

1. THE JEWISH TRADITION

Around Easter time last year a significant kerfuffle arose within my universe. This was caused by comments made on social media by the Australian rugby player Israel Folau. Originally a South Sea islander, and a committed Christian, Folau wrote an Instagram post which said this:

“Those who are living in sin will end up in Hell unless you repent. Jesus Christ loves you and is giving you time to turn away from your sin and come to him.” He then quoted from Galatians 5:19-21, the KJV, to define the sin he was referring to as “adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, envyings, murders, drunkenness, revelings and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.”

All of which sat beneath a photograph stating: “Warning: Drunks, Homosexuals, Adulterers, Liars, Fornicators, Thieves, Atheists, Idolaters. Hell awaits you. Repent! Only Jesus saves.”

I had a professional interest in this as I work in sport, and I advise a lot of sports organisations on their governance and management structures and systems. This can involve helping them deal with these kinds of issues arising – and so I was fascinated to read about the debates and the processes that Rugby Australia worked through, and what they said and didn’t say, before they sacked Folau for breach of contract. When they did so, they made specific reference to his inclusion of homosexuals in the list of sinners bound for Hell, as this viewpoint was directly contrary to the terms of their equality and diversity policies which seek to ensure that rugby is a game which welcomes everyone regardless of race, creed, colour and sexual preference.

As a Christian, I was challenged by this episode in two ways. First, should Folau not have the right to express his religious views openly and honestly, in line with his beliefs? Wasn’t any attempt to silence him religious discrimination, just another step down the road of persecuting Christians for speaking boldly the truths that they hold dear? And, indeed, there were a number of defenders of Folau, including other Christian rugby players, who protested that he had a right to express the doctrines of his faith as he saw them. Meanwhile, churches across Australia provided funding to support his legal costs when he appealed against his sacking.

But there was another, more fundamental challenge for me which lay behind this. Do these views actually reflect those of the church of which I’m a member? What do we believe about the afterlife, and the fate of different groups of people? Do we – do I – really believe that unrepentant homosexuals go straight to Hell when they die? What do we mean by Hell anyway? And what do we believe about its opposite? Is it a binary choice, that we go to one or the other? Or are there alternatives?

In considering this challenge, I found that I had a fairly woolly view of what happens after we die. This was nothing more than a general sense that we go one way or the other: if we’ve been good, we go to Heaven – which is up; and if we’ve been bad, we go to Hell, which is down. Heaven is a happy place, where we go to be with God. And Hell is an unhappy place, where we live an uncomfortable life being tortured by the Devil and his demons. And I suppose that this is the schematic which most of us will have about the afterlife – with degrees of variation, depending on how much we have dug into the subject, and what we’ve been taught about it from time to time.

But there is an inadequacy within this schematic which sells us short. There are too many questions left unanswered: how do we define the good and bad deeds and behaviour that take us to one of these places? Are they related to what we think, what we believe, or what we do? And are these absolute judgements? Do they apply at a specific moment in time, e.g., at the moment of death? Or are there other moments at which judgement is applied to our life? And is it final, i.e., do we have the

opportunity to overturn the judgement at any stage, through our subsequent actions or through our conscious will?

And Heaven and Hell – what do we mean by these terms? Words matter, because they all carry meaning and assumptions which can be different for different people. When I started looking into this, I found that the King James Bible uses the term “Hell” as a translation for no fewer than four different words across the Old and New Testament – two Hebrew and two Greek terms, each of them with their own separate meanings and discrete cultural associations.

And when I started to investigate where the KJV got the word “Hell” from, I found that Hell is not in fact a place but, rather, it is a she. The words “Heaven” and “Hell” actually originate not from the Middle East, but from Northern Europe – from Old Germanic, Norse and Saxon linguistic roots. “Hell” comes from Norse mythology, the world of the gods Odin, Freya, Thor, Loki and others, who exercise divine rule from Asgard, the highest of the nine Norse worlds. Here Hel is a personality, a goddess: she is Loki’s daughter, who rules over the evil dead in Niflheim, the lowest of all the worlds. So Heaven and Hell are clearly words which belong to pagan religions instead of Christianity – and so they also possess contexts and assumptions which are far removed from our popular conception of them. So how are we to view this borrowing? How should we seek to square it with our own, Bible-based, Christian worldview?

