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**TABLE
OF
CONTENTS**

FIVE THEMES OF THE PENTATEUCH	138
By Justin Nash	
SHEOL: THE OLD TESTAMENT CONSENSUS	162
By Rev. Jefferson Vann	
SET APART FOR DESTRUCTION	171
By Rev. Jefferson Vann	
PERISH THE THOUGHT	176
By Rev. Jefferson Vann	
SPOILING THE VINEYARD	181
By Rev. Jefferson Vann	
SWEPT AWAY	185
By Rev. Jefferson Vann	
THE END AND THE BEGINNING	192
(Looking ahead to issue XLV/1)	
By Rev. Jefferson Vann	

FIVE THEMES OF THE PENTATEUCH

By Justin Nash

Introduction

The first five books of the Bible (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) comprise the Pentateuch. These books are also sometimes referred to as the “Torah” or the “Law of Moses.” The word *Pentateuch* is Greek for “five books,” and these books cover ancient history spanning from the creation of the world (Gen. 1:1) until the death of Moses (Deut. 34).¹ Some scholars believe that even though they have been transmitted in five books, they are, in fact, one book.² Authorship of the Pentateuch has been debated for some time. Many source critics have adopted the Documentary Hypothesis in explaining the origins of the Pentateuch. This view posits:

[T]he Pentateuch derives from four documentary sources ... (1) a Yahwist (J) source, written in the south (Judah) in early monarchical times, (2) an Elohist (E) source, written in the north (Israel) somewhat later (these two sources being combined at some point, a combination referred to as JE), (3) a Deuteronomic (D) source, understood as the book of the law found in the temple during the Josianic reforms in 621 B.C.E., and (4) a Priestly (P) source, which was originally thought to be post-Exilic. These four sources were then combined by a Redactor (R) to form the Pentateuch in the form we know it today.³

¹ Gordon T. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 1.

² Joshua E. Williams, “The Message of the Pentateuch” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 52, no. 1 (2009): 2. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost (accessed February 4, 2018).

³ Kevin L. Barney, “Reflections on the Documentary Hypothesis,” *Dialogue* 33, no. 1 (2000): 58. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed February 2, 2018).

The traditional view of Pentateuchal authorship views Moses as the primary author of the Pentateuch. This is the view this essay will work from for a number of reasons. First, it is acknowledged that the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch was the traditional opinion of the Jews. Abundant evidence of this can be seen in the Old Testament, where Moses is credited with the material in the Pentateuch (e.g., 2 Kings 18:6; 2 Chron. 8:13; Ezra 3:2; 6:18; 7:6; Neh. 8:1, 18; Dan. 9:11, 13; Mal. 4:4). Further, the Pentateuch credits Moses as its author (e.g., Ex. 24:4; 17:14; Deut. 31:9, 24-25). More importantly, the Lord Jesus avers Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch (e.g., Matt. 8:4; 19:7-8; Mark 12:26; Luke 5:14; John 8:5).⁴

Given a common author and a singular work of literature, it would be expected to find the books unified by an overall plot with common literary and thematic threads running through the books.⁵ That is exactly what is found with each book building upon the previous to advance the “big” story of Scripture. Five key theological themes are seen in the Pentateuch: 1) God, 2) the world, 3) humanity, 4) sin and 5) salvation.⁶

God

The Pentateuch reveals a great deal about who God is and what he is like. Two major aspects of God’s ontological nature are prominent in the Pentateuch:

1. *Transcendence*. This means that God is “separated from and independent of nature and humanity. God is not simply attached to, or involved in, his creation.”⁷ This is seen clearly in

⁴ William Henry Green, *The Higher Criticism of the Pentateuch* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1895), 31-39, PDF (accessed February 3, 2018).

⁵ Williams, loc. cit.

⁶ T. Desmond Alexander and David Baker, *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 846.

⁷ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1994), 312.

Genesis 1:1 where “God created the heavens and the earth.”⁸ The idea of God’s transcendence is foundational to the Pentateuch conception of God.⁹

2. *Immanence*. This means God is within or present to the entire universe.¹⁰ This idea is found throughout Scripture (e.g., Psalm 139:7-10) and especially in the Pentateuch as God speaks and interacts with humans (e.g., Gen. 1:28; 4:6-7; 6:13; Ex. 3:4-6; Num. 12:8).

The World

The world is understood to be the entirety of God’s creation, “the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). God spoke the creation into being from nothing, and his creation was perfect, or as God called it, “good” (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). This creation was distinct from its Creator. The goodness of God’s creation was a reflection of his own goodness.¹¹ This creation was fully a result of God’s will and desire. He had no need for this creation.¹²

Humanity

Humans were created on the sixth day of creation along with the other land animals (Gen. 1:24-27). Yet humans were different from animals in one very important way: they were created in the image of God (v. 27). This idea of “image” meant that, unlike the rest of creation, humans were in some way like God. Mankind, therefore, became the pinnacle of God’s creation. And because humans are made in the image of God and the divine character is to be manifest in their lives, God uses humans to advance the knowledge of himself.¹³

⁸ Unless otherwise specified, all Bible references are to the English Standard Version (ESV) (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001).

⁹ Alexander and Baker, loc. cit.

¹⁰ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology: God Creation* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2003), 527. Hereafter abbreviated GC.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹² Alexander and Baker, 163.

¹³ Erickson, 456.

Sin

God's perfect humanity falls in the third chapter of Genesis and brings sin and its consequences into the world. Sin can be defined as "any offense against life as God designed it. It is to miss the target that God designed for humanity, whether intentionally or unintentionally; it is the expression of an inner twist- edness; it is finally to step over the bounds God has defined for humanity."¹⁴ This sin would lead to both spiritual death (separation from God) and physical death.¹⁵ These consequences would fall not only on Adam and Eve, but on their descendants and the entire creation as well (Romans 5:12; 8:20-23). God's perfectly ordered creation was now in chaos.

Salvation

God was not content to leave his beloved creation in such a disordered and deadly state. So God's plan to redeem and return it to its Edenic state begins early in the Pentateuch. In Genesis 3:15, God curses the serpent and promises, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel." This is the first proclamation of the good news of God's mission to redeem the world and return it to the perfect order with which He created it. This redemptive narrative can be seen throughout Scripture. The foundations for this saving work are laid in the Pentateuch. *Covenant* and *Law* are two key concepts in the Pentateuch that are foundational to this redemptive plan.

God

God's immanence (nearness) and transcendence (distance) speak of his relationship to his creation. They should not be

¹⁴ Alexander and Baker, 856.

¹⁵ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology: Sin Salvation*. (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2003), 122. Hereafter abbreviated SS.

thought of as attributes of God. Rather, they should be seen as aspects of God's being that cut across his various attributes. These two ideas must be kept in balance, and each must be seen in light of the other or a biblical and orthodox view of God will be lost.¹⁶

God is self-existent. He is not derived from someone or something else, and his being is not contingent upon anyone or anything else.¹⁷ The fact of God's transcendence is immediately expressed in the Pentateuch. Genesis 1:1 states, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." God was "in the beginning." There was nothing before him — he is self-existent. This is made even more explicit in Moses' encounter with God in Exodus 3:13-15. When asked his name, God replies, "I AM WHO I AM." In verse 15, God then declares, "This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations." In this exchange, God makes it clear that he always has been, is and always will be who he is. God is not being evasive, he "defines himself as the One who Is, who exists, who is real."¹⁸ God's transcendence is made explicit in this passage.

