here to you cannot do so, and no one can cross from there to us'.

**Lazarus and Dives,
Codex Aureus of
Echternach (c. 1030-
50)**





Conclusion: Death and Judgement in the Bible

- The Hebrew Bible shows little interest in an ‘afterlife’ (as imagined in later tradition) though there is emphasis on universal judgement.
- Building on the ideas found in the Hebrew bible and intertestamental literature, the New Testament texts anticipate a final judgement before Jesus/God, after which the righteous/wicked will receive their reward/punishment.
- The concept of immediate post-mortem judgement (movement to hell or heaven upon death) is almost non-existent in the biblical texts.
- Only in later centuries (particularly in medieval theology) does a well-developed concept of ‘particular judgement’ emerge.

Conclusion: Death and Judgement in the Bible

A this-worldly promise... represents a markedly different kind of eschatology from the mainstream Christian tradition in the centuries after Augustine: a hope for this world rather than some transcendent realm. This exemplifies a fundamental division within the Christian world, ancient and modern, and concerns whether Christians believe that the kingdom of God involves a hope for the transformation of this world and its structures. Over the first centuries, there was a diminution in the hope of the establishment of God's kingdom on earth and a greater emphasis on the transcendent realm as the goal of the Christian soul...Such a focus on heavenly eschatological goals eventually took precedence over the earthly eschatology as the dominant doctrine for the Christian pilgrimage, Such an outlook contrasts with the bulk of New Testament eschatology.

Christopher Rowland, 'The Eschatology of the New Testament Church', *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology* (see link on Moodle).