If we accept that Heaven and Hell have a place within Christian cosmology, what and where are they? Are they literal, physical places or spaces – or other dimensions? Is there any justification for our sense that one is up in the sky, and the other is down under the ground? How are we to interpret the sayings of Jesus in this regard – the many rooms in his father’s house, the darkness, wailing and gnashing of teeth that await the wrongdoer, the place in paradise that is offered to the criminal on the cross?

To some extent I consider that my woolliness in this regard is a result of the Church of England being quite coy in its teaching about the afterlife – at least here in England. I can recall very few Sunday-morning sermons which have addressed the topic in detail, or sought to establish a clear and unambiguous doctrine. Perhaps this is because it’s not the sort of thing that can be achieved in 25 minutes; perhaps it’s because we don’t want to put people on the spot or scare the horses; or perhaps it’s because there is no such thing as a clear and unambiguous doctrine – perhaps there truly are more questions than answers.

Of course, the evangelical wing of the church is much less coy: the teaching I have heard in seminars and online has been much more definitive, robust and muscular in its approach. Here there is an urgency that we don’t often encounter in Anglicanism nowadays, a pressure to make good decisions now and in our lifetime, or face the consequences in the afterlife – what my friend Malcolm Peters would call the “turn or burn” approach. Which I suppose brings us back to Israel Folau and his ideology – the starting point for this enquiry.

So what follows over the next four weeks will be the results of my musings on the afterlife, as prompted by Folau, in an attempt to unravel some of these questions. In it we’ll look at:

- The Jewish tradition that is evident in the Old Testament
- Jesus’s own teaching, as expressed in the Gospels
- The subsequent evolution of afterlife theology
- Finally, a modern perspective – including some of my own personal beliefs

One caveat before we start: while I would fully claim to be an ancient historian and a scholar of Latin and Greek, I am not a theologian in the sense that I have had no formal academic education in theology – nor am I a scholar of Hebrew. What I know about these matters has been garnered from enthusiastic

but amateur study, and informed by what I know by other means about the ancient world, its culture and language. What I share with you over these four weeks will be the product of this – and it's highly likely that there will be among you people who know much more about these things than I do. If that's the case, then please feel free to get in touch to question or correct me ...

I think it's right and proper to base this enquiry on an analysis of what the Bible says, first within the Old Testament, before we move on to the New Testament and subsequent sources over the next couple of weeks. The purpose of starting with the Old Testament is to try to identify the Jewish tradition which Jesus inherited, and into which he spoke – to get an idea of the background and context for his words on the afterlife, and to give us a sense of how these might have landed. As we do so – and without wishing to give away too many spoilers – we'll find that there are a number of different strands and apparent contradictions, sometimes even within the same book, and an evolving picture that leaves much to our interpretation. Collectively, these may help to explain at least in part why a definitive picture of the afterlife can be hard to come by.

The first of these strands emerges in Genesis chapter 2, where we find the origin of all human life. Here God gathers the dust of the earth together and breathes into it, and so the first man comes to life – Adam, whose name means “made from the earth”. The divine breath gives or makes Adam “nefesh”, a Hebrew word which denotes life, animation, or a personality, and is the thing which distinguishes him from what would otherwise be a moulded lump of earth.

In Genesis chapter 3, when Adam and Eve disobey God's injunction by eating the fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, God's curses upon them include the following words, in verse 19: “By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are, and to dust you will return.”

So there is an initial, primal belief that we comprise just two components – that we are merely animated dust – and that our death signifies the point at which these components separate and return to their origins. This belief pertains elsewhere in the Old Testament, especially and more eloquently in the much later book of Ecclesiastes, written in comparatively modern times between the fifth and third centuries BC. Here in chapter 3 verses 19-20 it is said:

“Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Everything is meaningless.²⁰ All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return.”

And again in chapter 12 verses 6-7:

“⁶ Remember him—before the silver cord is severed/and the golden bowl is broken;/before the pitcher is shattered at the spring/and the wheel broken at the well/⁷ and the dust returns to the ground it came from/and the spirit returns to God who gave it.”