God's transcendence is seen clearly in his divine attribute of holiness. Holy "describes that which sets apart the divine, and that which pertains to the divine, from the common or ordinary. It describes God's otherness."¹⁹ Words having to do with holiness occur more than 200 times in the book of Leviticus.²⁰ Leviticus follows the Israelites' encounter with God on Mt. Sinai where he declares himself their God and them his people. Leviticus looks to address the question of how that covenant relationship was to be maintained.²¹ At least in part, therefore, Leviticus seeks a

¹⁶ Erickson, 302.

¹⁷ Alexander and Baker, 847.

¹⁸ E. Schild, "On Exodus 3:14 - 'I am that I am'" *Vetus Testamentum* 4, no. 3 (1954): 301. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials, EBSCOhost (accessed February 2, 2018).

¹⁹ Alexander and Baker, 849.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 850.

²¹ William Sanford Lasor et al., *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 80.

solution for bridging the gap between a transcendent God and his creation.

The book of Numbers advances the relationship between the wholly other God and his people. One of the truly remarkable events recorded in this book is God making his presence visually known to the Israelites in Numbers 9:15: “On the day that the tabernacle was set up, the cloud covered the tabernacle, the tent of the testimony. And at evening it was over the tabernacle like the appearance of fire until morning.” Here, God’s transcendence and immanence meet as the wholly other God condescends to give his people a sign of his dwelling in their midst. These visual phenomena not only acted as a constant reminder of God’s presence, but they also served as a guide to the movement of the nation (Num. 9:17-23).

Deuteronomy repeats many of the laws, including the Ten Commandments, which are found in the four previous books of the Pentateuch. But, it also recounts God’s dealings with his covenant people, Israel, and what they can expect as they enter the Promised Land.²² As a result, the concept of God choosing Israel as his covenant people is a pervasive idea in the book of Deuteronomy. This concept originates in God’s calling of Abraham in Genesis 12.²³ The point of this is that God chose Israel — they didn’t choose him. They couldn’t choose him as he is transcendent.²⁴ Man cannot work his way to a right relationship with God. In the Pentateuch, the wholly other God chooses his covenant people as an act of his grace and love.

God’s immanence is also seen in the idea of God’s divine election of Israel. His election displays his unfailing love (Hebrew *hesed*) for his people. *Hesed* “speaks of the favor given to someone who does not have a right to that favor by someone who does not have to give that favor.”²⁵ Moses reminds the people that God is their Redeemer who has drawn near and now speaks, guides and protects (Deut. 1:29-31).

²² Wenham, 123.

²³ Lasor, 120.

²⁴ Erickson, 315.

²⁵ Alexander and Baker, 850.

God's nearness is also seen in Numbers. In Numbers 12:8, God says of Moses, "With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly, and not in riddles, and he beholds the form of the Lord." The wholly other God draws near and reveals himself to one of his people in a way that was clear and easy for Moses to understand — God spoke to him using words. But this relationship is not a monologue. In Numbers 14, God consults with Moses regarding what to do with the rebellious nation that was refusing to receive the Promised Land. Then, in verse 13, Moses spoke to the Lord and the Lord listened.

This pattern of the Lord revealing himself in words is especially apparent in Leviticus. Twenty of the 27 chapters begin with the phrase "the LORD spoke to Moses." This speaking was especially important because sinful people needed to know how to dwell in the presence of a holy and transcendent God who would draw near to the tabernacle in their midst. In Leviticus, God offers a detailed prescription to allow his people to avoid one of the effects of their sin: estrangement from himself. This would be made possible through the acts of atonement God delivered to his people (chaps. 1-9, 16).²⁶ As a result of the Levitical codes, the people of Israel had a means to reconcile themselves to the God who had redeemed them and drawn near.

In Exodus, God redeems his people from their slavery in Egypt, visiting them after more than 400 years of silence. In delivering Israel, God displays his sovereignty as absolute ruler over all creation, even using the free, sinful choices of a human leader (Pharaoh) to accomplish his will. The Lord was near enough to hear and see his people (2:24-25), and he drew even nearer to intervene on their behalf (chaps. 4-14). Finally, at Mt. Sinai, the Lord deepens the commitment he made with Abraham and his descendants by covenanting with Israel to be a "kingdom of priests and a holy nation" who would display God's glory in the world (19:1-6).

In Genesis, while God is clearly distinct from his creation, he is still near it — as Genesis 1:2 states, "The earth was without

²⁶ Ibid., 855.

form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters.” God would draw even nearer to his penultimate creation: man. He walked and talked with Adam and Eve (2:16; 3:8-19). The Lord further connects himself with man by making covenants with Noah (9:11-13) and Abraham (chaps. 15, 17). It would be through the covenant with Abraham that God would advance his plan to redeem his creation through the promised seed, Jesus Christ. The transcendent God drew near to Abraham through a covenant so that one day, creation would be redeemed and the dwelling place of God would be with man. “He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Rev. 21:3).

The World

In the previous section, the immanence and transcendence of God were discussed. This lesson will focus on God’s creative work in the world. Dr. Norman Geisler has suggested that God’s immanence and transcendence could be thought of as who God is (his attributes) and creation could be viewed as what God does (his activity).²⁷ God’s good creation is central to the theology of the Pentateuch and indeed the entire Bible, for it is the good creation that was corrupted at the fall that God is seeking to restore. In “Creation and Salvation,” Walter Wegner asserts:

These first chapters of the Bible, then, including the creation accounts, are not intended merely to explain how the world came to be but rather why Israel had to be and why in the person of Jesus Christ the Creator Himself had to enter the world of His creation in order to seek and to find His rebellious creatures and to bring them back to Him in gracious love.²⁸

²⁷ Geisler, GC, 14.

²⁸ Walter Wegner, “Creation and Salvation: A Study of Genesis 1 and 2” *Concordia Theological Monthly* 37, no. 8 (September 1966): 536. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost (accessed February 3, 2018).

“In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen. 1:1). In this verse the word “create” (Hebrew *bara*) is used to describe how God created the material universe. This is a description of creation out of nothing (*ex nihilo*). God did not use preexisting materials to create all things (as atheistic materialism teaches), nor did he break off a piece of himself to create the world (as pantheism teaches).²⁹ The Pentateuch establishes that the creation is distinct from the Creator. As a result, he is in no way contingent upon its existence, but the creation is completely contingent upon its Creator.³⁰

God declared his creation “good” in the first chapter of Genesis (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). The ancient Near East cultures of the Bible viewed creation not primarily in terms of making things. Instead, they understood acts of divine creation as bringing order and equilibrium out of chaos. With that in view, it could be understood that God “set up the cosmos to serve as His temple in which He will find rest in the order and equilibrium He has created.”³¹

However, in Genesis 3, God’s highest creation (humans) rebel against their Creator and bring chaos and disorder to God’s perfectly ordered cosmos. It is here that God’s true commitment to his creation can be seen, and it also establishes what Wegner calls “a schematic pattern of sin, judgment and grace” that “constitutes the story of creation with the giving of the promise to Abraham.”³² God does not immediately destroy Adam and Eve, nor does he destroy the creation and simply start over. Instead, he shows them grace by preserving them. God is committed to making this creation “good” again. This motif is seen again in Genesis 6:5-8 where humanity had become so wicked that God regretted his decision to create them. Therefore, he determined to destroy all the living creatures on the land. But even here, God’s grace is displayed. Noah and his family find favor in God’s

²⁹ Geisler, *ibid.*, 441-443.

³⁰ Alexander and Baker, 855.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 161.

³² Wegner, 532.

eyes. God preserves Noah, his family and the animals in the ark. God was committed to redeeming his creation, not destroying it. Noah became a second Adam of sorts. This can be seen clearly in God's command to Noah and his sons to "be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth," a direct reference to God's command to Adam and Eve in the garden of Eden (Gen. 1:28). God's commitment and desire was to redeem his creation and to do it through humanity who introduced sin into the creation. This concept continues the fleshing out of the promise God made of "the seed of the woman" who would one day crush the serpent's head (Gen. 3:15).

The next step in God's redemptive plan is seen in God's two-fold promise to Abraham in Genesis 12:2. The first promise (v. 2a) is the promise of nationhood (heirs and inheritance), and the second is the promise that Abraham would be a blessing to all nations. These promises are ratified in the distinct but related covenants of Genesis 15 and 17.³³ In Genesis 15, God makes a unilateral covenant in which Abraham is promised heirs (v. 5) and land (vv. 18-20) for those heirs. In Genesis 17, the covenant is that Abraham will be "the father of a multitude of nations" (v. 4). This covenant points to the final redemption that comes through Jesus Christ (v. 7). However, the enduring covenant of Genesis 17 is dependent upon the fulfillment of the temporal covenant of Genesis 15 (fulfilled once the nation had taken possession of the land).³⁴ All of this points to a new covenant which will finally and fully redeem God's good creation.

The concept of creation is central to the book of Exodus as well.³⁵ "Exodus 1:7 also establishes a connection between the growth of the Israelites in Egypt and the divine word in creation. That is to say, God's redemptive work on behalf of Israel stands in the service of God's intentions for the creation as a whole."³⁶

³³ Lionel Windsor, *The Fulfilment of the Covenants: An Acovenantal Perspective on Paul* (St. Michael's Anglican Church, 2006), 10.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁵ Alexander and Baker, 252.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 250.

As Israel suffered in slavery to Pharaoh in Egypt, God heard his people cry out for relief, and he sent Moses to deliver them from bondage. The plagues God unleashes on Egypt in Exodus 7-10 show his absolute rule over his creation. This is not a struggle between Moses and Pharaoh — it is a struggle between the gods of Egypt and the God of Israel.³⁷

God rescues his people from Egypt and leads them into the wilderness where he meets with them at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 19). Here God mediates a new covenant with Israel through Moses, which renews God's covenant with Abraham and reestablishes his relationship with Israel.³⁸ Wegner's pattern of sin, judgment and grace soon becomes evident once again in Exodus 32. The people, when they saw Moses was delayed, colluded with Aaron to create a god for them to worship. When later confronted with his culpability in all of this, Aaron's "mea culpa" was evasive and a bit comical. In Exodus 32:24, Aaron tells Moses, "So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf." The people sin horribly, breaking the first commandment before Moses even delivers it, and God does bring judgment in the form of a plague (Ex. 32:35), but he relents and shows grace to Israel by not destroying the whole lot of them. God shows grace to Israel so that the whole world might know Israel's God as he blesses the cosmos by redeeming it. This is made clear in Exodus 9:16 when he says, "But for this purpose I have raised you up, to show you my power, so that my name may be proclaimed in all the earth."

In the closing chapters of Exodus, the people build God's tabernacle according to Moses' instructions. The book of Leviticus instructs the Israelites how they are to approach God in the tabernacle worship. It also offers God's moral standards for his people.³⁹ This was exceptionally important because God had manifested his presence at the tabernacle in a glorious way, thus announcing his dwelling with his people. The laws and proce-

³⁷ Wenham, 61.

³⁸ Alexander and Baker, 249.

³⁹ Frank E. Gaebelain, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers*, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 502.

dures of Leviticus addressed how sinful men were able to dwell in fellowship with a holy God. Exodus 25-40 echoes Genesis 1-2 and depicts the tabernacle as “a partial return to the garden of Eden and Yahweh’s indwelling presence as the location and essence of creation’s blessing.”⁴⁰ In the beginning, Adam and Eve were holy as God was holy and thus had perfect fellowship with him. After the fall, sin made that fellowship no longer possible. By pointing the Israelites back to creation, and humanity’s initial holiness, the book of Leviticus also foreshadowed the new creation when the dwelling place of God would be with man: “He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God” (Rev. 21:3). The holiness codes of Leviticus pointed them to that city where “nothing unclean will ever enter it, nor anyone who does what is detestable or false, but only those who are written in the Lamb’s book of life” (Rev. 21:27).

The second chapter of Numbers continues looking forward to the time God will dwell among his people, giving direction regarding how the camp of Israel was to be set up. The people were to be arranged by tribe, with the tabernacle, and thus God’s presence, in the center of the camp (Num. 2:1-2). This again points to the heavenly city, the New Jerusalem, which is to come. The pattern of sin, judgment and grace also returns in Numbers, perhaps most powerfully in Numbers 14 when the people rebel against God and refuse to enter the land he has promised to them. God shows that he is “slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation” (Num. 14:18). He judges not the entire nation, but the generation of those who rebelled by making them wander in the wilderness for 40 years until they all perished, and in his grace he promises to give the land to the next generation of his covenant people. Again,

⁴⁰ Alexander and Baker, 552.

God shows his faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham and his determination to redeem the world through Abraham's seed.

The book of Deuteronomy is a series of speeches Moses delivers to Israel after the last of the rebellious generation had died and the nation sits on the edge of entering the Promised Land. They would finally enter and occupy the land God had covenanted to give to Abraham's descendants so many years before. Therefore, the land and the ultimate blessing of all nations through Abraham takes center stage.⁴¹ Ten different times, the Promised Land is referred to as "good land" (Deut. 1:25; 1:35; 3:25; 4:21,22; 6:18; 8:7,10; 9:6; 11:17): a reminder of God's "good" creation in Genesis. The sin, judgment and grace pattern is also seen again in Deuteronomy 31:20-23 in which God gives Israel a song to remember all that he has taught them. He does this knowing that when they inherited the land, they would forget him and turn to other gods and serve them. Yet God in his grace and his faithfulness to redeem his creation continues on with this rebellious people.

Man

Genesis 1:27 says, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." Humans are the pinnacle of God's creation because they alone were made in his image.⁴² God continues in verse 28 to say, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Humans are charged as God's vassals on earth to steward and care for his good creation. Being made in God's image grants a special dignity and sanctity to human life.⁴³

⁴¹ Frank E. Gaebelin, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 5.

⁴² Geisler, GC, 449.

⁴³ Alexander and Baker, 165.

The question of what it means to be made in the image of God is one of much debate. Daniel Simango asserts that being made in the image of God (what he calls God-likeness) consists in a “moral likeness to God and a relationship between God and humankind like that between a parent and child.”⁴⁴ He further argues that the idea of God-likeness, as seen in Genesis 1-11, is also seen in Exodus through Deuteronomy.⁴⁵ Though man was made perfect in the image of God (*imago Dei*), mankind brought sin and corruption into the creation when they rebelled against God and followed the heeding of the Serpent rather than the command of God. However, the image of God was marred, but not erased from human beings.⁴⁶ This can be seen in Genesis 9:6: “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image.” If humans were not still in the image of God, this command would make no sense.

