

Death in Biblical Israel

1. Die in peace at a good old age, go to ancestors, be buried with ancestors

Genesis 15:¹³ Then the LORD said to Abram, ‘Know this for certain, that your offspring shall be aliens in a land that is not theirs, and shall be slaves there, and they shall be oppressed for four hundred years; ¹⁴but I will bring judgement on the nation that they serve, and afterwards they shall come out with great possessions. ¹⁵As for yourself, you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.

Genesis 25:⁷ This is the length of Abraham’s life, one hundred and seventy-five years.

⁸Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. ⁹His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, ¹⁰the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with his wife Sarah.

2. Die violently by the sword and remain unburied

1 Samuel 31: ²The Philistines overtook Saul and his sons; and the Philistines killed Jonathan and Abinadab and Malchishua, the sons of Saul. ³The battle pressed hard upon Saul; the archers found him, and he was badly wounded by them. ⁴Then Saul said to his armour-bearer, ‘Draw your sword and thrust me through with it, so that these uncircumcised may not come and thrust me through, and make sport of me.’ But his armour-bearer was unwilling; for he was terrified. So Saul took his own sword and fell upon it. ⁵When his armour-bearer saw that Saul was dead, he also fell upon his sword and died with him. ⁸The next day, when the Philistines came to strip the dead, they found Saul and his three sons fallen on Mount Gilboa. ⁹They cut off his head, stripped off his armour, and sent messengers throughout the land of the Philistines to carry the good news to the houses of their idols and to the people. ¹⁰They put his armour in the temple of Astarte; and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan.

3. Descend to Sheol in death

Genesis 37:³³ He recognized it, and said, ‘It is my son’s robe! A wild animal has devoured him; Joseph is without doubt torn to pieces.’ ³⁴Then Jacob tore his garments, and put sackcloth on his loins, and mourned for his son for many days. ³⁵All his sons and all his daughters sought to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted, and said, ‘No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.’ Thus his father bewailed him.

4. No remembrance or praise of God in Sheol

Job 10:²⁰ ‘Are not the days of my life few?

Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort

²¹ before I go, never to return,

to the land of gloom and deep darkness,

²² the land of gloom and chaos,

where light is like darkness.’

Ecclesiastes 9:¹⁰ Whatever your hand finds to do, do with all your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going. ⁵The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing; they have no more reward, and even the memory of them is lost. ⁶Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished; never again will they have any share in all that happens under the sun.

Psalm 6: ⁴ Turn, O LORD, save my life;
deliver me for the sake of your steadfast love.
⁵ For in death there is no remembrance of you;
in Sheol who can give you praise?

5. No one escapes death or Sheol

Psalm 89: ⁴⁶How long, O LORD? Will you hide yourself forever?
How long will your wrath burn like fire?
⁴⁷ Remember how short my time is—
for what vanity you have created all mortals!
⁴⁸ Who can live and never see death?
Who can escape the power of Sheol?

Psalm 39: ⁴ ‘LORD, let me know my end,
and what is the measure of my days;
let me know how fleeting my life is.
⁵ You have made my days a few handbreadths,
and my lifetime is as nothing in your sight.
Surely everyone stands as a mere breath.
⁶ Surely everyone goes about like a shadow.

6. The same fate awaits the good and the evil, the wise and the foolish

Psalm 49: ¹⁰When we look at the wise, they die;
fool and dolt perish together
and leave their wealth to others.
¹¹ Their graves are their homes for ever,
their dwelling-places to all generations,
though they named lands their own.
¹² Mortals cannot abide in their pomp;
they are like the animals that perish.

Ecclesiastes 3: ¹⁹For the fate of humans and the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and humans have no advantage over the animals; for all is vanity. ²⁰All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again.

Ecclesiastes 9: ²The same fate comes to all, to the righteous and the wicked, to the good and the evil, to the clean and the unclean, to those who sacrifice and those who do not sacrifice. ³This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone.