

The Urban Well

The Mercy Seminar 2026, Term II.1

Opening Comments

Welcome to Term 2 of the 2026 Mercy Seminar! Last term, we looked at the understanding of life in the light of death in the Hindu and Buddhist traditions. This term we turn our attention to the understanding of life in the light of death in the Israelite, Jewish, and Muslim traditions, beginning with Biblical Israel. The selections from tonight are likely quite familiar to most of us, as they come from the Scriptures that are common to the Jewish and Christian traditions. However, I have chosen to focus exclusively on them for our first session, for their understanding of life and death is dramatically different than that of the subsequent Jewish and Christian traditions. In the readings for next week, we will see why this should be so, for the expectation of life after death comes by means of a very late development in Israel's history, about 170 years before the birth of Jesus.

The first selection in tonight's readings comes from the beginning of the book of Genesis. My point in looking at this reading is not to examine the origin of sin, or who is most responsible for sin, but rather to see that according to Israel's self-understanding, human beings were created from the dust of the ground, and receive life when God breathes the breath of life into them. This means that humans are inherently mortal by their creation, and only live when God breathes life into them. We see this view echoed in Ecclesiastes: in death "the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it." There was an additional blessing in the garden, which was the tree of life, and it seems that humans could have avoided death in the garden were they to have been able to eat the fruit of the tree of life. However, God tells the man and the woman in the garden not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil (which can also be translated good and evil knowledge), for on the day they eat of it they will die. The serpent tells the woman that she will not die, but will become like God, knowing good and evil. Interestingly, they do not die when they eat this fruit, and God even acknowledges that they have "become like one of us." However, this is precisely why God expels them from the garden and keeps them away from the tree of life.

²² Then the LORD God said, "See, the humans have become like one of us, knowing good and evil, and now they might reach out their hands and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever"—²³ therefore the LORD God sent them forth from the garden of Eden, to till the ground from which they were taken. ²⁴ He drove out the humans, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a sword flaming and turning to guard the way to the tree of life.

It is interesting to note that the man and woman would have been able to live forever had they not come to know good and evil; but once they do, and become like God, they are denied the possibility of living forever. The limitation of human life by death thus seems to be intended by God to keep human beings humble, and to keep them from transgressing the boundary between human beings and God. We see this dynamic yet again when angelic beings called “sons of God” mate with the daughters of human beings, thereby threatening to cross the line between human and divine life. “Then the LORD said, ‘My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years.’” This of course is not a hard and fast number, as Noah is said to have lived to be nine hundred and fifty years old, and Abraham is said to have lived until he was one hundred seventy-five. However, by the time we get to the Psalms, we are in more familiar territory, where one can hope to live seventy to eighty years. It seems therefore that the further humans get from the time of their creation, the more the spirit of life diminishes in them. However, the understanding of death as a limit on human life, preserving the boundary between God and humans, endures throughout Israel’s history. As one of our Psalms for tonight reminds us, “You turn us back to dust, and say, ‘Turn back, you mortals.’” (see Ezekiel 31:14)

Even though all human beings are turned back to dust, Israel makes a clear distinction between a blessed death and one that is not blessed. In a blessed death, one lives to a good old age, dies in peace, and is buried with one’s ancestors. Thus, even though God tells Abraham that his descendants will be enslaved in Egypt, he nonetheless promises him, “you shall go to your ancestors in peace; you shall be buried in a good old age.” And this is exactly what happens:

⁷ This is the length of Abraham’s life, one hundred and seventy-five years. ⁸ Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years, and was gathered to his people. ⁹ His sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron son of Zohar the Hittite, east of Mamre, ¹⁰ the field that Abraham purchased from the Hittites. There Abraham was buried, with his wife Sarah.

We see the same manner of death and burial with Jacob: he dies in peace, in the presence of his sons, and is gathered to his people. His sons bury him where Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebekah, and Leah were buried. The one exception to this pattern is Moses. Moses does not die at a good old age in the presence of his sons; he dies alone at the command of God. He is not buried with his ancestors, he is buried by God, and no one knows where he is buried to this day. His death came in response to his sin in the wilderness, which meant he could not enter the land of Canaan; but the unusual circumstances of his death also reveal his intimate relationship with God. As Deuteronomy tells us: “Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face.” The other exceptions are Enoch and Elijah, both of whom are taken up directly to heaven without first dying. However, these events are singular, as no other Israelites ever expect to be taken directly to heaven.