What we have here, then, is an original and simple strand of thought that what happens when we die is that the physical part of us returns to the dust from which we were made. And the spiritual part of us, the “nefesh” that animates us returns to the God who provided it. And that, so to speak, is that – that's all there is to it. In this strand of thought there is no afterlife, merely the dissolution of the person who previously existed.

Around this strand of thought is woven a belief system that insists that all the rewards and punishments that we are to receive will be encountered in the life that we live between birth and the moment that we die and are dissolved. In this belief system there is no sense that the deeds and misdeeds that we conduct in our lifetime will have any consequence – either positive or negative – after our death. As it is said in Ecclesiastes 9:2-3:

“All share a common destiny – the righteous and the wicked, the good and the bad, the clean and the unclean, those who offer sacrifices and those who do not. As it is with the good, so with the sinful; as it is with those who take oaths, so with those who are afraid to take them. This is the evil in everything that happens under the sun. The same destiny overtakes all.”

Instead, there is a clear framework of thought which says, if we behave well, God will reward us while we live; and if we behave badly, He will seek us out and punish us. The rewards that we stand to gain in our lifetime are a long life, “full of years”, as is often said; wealth and property; but also a good name or reputation, and a large family and a strong line of inheritance which will keep that name alive through subsequent generations. These rewards come from living a life of wisdom, piety and integrity, of goodness towards other people, and observation of God’s laws and commandments.

However, for those who do not live this kind of life – but who victimise others, rob and cheat, commit murder, who generally disobey and scorn the laws and commandments of God – they will come to a sticky end; their crimes will catch up with them, and the consequences will afflict them in their lifetime, leading to a loss of possessions, a bad reputation, and an early death without loved ones to mourn and remember them.

This belief system is set out most clearly in the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, most especially in the books of Job, Ecclesiastes and Proverbs. Job in particular is a full outworking of this worldview: Job himself is a man of impeccable character whose wealth and family and good reputation are all viewed as the natural rewards of his excellent life, and he cannot understand why a good God would take those rewards away from him. Meanwhile, his companions can only conclude that, when Job loses these things, it must be as a result of some thing or things that he has done which fall short of the expectations of the God who sees and judges and immediately deals out just deserts.

Proverbs as a whole is shot through with statements which affirm this sense that wisdom is rewarded, and folly or wickedness brings about a different fate. For example, in 3:32-35:

“For the LORD detests the perverse/but takes the upright into his confidence.^{β3} The LORD’s curse is on the house of the wicked/but he blesses the home of the righteous.^{β4} He mocks proud mockers/but shows favour to the humble and oppressed.^{β5} The wise inherit honour/but fools get only shame.”

And again in Proverbs 28:18:

“The one whose walk is blameless is kept safe/but the one whose ways are perverse will fall into the pit.”

These basic strands of thinking exist in parallel, and are not entirely incompatible with another strand which recurs throughout the Old Testament. This strand talks about where the dead go after their death – and it involves a progression from the simple statement that dust returns to dust. It talks of the dead going down into the pit or the abyss – and there are two distinct Hebrew terms which are used for this destination, more or less interchangeably. They are:

- Vor – a word which appears 67 times in the Old Testament, including in Genesis 37 where it is used to describe the pit that Joseph’s brothers threw him into before they sold him off to the slave-traders who took him to Egypt, but also in Isaiah, Ezekiel and the Psalms
- Shachat – a word which appears 23 times in the Old Testament, most notably in Job 33, but also in the Psalms, Isaiah, Ezekiel and Jonah

These words are used literally to describe a hole in the ground, an underground chamber of some sort – often a well or a cistern to capture and retain water; but also a grave into which dead bodies were placed. In this respect, we know from archaeology that burial chambers were in common usage in Mesopotamian culture – holes in the ground lined with stone into which corpses were placed to

decompose. And so when the Old Testament talks of the dead going down into the pit, what it seems to refer to is the physical interment of the body in one of these chambers. After which it is assumed that dust will return to dust.

There is a third Hebrew word which is also used in similar contexts, and no fewer than 68 times in the Old Testament – and this is Kever. Kever is linguistically linked to Vor, but has a more specific and technical meaning: Kever is not any old hole in the ground where a dead body may be placed, but it is a hole with a distinct purpose. It means a grave, tomb or sepulchre – and so it offers a more precise description of the place where the dead go.