There were severe consequences for Adam and Eve’s sin though: physical death (Gen. 3:19), conflicted relationships with other humans (even those who are closest; Gen. 3:12, 16), a hostile relationship with the rest of creation (Gen. 3:17-19) and most importantly, separation from God (spiritual death; Gen. 3:7-8). The first humans’ fellowship with God was broken, and their guilt and the consequences of their actions would be transferred to the whole human race that would follow them (Rom. 5:18-19).

So, all people would be marred versions of the *imago Dei* and spiritually separated from God. God, however, was not done with his highest creation. In Genesis 3:15, he offers a glimpse of hope that he would restore his broken image in humanity when he says, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” So God would seek to undo the work of the Serpent, and he would do it through one of his image-bearers.

⁴⁴ Daniel Simango, “The Law and the Image of God” Old Testament Essays, vol. 26 (2013) (2), 445.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 446.

⁴⁶ Geisler, SS, 146

In Genesis 12:1-2, God makes a twofold promise to Abraham in which he covenants to bless Abraham with a land and a nation and he promises to make Abraham a blessing to all nations. This would be the beginning of God's calling out and forming the nation of Israel who would be his covenant people and image-bearers to the world. In Exodus 4:22-23, God calls Israel his "firstborn son" and sonship implies image. Just as a human son bears the image of his father, so Israel is to bear the moral and relational image of their Father to the entire world.⁴⁷ Simango goes on further to say, "The use of creation language with respect to the Israelites seems to suggest that the Israelites are God's new creation."⁴⁸

God was working to restore humanity's broken relationship with him. One way in which he did this was through the giving of his law through Moses. God's law is a true expression of his nature.⁴⁹ This law would act as a plumb line by which the flawed image-bearers could begin to conform who they were morally and restore God's marred image in them. A couple of illustrations from the Decalogue should be helpful here. The first commandment (Ex. 20:3; Deut.5:7) states, "You shall have no other gods before me." This first affects the relational aspect of the image of God because when the Israelites worshiped other gods, they rejected God as their Father. It also "entails a general moral likeness to God" because it "is inherently right to worship God and inherently wrong not to do so."⁵⁰

The effect of the image of God on the law can also be seen in the ninth commandment, which requires, "You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor" (Ex. 20:16; also Deut. 5:20). Lying is the moral characteristic of the Tempter, not of God. To lie is to offend your neighbor, which is an offense against God's child and therefore an offense against God.⁵¹ There is also a mor-

⁴⁷ Simango, 451.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 446.

⁴⁹ Erickson, 286.

⁵⁰ Simango, 461.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 465.

al likeness to God in this commandment. Peter C. Craigie supports this when he writes:

A God of faithfulness, who did not deal deceitfully with his people, required of his people the same transparency and honesty in personal relationships.⁵²

While other commands of God could be cited, these examples provide some evidence that the law of God may have served as a means for Israel to more accurately represent the image of God in the world.

In Leviticus 19:2, the call to holiness “Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them, You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy” serves as the principles upon which all the Levitical codes were based. The idea of holiness means to be separate (from the world) and set apart (to God) — it can also mean “bearing an actual likeness to God.”⁵³ “Every biblical statement about God carries with it an implied demand upon men to imitate Him in daily living.”⁵⁴ Since God is holy, the Israelites were to be morally like God and distinct from the nations.⁵⁵ While God’s image-bearers in Israel were still marred, they were moving closer to a fully restored image.

How badly the *imago Dei* was still damaged (even in God’s covenant people) can be seen in Numbers 14:1-4 as the people rebel and refuse to enter the Promised Land. Here, there are echoes of the sin of Adam and Eve. The first humans doubted God’s goodness and his intentions for them. So did the Israelites who believed God was actually trying to destroy them rather than redeem them. Moses recounts their words in Deuteronomy 1:27, “And you murmured in your tents and said, ‘Because the Lord hated us he has brought us out of the land of Egypt, to give us into the hand of the Amorites, to destroy us.’” Again, God is

⁵² Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (NICOT; Grand Rapids; Eerdmans, 1976), 163.

⁵³ Erickson, 968.

⁵⁴ Simango, 457.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 458.

gracious to his people and does not destroy the nation, only the generation that rebelled. For 40 years, the nation wanders unable to enter the Promised Land. But God is not done as he continues to work to redeem his image in fallen man.

The book of Deuteronomy further reinforces the importance of the image of God in man in at least two ways. The first is the way in which the book recognizes the dignity and sanctity of every human life through its law codes. These “consistently minimize the distinctions of rank between members of the community.”⁵⁶ Deuteronomy has the clearest concern in the law codes for the poor and disadvantaged,⁵⁷ and all of these codes were “based on the absolute respect for all its members, all equally enjoy the protection of the law of God.”⁵⁸ All people were made in the image of God, and therefore all people were to be cared for and their lives protected. Another area where the *imago Dei* is seen is in the idea of dominion. Adam and Eve were given dominion over the earth in Genesis 1:26-28. In Deuteronomy, the law speaks of dominion in the Promised Land as blessing for keeping the law. They would have dominion over the land in two ways: 1) they were going to possess the land and 2) be successful in it (Deut. 4:1; 6:3; 11:8, 27). Also, “God’s blessing would extend to every sphere of the Israelite community. Their people, land and animals were going to be fertile (Deut. 28:3-6, 8, 11-14), they would have peace (Lev. 26:6-10), and God’s presence would be among them (Lev. 26:11-13).”⁵⁹

In conclusion, it can be seen that the image of God seen in Genesis is a major theological theme throughout the Pentateuch. Through the law, God seeks to remind his covenant people of who they are called to be. The problem, of course, is that no one could keep the law perfectly and thus would never be able to restore the image to its pre-fall condition. However, one man, Jesus Christ, was able to be God’s perfect image-bearer so that all who

⁵⁶ Alexander and Baker, 188.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 189.

⁵⁹ Simango, 467.

believe in him could one day be restored to the perfect and holy state for which God created humankind.

Sin

Sin is a concept that was absent from God's perfect creation in Genesis 1-2. God's world was one that was perfectly ordered in the beginning. When Adam and Eve ate from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil, sin entered into the cosmos. Sin can be defined as "any offense against life as God designed it. It is to miss the target that God designed for humanity, whether intentionally or unintentionally; it is an expression of an inner twistedness; it is finally a step over the bounds God has defined for humanity."⁶⁰ The entrance of sin into the world displayed two overarching truths: obedience to God's law brings blessing and disobedience to God's law (sin) brings cursing (Gen. 2:15-17). This striking contrast is seen when God blesses what he creates (Gen. 1:22, 28; 2:3; 5:2) and then curses it because of sin (Gen. 3:14, 17; 4:11).⁶¹

Because of God's justice, sin could not be left unpunished — it couldn't simply be swept under the rug. God is perfect and complete in his holiness, and the law is not something impersonal or foreign to God. It is an expression of his person and will. Therefore, to sin (i.e., to break God's law) is not to transgress some arbitrary statute, it is to offend God himself. To bless God by obeying him is to be blessed and to curse God by disobeying him is to be cursed.⁶²

The first humans were now cursed, and their guilt and the consequences of their actions would be transferred to the whole human race that would follow them (Rom. 5:18-19). While the consequences would be many, the greatest of these would be

⁶⁰ Alexander and Baker, 856.

⁶¹ William D. Barrick, "Penal Substitution in the Old Testament" *The Master's Seminary Journal* 20, no. 2 (2009): 151. ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials PLUS, EBSCOhost (accessed February 6, 2018).

⁶² Erickson, 802.

death. The Old Testament makes it clear that God's divine justice requires the death of those who violate his law.⁶³ However, God was not content to allow mankind to stay mired in sin, and so he begins a divine, righteous and loving process to restore humanity and his creation as a whole to a sinless state. The Pentateuch displays God's love and mercy as he teaches his covenant people the way to be redeemed, and being in right fellowship with God was through atonement.

The Hebrew word most commonly used for atonement in the Old Testament was *kaphar* or one of its derivatives.⁶⁴ The word means to "wipe clean."⁶⁵ Through the sacrificial system God puts into place in the Pentateuch, he offers a means to cleanse his people and, more importantly, to point the world to the ultimate and final cleansing that would come through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. The entire sacrificial system of the Old Testament is about making it possible for sinful people to have fellowship with a holy God.⁶⁶

One of the earliest examples of the codification of this sacrificial system (and its substitutionary atonement) is in Exodus 12: the Passover. When the Israelites were obedient to God's demands regarding the Passover sacrifice, they were blessed as their oldest sons would be allowed to live. However, if the ritual was not followed, the curse of death would fall on the home that disobeyed. God institutes the Passover observance in which the lamb served as a substitutionary sacrifice for the Israelites' first-born sons.⁶⁷ The Passover celebration would become a perennial feast for the nation of Israel that reminded them of God's deliverance and redemption of his covenant people. This deliverance and freedom presents an Old Testament foreshadowing

⁶³ Barrick, 149.

⁶⁴ Erickson, 805.

⁶⁵ Lance Higginbotham, lecture notes for M-BS2210-OL-A01-SP-18 Old Testament Survey I: Pentateuch and Historical Books SP-18, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary 2018.

⁶⁶ Barrick, 155.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 156.

of Christ ultimately delivering mankind from sin through his substitutionary death on the cross.⁶⁸

Sin is a terrible thing, deeply offensive to God and worthy of his divine wrath. The “Old Testament sacrifices declared, emphasized and magnified sin and its consequences.”⁶⁹ This is seen throughout the book of Leviticus as God’s holiness is juxtaposed against human sinfulness. Holiness is a key theme in the book with the word “holy” appearing more than 200 times.⁷⁰ Leviticus offers in-depth precepts regarding how sinful people could dwell with a holy God. William D. Barrick writes,

The holiness themes of Leviticus reveal the bad news that God’s holiness cannot allow for sinful human beings to have access to Him. On the other hand, however, Leviticus presents the good news that God provides a means for sinners to be accepted and to enter His presence through Levitical sacrifices (159).

The Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 is an excellent example of what it takes to remove the barriers sin creates between God and his people. God’s glorious presence was manifest in the tabernacle, which sat at the center of the Israelite community. The Day of Atonement was a way of purifying the tabernacle so God’s presence could dwell there.⁷¹ Both sin and uncleanness must be wiped clean in order for God to dwell in the midst of this sinful people. The scapegoat showed that sin must be removed (Lev. 16:7-9) and the goat for the sin offering showed that God’s wrath must be satisfied (vv. 15-16) if Israel was going to have fellowship with a holy God.

In Numbers 14, Israel loses the blessing of inheriting the Promised Land and receives the curse of God’s judgment. The curse would be upon the generation that refused to enter the land. They would all die as wanderers in the wilderness (Num. 14:20-

⁶⁸ Alexander and Baker, 310.

⁶⁹ Barrick, 155.

⁷⁰ Alexander and Baker, 850.

⁷¹ Higginbotham, lecture notes.

23). But, God was merciful with his people and preserved a new generation who would inherit the Promised Land some 40 years later. Korah's rebellion in Numbers 16 also shows the necessity for following God's commands and approaching him only when properly purified. In Numbers 16:3, Korah says, "You have gone too far! For all in the congregation are holy, every one of them, and the Lord is among them. Why then do you exalt yourselves above the assembly of the Lord?" Korah and his rebels argued that there was nothing special about Moses and Aaron and that all the people of Israel were holy and worthy to be in God's presence. Korah and his men offered burning incense to the Lord (Num. 16:17-19), but in verses 31-35, the rebels are consumed by God's holy wrath. Sin is serious and has grave consequences.

The curse of sin and the blessing of obedience is explicit in Deuteronomy 30:15-20 where God, through Moses, says,

"See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil. If you obey the commandments of the Lord your God that I command you today, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his rules, then you shall live and multiply, and the Lord your God will bless you in the land that you are entering to take possession of it. But if your heart turns away, and you will not hear, but are drawn away to worship other gods and serve them, I declare to you today, that you shall surely perish. You shall not live long in the land that you are going over the Jordan to enter and possess. I call heaven and earth to witness against you today, that I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse. Therefore choose life, that you and your offspring may live, loving the Lord your God, obeying his voice and holding fast to him, for he is your life and length of days, that you may dwell in the land that the Lord swore to your fathers, to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, to give them."

Blessing in the land would come when they showed their love for the Lord through their obedience to him. However, their disobedience (sin) would lead to their perishing.

The concept of sin and its consequences fill the pages of the Pentateuch. However, along with the curses are the blessings of God's goodness. Numbers 14:18 is a reminder that "The Lord is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, forgiving iniquity and transgression, but he will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children, to the third and the fourth generation." God's grace is often seen when he makes accommodations for his people to draw near for fellowship with him through sacrifices. The Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16 is especially powerful as it points the reader to a day when God will forever dwell in the midst of his people because his people have once for all been made holy by the blood of another shed on their behalf.

Salvation

God's plan to redeem his creation is seen immediately after the fall. God did not destroy Adam and Eve, instead he showed them mercy and provided a pronouncement of hope. In Genesis 3:21, God covers them in the skins of animals that were likely sacrificed for their sin.⁷² Even as God pronounces curses on the Serpent and mankind, he announces his plan to ultimately redeem all things. Genesis 3:15 is God's first promise of a Redeemer who would one day come and restore the creation. God's plan of salvation would begin to work through his covenants with his chosen people.⁷³

Biblically, a covenant can be defined as a legally binding obligation, often a legally binding promise made by God toward men. In the covenants, it is God alone who sets forth the conditions.⁷⁴ Also, a covenant is an act of grace in that God enters into the various covenants because he wants to, not because he is somehow obligated to or has need of the covenant. Covenants are God's choice.⁷⁵ There are two types of covenants between

⁷² Geisler, SS, 122.

⁷³ Erickson, 291.

⁷⁴ Irvin A. Busenitz, "Introduction to the Biblical Covenants; the Noahic Covenant and the Priestly Covenant" *The Master's Seminary Journal* 10, no. 2 (1999): 176.

God and men seen in Scripture. A *unilateral covenant* is one in which the Lord is the sole party responsible to carry out its obligations. These are unconditional, depending totally on God and his faithfulness for their fulfillment. A *bilateral covenant* is one in which failure of one of the parties to carry out the specified conditions renders the agreement null and void.⁷⁶

Each covenant also seeks to affirm an existing relationship God has with people and creation or create new or deepening relationships. The Noahic covenant in Genesis is the first explicit covenant in Scripture. It comes in the context of the flood in which God destroys all the inhabitants of the earth because of their great wickedness. So God “uncreates” his creation through the floodwaters.⁷⁷ But Noah finds grace in God’s eyes (Gen. 6:8). The Noahic covenant is an example of God reaffirming his commitment to his creation which he had symbolically uncreated in the flood. God was committed to returning order and stability to a world corrupted by sin.⁷⁸ God was not done with his creation; he was committed to redeeming it. So the Lord made a unilateral covenant in which he promised, “I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Gen. 9:11).

In Genesis 12:1-3, God advances his redemptive plan through a covenant with Abraham. In these verses, God offers a twofold promise to Abraham: he would be blessed and he would be a blessing to others. Here, the blessing not the curse becomes the prominent theme. In these three verses, the root of the Hebrew word “bless” is used five times. This is likely intentional, announcing that God would use this fivefold blessing to balance the fivefold curse of the previous nine chapters, and in doing so, he would show that his solution to the curse of sin would be through the blessing of Abraham.⁷⁹

⁷⁵ Windsor, 7.

⁷⁶ Busenitz, 180.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 183.

⁷⁸ Windsor, 9.

⁷⁹ Higginbotham, lecture notes.

These promises to Abraham are ratified in the distinct but related covenants of Genesis 15 and 17.⁸⁰ In Genesis 15, God makes a unilateral covenant in which Abraham is promised heirs (v. 5) and land (vv. 18-20) for those heirs. In Genesis 17, the covenant is that Abraham will be “the father of a multitude of nations” (v. 4). This covenant points to the final redemption that comes through Jesus Christ (v. 7). However, the enduring covenant of Genesis 17 is dependent upon the fulfillment of the temporal covenant of Genesis 15 (fulfilled once the nation had taken possession of the land).⁸¹ All of this points to a new covenant which will finally and fully redeem God’s good creation.

God continues to advance his covenant with Abraham in the book of Exodus. The foreshadowing of God’s ultimate salvation for all of creation was seen in God’s deliverance of Israel (the seed of Abraham) from bondage in Egypt. Beginning in Exodus 19, God gave the Mosaic covenant as the means to address the consequences of sin and of showing those consequences would ultimately be addressed.⁸² The covenant was not a means of establishing a relationship with God — rather, its goal was “the residence of God in the midst of his people as represented by the tabernacle.”⁸³

The covenant is further elaborated in the holiness codes of Leviticus. Holiness was not a means of being made righteous before God or maintaining the covenant. That would not be possible for any person. The covenant would be maintained by God’s grace.⁸⁴ The holiness codes offer in-depth precepts regarding how sinful people could dwell with a holy God. The book defines numerous sacrifices and offerings all designed as means for the Israelites to approach God and have fellowship with him.⁸⁵ This would also point forward to the day when God would forever dwell in the midst of his redeemed people (Rev. 21:1-4).

⁸⁰ Windsor, 10.

⁸¹ Loc. cit.

⁸² Alexander and Baker, 857.

⁸³ Ibid., 858.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 857.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 252.

In the book of Numbers, God’s salvation is juxtaposed against Israel’s rebellion and unfaithfulness. The first half of the book records Israel’s refusal to enter the Promised Land and God’s judgment on that generation of Israelites. The second half of the book speaks of God’s saving grace and covenantal faithfulness to Abraham to make him a blessing to many nations. Life and hope are indicative of this new generation who stand on the verge of entering the Land of Promise.⁸⁶ This points to the perfect Promised Land to come when Christ returns.

In Deuteronomy 29:12-14, God renews his covenant with his people as they are about to enter the Promised Land. They are reminded of his presence, protection and provision in the new land if they will only believe and obey.⁸⁷ The Mosaic covenant would ultimately be abrogated by the new covenant, which will one day finally bring life and redemption to all of God’s creation, restoring it to its perfect pre-fall condition.⁸⁸

SHEOL: THE OLD TESTAMENT CONSENSUS

By Rev. Jefferson Vann

There were 400 silent years — a gap between the closing of the Old Testament prophets and the writing of the New Testament. During this time, the doctrine of the intermediate state (that state between death and the resurrection) underwent a sort of evolution. Jews became immersed in pagan communities which held to the doctrine made popular by Greek philosophy: the immortality of the soul.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 612.

⁸⁷ Busenitz, 183.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 182.

The Judaism that emerged from this period was not consistent on the issue of the intermediate state. Some Jews adapted the Greek concept almost whole cloth. They conceded that all human souls are immortal, and understood “that the souls of the righteous proceeded immediately to heaven at their deaths, there to await the resurrection of their bodies, while the souls of the wicked remained in Sheol.”⁸⁹ For them, *sheol* (שְׁאוֹל) became a place entirely associated with the punishment of the wicked, although their own Scriptures insist that Sheol contains the righteous as well.⁹⁰ Other Jews were not willing to concede that Sheol was exclusively for the wicked. Instead, they imagined “that there was a spatial separation in the underworld between the godly and the ungodly.”⁹¹ These retained the Old Testament idea that all souls go to Sheol at death, adding only the Greek concept that these souls are immortal and conscious of being in Sheol or — as the Greeks called it — Hades.

By the New Testament era, a third view (or a variation of the second) apparently became popular among the Jewish sect known as the Pharisees. Jesus must have accommodated one of their own stories when he told the Pharisees about the rich man and Lazarus.⁹² In that story, the rich man dies and ends up in Hades, while Lazarus is carried bodily to a place called “Abraham’s side.” The irony was not lost on the Pharisees, who would have expected just the opposite. For them, riches were a sign of the Lord’s blessing, while poverty was viewed as a curse. Jesus used the story to warn

⁸⁹ Richard N. Longenecker, “Grave, Sheol, Pit, Hades, Gehenna, Abaddon, Hell” in Donald E. Gowan, ed. *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible* (Louisville, Ky.: John Knox Press, 2003), 189.

⁹⁰ Hezekiah, for example, lamented that at the age of 39 he must walk through the gates of Sheol, being deprived of the rest of his years (Isa. 38:10). And David spoke of his hope that God would rescue him from death by saying confidently that God would not abandon him to Sheol (Ps. 16:10). Both of these men of God understood entering Sheol as synonymous with dying.

⁹¹ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1994), 99.

⁹² Luke 16:19-31.

the Pharisees that their godless greed was disobedience to the very laws they were trusting in for their salvation.

By using that story, Jesus was by no means condoning its theology. After all, he was not declaring doctrine to his disciples. He was speaking to a group who stood in opposition to his teachings. If Jesus were teaching his disciples about the intermediate state, his words would have conformed to the Old Testament consensus.

The best place to look for answers about the intermediate state is in the Old Testament. God's people struggled with this question for millennia before Plato was born. One has every right to expect God's Word to provide answers, and for those answers to be consistent. The vast majority of biblical references to the intermediate state are in the Old Testament.⁹³ By the time the Old Testament was completed, a theological consensus was clearly revealed. This Old Testament consensus shows that Sheol is a much different place from that imagined by syncretistic Second Temple Judaism.

Sheol Is Down There

When Jacob was told that his son Joseph had been killed by some wild animal, he was distraught. He imagined that Joseph was dead, down underneath the earth somewhere. Jacob was so upset that he thought he would die of grief. He tells his children who are trying to comfort him, "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning."⁹⁴ This first reference to Sheol in the Bible reveals that the intermediate state is not a mystery that no one knows about. Jacob apparently knew that all people go there at death.

Jacob also knew that, in some way, Sheol is "down there." The rest of the Old Testament has a number of references to Sheol that utilize the verb root that Jacob used: *yarad* (to go down or

⁹³ References to Sheol in the Old Testament outnumber those of Hades in the New Testament over six to one. Also, most of the New Testament references merely use the term Hades without explaining it.

⁹⁴ Genesis 37:35.

descend).⁹⁵ Other verb roots used with Sheol portray the same idea: *nachat* (to go down)⁹⁶ and *shafel* (to be or become low).⁹⁷ Both people from within the covenant community and those without went in the same direction at death.

Some have suggested that these are all references to being buried in the grave, and that *sheol* is merely a reference to what happens to the body. Thus, Sheol would be taken as a synonym for *Qever*: “the grave” or “tomb.” But Jacob could not have been referring to a literal grave, since Joseph’s body was not found to bury.

Also, Sheol is normally associated with death in poetic parallels, not the grave. Of all the references to Sheol in the Old Testament, none directly parallel with *Qever*. However, the term *sheol* is often paralleled with synonyms for the grave like *bor* (the pit)⁹⁸ and *Abaddon* (destruction).⁹⁹ This leads to the conclusion that the term *sheol* has something in common with the grave, but cannot be equated with the actual grave itself. Although Sheol is often described as if it were a location, its Old Testament use leads to the conclusion that it more specifically refers to the human state after death. The location for the dead (at least those who are buried) is the grave. Their condition is Sheol.

This was the conclusion of Eric Lewis, whose examination of the 65 references to Sheol in the Old Testament led him to the conclusion that the term specified “not the place of interment, nor a presumed locality of departed spirits, but the condition of death, the death-state.”¹⁰⁰ Lewis suggested that a synonym for Sheol emphasizing this connotation is *Gravedom*. But how does one reconcile the idea that Sheol is a state with all these references to a direction (i.e., down there)?

⁹⁵ Genesis 42:38; 44:29, 31; Numbers 16:30, 33; 1 Samuel 2:6; 1 Kings 2:6, 9; Job 7:9; 17:16; Psalm 55:15; Proverbs 1:12; 5:5; 7:27; Isaiah 14:11, 15; Ezekiel 31:15, 16, 17; 32:21, 27.

⁹⁶ Job 21:13.

⁹⁷ Isaiah 57:9.

⁹⁸ Psalm 30:3; Proverbs 1:12; Isaiah 14:15; 38:18; Ezekiel 31:16.

⁹⁹ Job 26:6; Proverbs 15:11; 27:20.

¹⁰⁰ Eric Lewis, *Christ, The First Fruits* (Boston: Warren Press, 1949), 48.

Sheol Is of Extreme Depth

Sheol is to down as heaven is to up. It is not simply six feet under. Moses spoke of the fire of God's anger burning to the depths of Sheol.¹⁰¹ Zophar said that God's limit is higher than heaven and deeper than Sheol.¹⁰² David described the Lord's deliverance as being "from the depths of Sheol."¹⁰³ When describing God's omnipresence, he said, "If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!"¹⁰⁴ The Lord complained through Isaiah that Israel prostituted herself by sending envoys to all far-off lands, even sending them down to Sheol.¹⁰⁵

His words through Amos describe the extent to which God was determined to go to bring punishment upon his own disobedient people:

"If they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; if they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. If they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search them out and take them; and if they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent, and it shall bite them. And if they go into captivity before their enemies, there I will command the sword, and it shall kill them; and I will fix my eyes upon them for evil and not for good."¹⁰⁶

Here again, Sheol is contrasted with heaven — not because it is a place of suffering and heaven a place of pleasure. Heaven is listed because it is a high place — like the top of Mt. Carmel. Sheol is mentioned because it is a low place, like the bottom of the sea.

Perhaps the ancient Hebrews imagined Sheol as an extremely deep place because of the mystery surrounding it. Perhaps it was thought so because people went there and did not come back.

¹⁰¹ Deuteronomy 32:22.

¹⁰² Job 11:8.

¹⁰³ Psalm 86:13.

¹⁰⁴ Psalm 139:8.

¹⁰⁵ Isaiah 57:9.

¹⁰⁶ Amos 9:2-4.

Perhaps it was regarded so because it was a mystery — hidden to everyone except God himself.¹⁰⁷ Regardless, when the Old Testament saints spoke of Sheol, it was obviously not synonymous with heaven. It was the exact opposite. Yet this is the place that all souls entered at death.

Sheol Is Silent

Another stark contrast the Old Testament presents when comparing Sheol to heaven is the activity it describes to each place. Heaven and earth are places where God is praised continually.¹⁰⁸ But, when the soul reaches Sheol, that praise stops abruptly. David prays for God to “let the wicked be put to shame; let them go silently to Sheol.”¹⁰⁹ The deaths of his enemies would not only silence them upon earth, it would silence them in the underworld as well. Sheol is a place where the once mighty now lie still.¹¹⁰ It is the land of silence, where the dead go down to silence.¹¹¹

Hezekiah prays that God would rescue him from his sickness because “Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness.”¹¹² What he was saying was that if he died, his praises would stop. Sheol is a place of silence for both the believer and the unbeliever. For that reason, it makes sense for King Hezekiah to plead with God to rescue him from death. His death would not glorify God. His rescue would — and did.

David had a similar experience when he was in threat of death, and he prayed for God to deliver him “[f]or in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?”¹¹³ His plea is so like that of Hezekiah that they mark a certain approach to the whole concept of Sheol. To these two people of God, there

¹⁰⁷ Job 26:6; Proverbs 15:11.

¹⁰⁸ Psalm 69:34; 113:3; 145:3-7; 148:2.

¹⁰⁹ Psalm 31:17.

¹¹⁰ Ezekiel 32:21, 27.

¹¹¹ Psalm 94:17; 115:17.

¹¹² Isaiah 38:18.

¹¹³ Psalm 6:5.

was no afterlife. There was merely silence and stillness — a waiting on God for perhaps rescue by resurrection. To neither of these Old Testament saints would a residence in Sheol be considered a goal to attain. For both of them it was an inevitable consequence of their own mortality — to be avoided at all costs.

David's son, Solomon, had an insatiable curiosity, and set his mind to study everything that could be studied. He wrote thousands of proverbs encapsulating his wisdom and composed over one thousand songs.¹¹⁴ His "wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt."¹¹⁵ Yet when he described Sheol, he merely warned his readers to do whatever they wanted to do before death, because "there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going."¹¹⁶ His studied assessment of Sheol agreed with the Old Testament consensus. He saw it as a place where the thoughts are silenced.

Sheol Is Dark

Other characteristics of Sheol found in the Old Testament consensus do not match modern views of the afterlife. Job described a person in Sheol as spreading out his bed in darkness.¹¹⁷ He described Sheol as "the land of darkness and deep shadow, the land of gloom like thick darkness, like deep shadow without any order, where light is as thick darkness."¹¹⁸ David describes those "long dead" as sitting in darkness.¹¹⁹ Jeremiah described "the dead of long ago" as dwelling in darkness now.¹²⁰ If Sheol is a place, then darkness might only imply a lack of visual awareness in that place. If Sheol is a state, then these references to darkness would imply a lack of cognitive awareness in that state.

¹¹⁴ 1 Kings 4:32.