If a blessed death involves dying in peace at a good old age in the presence of one’s children, who then bury you with your ancestors, then dying by the sword in the prime of life, after seeing your sons killed by your enemies, only to be left unburied, is a horror every Israelite would want to avoid. We see this

kind of death portrayed in the cases of Saul and Jezebel. After seeing his sons killed by the Philistines, Saul commits suicide, and the Philistines cut off his head. “They put his armour in the temple of Astarte; and they fastened his body to the wall of Beth-shan.” After this, however, the men of Jabesh-Gilead come to bury Saul and his sons. The same kind of death awaits Jezebel, the wife of King Ahab of Israel, who brought the worship of Baal to Israel during the time of Elijah. She is flung from a window to her death, and before she can be buried, dogs come to eat her flesh, so that “they found no more of her than the skull and the feet and the palms of her hands.” Jeremiah tells the people of Jerusalem that the same fate awaits them, because of their persistent worship of other gods besides YHWH. “The corpses of this people will be food for the birds of the air, and for the animals of the earth; and no one will frighten them away.”

However, it is important to note that the way one dies does not determine where one goes after death. We are quite accustomed to think of God judging all of us when we die, with the righteous going to heaven and the wicked going to hell, but this is not the case in Biblical Israel. Even though Saul dies violently by the sword and lies unburied, he descends to the same place that Abraham does. The Israelites call this place Sheol, or the Pit. This is where their ancestors are, and when they die, they expect to be gathered to them there. This is why when Jacob’s sons deceive him and convince him that his beloved son Joseph is dead, Jacob wants to die, so that he can see Joseph again in Sheol. Sheol is best described in the passage in the reading from Job, where Job tells God: “Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort before I go, never to return, to the land of gloom and deep darkness, the land of gloom and chaos, where light is like darkness.” The dead in Sheol may be gathered to their ancestors, but they lose all contact with the living, which the book of Ecclesiastes makes devastatingly clear.

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.

It is also clear from the testimony of ancient Israel that the dead also lose all contact with God. As one of the Psalmists tells God: “For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who can give you praise?” King Hezekiah reminds God of this condition of the dead when he is told by the prophet Isaiah that he will die. “For Sheol cannot thank you, death cannot praise you; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for your faithfulness. The living, the living, they thank you, as I do this day; fathers make known to children your faithfulness.” Another psalmist reminds God of the same limitation in death, indicating that the primary purpose of living is to thank God, to praise God, and to tell of God’s faithfulness, especially to one’s children. “To you, O LORD, I cried, and to the LORD I made supplication: ‘What profit is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it tell of your faithfulness?’”

However, even though God may extend the days of one's life through God's grace and mercy, as God did for Hezekiah, this does not mean that any Israelite will escape their destiny in Sheol. "Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol?" It is therefore essential that one keep in mind the horizon of one's own death, as there is no way of escaping it. "LORD, let me know my end, and what is the measure of my days; let me know how fleeting my life is." Being mindful of the horizon of death gives rise to humility and wisdom, for it reveals yet again the difference between the life of humans and the life of God.

- ³ You turn us back to dust,
and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.'
- ⁴ For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.
- ⁵ You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
- ⁶ in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.
- ¹⁰ The days of our life are seventy years,
or perhaps eighty, if we are strong;
even then their span is only toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away.
- ¹² So teach us to count our days
that we may gain a wise heart.

Wisdom does not save us from death, for the wise die just like fools. However, being mindful of the coming day of death keeps the wise appropriately humble, unlike those who think their wealth and reputation will spare them from death and Sheol. "Mortals cannot abide in their pomp; they are like the animals that perish." And this equality with animals, with whom humans share the experience of mortality, is one of the main reasons that the author of Ecclesiastes thinks that all is vanity and a chasing after the wind. "For 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. All go to one place; all are from the dust, and all turn to dust again." As we shall see next week, it will become increasingly vexing for Israel to remember that the fate of the righteous is the same as the fate of the wicked. As Ecclesiastes says:

Everything that confronts them is vanity, since the 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. As are the good, so are the sinners; those who swear are like those who shun an oath. This is an evil in all that happens under the sun, that the same fate comes to everyone.