Because of the implications attached to these three words, they all have a metaphorical as well as a literal sense: by extension, they come to signify death, or the state of death, in its broader sense. For example, in recognition that the pit is a place of decomposition, Shachat is also commonly used as a word to indicate decay, corruption or destruction.

There is a fourth word to add to this collection, one which appears 64 times in the Old Testament, and this is Sheol. Sheol introduces a new strand, one which is a further progression of the idea of the destination of the dead: it advances us from the literalism wherein the life force departs us and returns to God, the dead body goes into a hole in the ground, maybe into a dedicated tomb, and then turns into dust. Like Kever, Sheol is very often translated as “the grave” – and, similarly, it can mean both the literal grave, a place in the ground where the dead body goes; and also, by extension, the general state of death, the state that we enter after our life force has gone.

But the usages of Sheol are many and various in the Old Testament – and these take us into new territory, and signify something substantially different than the simple, straightforward beliefs we have identified so far. Through these usages Sheol emerges as a domain in itself, a space where the dead go – but, once there, they do not simply dissolve into dust. Instead, they continue to exist in an altered state described as “refalm”, which is usually translated as “shades”, in the sense of ghosts or departed spirits. Thus, for example, in Job 26.5 where it is stated that *“The dead (harefalm) are in deep anguish/those beneath the waters and all that live in them;”* or in Proverbs 9.18, *“little do they know that the dead (Refalm) are there/that her guests are deep in Sheol”*.

Inherent within this is a new presumption that, in addition to the breath of God, the “nefesh”, and the dust of the earth, we comprise a third element, a separate and independent thing, something that we in the 21st century might recognise and describe as a soul. And it is this which, at the moment of death, descends into Sheol and become the “refalm”. We’ll come back to this in Week 3 and say a little bit more about the emergence of the soul as a feature of our humanity, and the place that it subsequently develops in Jewish and then Christian cosmology.

In the meantime, in Sheol, the continued existence of the “Refalm” after death is portrayed as empty:

- They have no meaningful consciousness or existence: according to Ecclesiastes 9.10, *“in Sheol where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom”*
- They are without strength or substance. Isaiah 14.10 has the shades greet new arrivals in Sheol with the words *“You also have become weak, as we are/you have become like us”*; while Psalm 88.3-4 says: *“... my life draws near to Sheol/I am counted among those who go down to the pit/I am like one without strength”*
- They remember nothing of their former lives. Psalm 6.5 says: *“For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise?”*

Sheol is definitely downwards – the authors of the Old Testament books talk consistently about going down into Sheol – and so a picture emerges that this domain is under the earth, in the same way that

the burial chambers that hold the bodies of the dead are under the earth. It is depicted as having a number of defining characteristics:

- It is the common destination of all who die. Job 30.23 says: *“I know you will bring me down to death/to the place appointed for all the living”*
- It is as deep below the earth as the heavens are above it. Isaiah 7.11 says: *“Ask a sign of the Lord your God: let it be as deep as Sheol or as high as the heavens”*
- It is a place of darkness and silence. Psalm 88.12 says: *“Are your wonders known in the darkness, or your saving help in the land of forgetfulness?”*
- Although it is a place of death, God has the power to enter it. In Amos 9.1-2, God says: *“Not one will get away/ none will escape./² Though they dig down to Sheol below/from there my hand will take them”*
- Once there, the dead do not return. In Job 7.9-10 it is said: *“As a cloud vanishes and is gone/ so one who goes down to Sheol does not return./¹⁰ He will never come to his house again;/his place will know him no more”*

But there are inconsistencies within the Old Testament’s portrayal of Sheol. For example, despite Sheol being depicted as the single, final and common destination for all the dead, it is in several places mentioned in tandem with another place, Abbadon; for example in Proverbs 27.20, where it is stated that *“Sheol and Abbadon are never satisfied/and neither are human eyes”*; or in Job 26.6, where before God’s all-seeing eye *“Sheol is naked before God/And Abbadon has no covering”*. The place and meaning of Abbadon is rather more obscure than that of Sheol: routinely translated as “destruction”, it seems to indicate almost a second level of Sheol, a place where the dead are not preserved as shades, or refalm, but are in fact eradicated entirely. For what reason, is not clear.

Also, despite the citations that suggest there is no man who can escape Sheol, there are in fact two in the Old Testament who do. The first is found in Genesis 5 in a list of patriarchs and their sons – Adam, Seth, Enosh, Kenan, Mahalalel, and so on, through to Noah – and their life spans, after each of which it is said simply that “and then he died”. The exception within this list is Enoch, of whom it is said in verse 24: *“he was no more, because God took him away.”* More of Enoch next week ...

The second man not to die is the prophet Elijah, of whom it is said in 2 Kings 2: *“As [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.¹² Elisha saw this and cried out, “My father! My father! The chariots and horsemen of Israel!” And Elisha saw him no more.”*

The fact that Elijah is said to go up to Heaven in a whirlwind injects a new consideration into the debate: it suggests that Sheol might not be the only destination for the dead, but there might be an alternative for the especially faithful or favoured; that is to say, a Heaven for God’s chosen people. The word used for Heaven here, “Shamayim”, has a distinct place in Hebrew cosmology. In this cosmology there are three levels: there is the earth, about which we know the most, which is called “Erets”. There is Sheol, which is below the earth, and which we now know to be the domain of the dead. And there are the heavens above the earth, which are “Shamayim”, a word whose etymology indicates that it is in the sky. Shamayim is plural, i.e., Heavens rather than Heaven, and is commonly stated to be the place where God lives, distinct from mankind on the earth.

But Elijah is the only individual in the whole of the Old Testament who is taken up into Shamayim at the end of his life – and so this appears to be the exception, rather than something which is a regular reward for those who are favoured by God. Others whom one might have expected to share the same privilege do not in fact do so: faithful patriarchs such as Noah, Abraham, Moses and company do not get the same treatment, at least not overtly.

While Noah is said simply to die in Genesis 9.29, there is a phrase used repeatedly of other patriarchs that at the time of their death they are “gathered to their ancestors”, or “gathered to their people”. This is the promise made by God to Abraham in Genesis 15, when he is told: “*You will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age*”. The fulfilment of this promise then follows in Genesis 25.8, which records that Abraham “*died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people*”.

Thereafter the same phrase is used across several of the early books of the Old Testament, in Genesis, Numbers, Deuteronomy, 1 Kings, Judges, and so on with application to the significant figures of the Old Testament – Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron and David – although it is also applied to the whole of Joshua’s generation in Judges 2.10. This usage has led some commentators to suggest that these faithful dead are bound for somewhere other than Sheol, a separate and better destination, which is afforded to them as a result of their virtue, or the favour of God; a place which their ancestors also occupy, as a result of their prior fidelity and good deeds.

However, this suggestion contradicts not only the strand we have been investigating which suggests that Sheol is the common destination for all, good or evil; but also what we have just said about Hebrew cosmology. Because, from what else we know about Shamayim, it is the Heaven in which God resides; it is not a place where the dead go after completing their lives on earth. And there is no fourth domain within Hebrew cosmology, in addition to the heavens, the earth and Sheol.

Perhaps a more realistic interpretation of this phrase “gathered to his ancestors” is a literal one. Such a sense emerges from consideration of Genesis chapters 49 and 50. Here we find both Jacob and Joseph on their respective death-beds, asking to be buried in the same cave as were Abraham, Isaac, Sarah, Rebekah and Leah. This suggests – and it is a suggestion that is borne out by archaeology – that the custom as far as was practicable was to bury the dead in family tombs, together with their ancestors, much as is found in churchyards today. It is a fairly short leap from here to infer that the phrase “gathered to his ancestors” refers simply to this custom, rather than anything more spiritual or metaphorical.

Notwithstanding this interpretation, the idea that there might actually be separate destinations for the faithful and the unfaithful dead does emerge elsewhere in the Old Testament, most notably in Ezekiel 32. Here there appears to be a distinction between the Israelite dead, the people of God, who go down to Sheol; and the uncircumcised dead, the Egyptians, the Elamites, the Sidonians, and other peoples who are distinct from God’s people, whose final resting place is not in Sheol, but in Vor, the pit. As with all such prophecies, the passage remains open to interpretation – but it does seem to represent quite a substantial departure from two strands that we have previously analysed: first, the belief that the dead go to Sheol, almost without exception; and second, the belief that there were no consequences after death for any of the deeds or misdeeds which were committed during a lifetime – but, instead, all the rewards and punishments were to be expected during that lifetime. In Ezekiel, the suggestion is that faith in God will be rewarded in the afterlife, while unbelief will lead to exclusion even from the realm of the dead. This is without doubt a new and contrary idea, the full significance of which will be revealed in the remainder of this series of talks.

To return to Enoch and Elijah and their avoidance of the fate that is ostensibly common to all men, there are also others in the Old Testament who escape Sheol and return from the dead – this despite Job 7.9-10 saying that it is a place of no return. There are three distinct classes of this escapism:

- The first is Jonah, who talks about being swallowed by the whale in terms which suggest that he to all intents and purposes died for a moment or moments, but was still able to pray to God who brought him back to life again. Jonah 2.1-2 says: “*From inside the fish Jonah prayed*”

to the LORD his God. He said: 'In my distress I called to the LORD/ and he answered me./From the depths of Sheol I called for help/and you listened to my cry.'"

- The second class of events is where the dead are undoubtedly dead, but then are brought back to life and live again. This happens three times in the Old Testament. The first is when the prophet Elijah prays for the son of the widow of Zarephath in 1 Kings 17:17–24, and God returns the “nefesh”, the life spirit to him. The second involves Elijah’s successor, Elisha, who raises the son of the Shunammite woman (2 Kings 4:32–37) whose birth he had previously foretold (2 Kings 4:8–16). And the third also involves Elisha, when a dead man is revived when his body is thrown into Elisha's tomb and touches the prophet’s bones (2 Kings 13:21)
- The third class of events is when the spirit, the shade of the dead prophet Samuel, his “refalm”, is summoned by the Witch of Endor in 1 Samuel 28 to prophesy to Saul. This is an episode frustratingly short of detail, but appears to be a kind of séance where the spirit is conjured up, consulted, and then returns to his resting place in Sheol

The first two mentioned classes of events are perhaps the first we hear in the Old Testament of the possibility of resurrection from the dead – albeit a very individual and circumstantial resurrection, one which relates to a return to the life that was lived prior to death. It seems to be this which is the hope of the psalmists, when they talk of God’s capability to lift them out of Sheol and restore them to the lives that they currently enjoy:

- Psalm 16.10: *“Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices/my body also will rest secure/because you will not abandon me to Sheol/nor will you let your faithful one see Shachat, or decay.”*
- Psalm 71.20: *“Though you have made me see troubles/many and bitter/you will restore my life again/from the depths of the earth/you will again bring me up.”*

This strand of belief that there is in fact a way back from Sheol can be seen in the later books of the Old Testament to evolve into something rather different – a strand which depicts the possibility not just of individual resurrection on a one-by-one basis, but of a corporate or collective resurrection of God’s people at some as yet unspecified stage in the future. This strand is found initially in opaque, prophetic passages such as:

- Isaiah 26.19: *“But your dead will live, LORD/ their bodies will rise/let those who dwell in the dust/ wake up and shout for joy/your dew is like the dew of the morning/the earth will give birth to her dead.”*
- Hosea 13.14: *“I will deliver this people from the power of Sheol/I will redeem them from death./Where, O death, are your plagues?/Where, O grave, is your destruction?”*

The strand then finds its most explicit and complete expression in the book of Daniel, in chapter 12, in the prophecy of the end times which ends the book, where it is said:

“At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people—everyone whose name is found written in the book—will be delivered. ² Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt. ³ Those who are wise will shine like the brightness of the heavens, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars for ever and ever. ⁴ But you, Daniel, roll up and seal the words of the scroll until the time of the end. Many will go here and there to increase knowledge.”

This is in many ways an extraordinary passage, a remarkable development of thinking on a par with that which we noted in Ezekiel 32 a moment ago. It is remarkable in that it creates a narrative which unites and surpasses the various strands that we have been considering in the breadth of its vision. It

takes three of the ideas that we have looked at – the continued existence of the dead in an altered state in Sheol, the possibility of a corporate resurrection, and the potential separation after death of the faithful and unfaithful dead – and it expands them while at the same time introducing a number of new or confirmatory elements: a time of tribulation, the deliverance of the people, the awakening of the dead prior to their judgement and separation, some to eternal life and light, others to condemnation.

One might with some justification ask where these new ideas have come from. We know that the book of Daniel was written quite late compared to other Old Testament books, around the second century BC. This allowed it to benefit from full consideration of other passages in the Old Testament, such as Isaiah 65-66 and Malachi 3.17-4.3. These prophesy that apocalyptic events will occur at some stage in the future which will create a new heaven and a new earth, and which will foreshadow God's people living in peace and harmony with each other inside an altered state of existence; but this will also involve a judgement or a separation which appears in Malachi's words as follows:

"You will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not. Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire."

In Isaiah, this same separation, and the aftermath of it, is described as follows in 66.22-24:

"As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me," declares the LORD, "so will your name and descendants endure."²³ From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me," says the LORD. ²⁴ "And they will go out and look on the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; the worms that eat them will not die, the fire that burns them will not be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind."

What the writer of the book of Daniel has done is to weave these ideas together with the strands which we have previously identified, to create an all-embracing theory of everything which leads through to the end of time.

So how can we sum up what we've talked about tonight? Steve Chalke did so as follows: " ... we reach the end of the Old Testament – the Hebrew Bible – with no clear or firm ideas about the afterlife or what its purpose is, and no depictions of anything much to be dreaded ... It may have been vague, but the Jewish people had the idea that there was hope rather than damnation beyond the underworld; they were after all the people that God loved and had chosen."

Our whistle-stop tour of the Old Testament has drawn out a multiplicity of strands of belief about what happens to us when we die. We have seen an original strand saying that dust returns to dust, that there is no afterlife, but that all man's just deserts are meted out to him during his lifetime, good and bad. Another strand saying that the first step is into the pit or the grave; then another that these graves collectively comprise a domain beneath the earth called Sheol where the dead continue to exist in some shadowy form; and this strand coupled with the emergence of a belief that we actually comprise not two but three elements – the dust from which we are made, the life-breath from God, and a separate, independent element that we might recognise as a soul. Then another strand that Sheol has not one but two levels, including its associate Abaddon, which implies ultimate destruction of the dead in a way that Sheol does not.

We have also seen suggestions that there might be alternative destinations for the dead, distinct from Sheol; not a Heaven as such, as we might understand it, but certainly the possibility of a separate domain for the faithful dead. We have also seen beliefs that the dead can in fact rise again, either as spirits conjured up by the living, or through a process of resurrection or revivification. And we have

lastly seen a new and rapidly developing narrative that death is the precursor to a corporate resurrection of the dead at the end of time at God's command, and a sorting which will lead some to eternal life, and some to shame and contempt.

If these strands indicate a variance of belief systems, some of which are complementary, some apparently contradictory, then we know that this was indeed the case among the Jews of antiquity. We know from the writings of the Jewish historian Josephus that by his time in the first century AD, shortly after Jesus's ministry, there were at least three separate schools of thought about the afterlife, and that these were distinctive between three of the main Jewish sects:

- First the Sadducees, the caste from whom the majority of priests were drawn, who believed simply that there was no afterlife, but that death was the end. Here Josephus's account is supported by Luke's statement in Acts 23.9 that: *"The Sadducees say that there is no resurrection, and that there are neither angels nor spirits"*
- Second, the Pharisees, who according to Josephus *"say that all souls are incorruptible, but that the souls of good men only are removed into other bodies, but that the souls of bad men are subject to eternal punishment"*
- Third, the Essenes, who teach that *"souls are immortal, and continue forever; and that they come out of the most subtle air, and are united to their bodies as to prisons, into which they are drawn by a certain natural enticement; but that when they are set free from the bonds of the flesh, they then, as released from a long bondage, rejoice and mount upward"*

Given that other contemporary historians state that there were not three but seven Jewish sects, and that the Talmud states that there were as many as 24 in the first century AD, one might easily conclude that these differences of belief were probably multiplied and magnified across those sections of the Jewish population who were inclined and able to reflect on these things.

Whatever the truth of the situation, it will undoubtedly be complex. And it's that thought that I want to leave you with, before next week we go on to consider the message that the Gospels convey about the afterlife. Because that message sits on the foundation of this multiplicity of emerging beliefs and strands of thinking that we have discussed tonight – and so a large extent it needs to be considered in that context ... [ENDS]