¹¹⁵ 1 Kings 4:30.

¹¹⁶ Ecclesiastes 9:10.

¹¹⁷ Job 17:13.

¹¹⁸ Job 10:21-22.

¹¹⁹ Psalm 143:3.

¹²⁰ Lamentations 3:6.

Sheol Is Sleep

David prayed to the Lord, “Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death.”¹²¹ He anticipated that his death would find him in Sheol and doing what all others in Sheol were doing: not praising, not singing, not playing golden harps. He defined existence in Sheol as sleeping the sleep of death. The exact phrase “slept with his fathers” is found 36 times in the Old Testament.¹²² It was a common expression used to describe the fact that someone had died.

Daniel described existence in Sheol as sleeping “in the dust of the earth.”¹²³ It was a condition which required an awakening — a resurrection. This sleep was never the hope of Old Testament saints. The resurrection and restoration to life was the hope. Sleep was simply a way of describing the state of death itself. Jesus used the same terminology to describe the death state of Jairus’ daughter.¹²⁴ He said of Lazarus (in Sheol) that he had “fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him.”¹²⁵

Conditionalists prefer to use the term “sleep” to describe the intermediate state for several reasons, among them: 1) it is used by the Scripture itself; 2) it emphasizes the need for resurrection; 3) it places the hope of humanity not in the death state itself, but in the Lord who will raise (awaken) the dead.

Sheol Is Universal

The thing most stressed in the Old Testament concerning Sheol is that it is synonymous with death itself. In the New Testament, this is seen by the terms “Death” and “Hades” appearing next to each other.¹²⁶ All those who die (the event) experience

¹²¹ Psalm 13:3.

¹²² 1 Kings 2:10; 11:21, 43; 14:20, 31; 15:8, 24; 16:6, 28; 22:40, 50; 2 Kings 8:24; 10:35; 13:9, 13; 14:16, 22, 29; 15:7, 22, 38; 16:20; 20:21; 21:18; 24:6; 2 Chronicles 9:31; 12:16; 14:1; 16:13; 21:1; 26:2, 23; 27:9; 28:27; 32:33; 33:20.

¹²³ Daniel 12:2.

¹²⁴ Matthew 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52.

¹²⁵ John 11:11.

¹²⁶ Revelation 1:18; 6:8; 20:13-14.

Hades (the state). In the Old Testament, this fact is seen in numerous passages where death and Sheol are placed in parallel. David, for example, says that “the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me.”¹²⁷ He also says, “[I]n death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?”¹²⁸

Other psalmists reflect the same association between death as an event, and Sheol as the state it initiates. The sons of Korah say of the foolish: “Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; death shall be their shepherd.”¹²⁹ Ethan the Ezrahite proclaims, “What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?”¹³⁰

Hannah prayed, “The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up.”¹³¹ The theology of her prayer is impeccable. To die is to be brought down to Sheol, where all the other dead are. To be rescued from that condition is to be brought back to life, and that is something that only the Lord can do.

Summary

Sheol, then, is a silent, dark state or condition in which everyone exists at death and can only live again by a resurrection from the Lord. It is always *contrasted* with heaven and never equated with it. It is not the hope of the saints; rescue from it is the hope of the saints. That is the Old Testament consensus.

¹²⁷ 2 Samuel 22:6.

¹²⁸ Psalm 6:5.

¹²⁹ Psalm 49:14.

¹³⁰ Psalm 89:48.

¹³¹ 1 Samuel 2:6.

SET APART FOR DESTRUCTION

By Rev. Jefferson Vann

In this article, Rev. Jefferson Vann explores an Old Testament term that helps us understand the biblical idea of hell.

Conditionalists have often been accused of being too simplistic in their approach to biblical terminology. For example, when we claim that the Bible teaches that destruction of the wicked is the purpose of hell, we are accused of not using the term *destruction* in its biblical sense. Perhaps it would be a good idea to revisit those texts containing that word — just to see if we conditionalists have been too naive in our understanding of it.

To avoid confusion, I will limit this search to only the word “destruction” and look only at its appearances in the most modern version available at present: the Christian Standard Bible (CSB). But, since this English word translates several Hebrew and Greek words, I will only focus on one Hebrew or Greek word at a time. Today, I will survey the Hebrew word חרם (verb *charam* or noun *cherem*), when it is rendered “destruction.”

- **Exodus 22:20:** Whoever sacrifices to any gods, except the Lord alone, is to be set apart for destruction.

Holladay’s Hebrew lexicon defines this term as to “be devoted to destruction by the ban.”¹³² It refers to a being who is marked to be killed, or an object to be utterly destroyed by fire. Further uses of the term show that there is no connotation where the term takes on any different meaning.

- **Leviticus 27:29:** No person who has been set apart for destruction is to be ransomed; he must be put to death.

¹³² The Greeks used the verb ὀλοθρεύω (destroy) to translate חרם here. The NT author of Hebrews used this word for the angel who killed the firstborn in Egypt (Hebrews 11:28).

- **Deuteronomy 7:26:** You must not bring any abhorrent thing into your house, or you will be set apart for destruction like it. You are to utterly detest and abhor it, because it is set apart for destruction.
- **Deuteronomy 13:17:** Nothing set apart for destruction is to remain in your hand, so that the LORD will turn from His burning anger and grant you mercy, show you compassion, and multiply you as He swore to your fathers.

The Old Testament historical incident that best explains the importance of this concept is that of Achan, who kept back some of the items in Jericho which had been set apart for destruction:

- **Joshua 6:18:** But keep yourselves from the things set apart, or you will be set apart for destruction. If you take any of those things, you will set apart the camp of Israel for destruction and bring disaster on it.
- **Joshua 7:12:** This is why the Israelites cannot stand against their enemies. They will turn their backs and run from their enemies, because they have been set apart for destruction. I will no longer be with you unless you remove from you what is set apart.
- **Joshua 22:20:** “... Wasn’t Achan son of Zerah unfaithful regarding what was set apart for destruction, bringing wrath on the entire community of Israel? He was not the only one who perished because of his sin.”

Saul was guilty of the same sin when he kept back some of the plunder from his battle with the Amalekites, ostensibly to offer those gifts to the Lord:

- **1 Samuel 15:21:** “... The troops took sheep and cattle from the plunder — the best of what was set apart for destruction — to sacrifice to the LORD your God at Gilgal.”

And there are others times in the Old Testament when the concept is reiterated:

- **1 Kings 20:42:** The prophet said to him, “This is what the LORD says: ‘Because you released from your hand the man I had set apart for destruction, it will be your life in place of his life and your people in place of his people.’”
- **1 Chronicles 2:7:** Carmi’s son: Achar, who brought trouble on Israel when he was unfaithful by taking the things set apart for destruction.
- **1 Chronicles 4:41:** These who were recorded by name came in the days of King Hezekiah of Judah, attacked the Hamites’ tents and the Meunites who were found there, and set them apart for destruction, as they are today. Then they settled in their place because there was pasture for their flocks.

The Old Testament prophets suggest that all the wicked are ultimately seen as destined to be totally destroyed by God:

- **Isaiah 34:2:** The LORD is angry with all the nations — furious with all their armies. He will set them apart for destruction, giving them over to slaughter.
- **Isaiah 34:5:** When My sword has drunk its fill in the heavens, it will then come down on Edom and on the people I have set apart for destruction.
- **Isaiah 43:28:** So I defiled the officers of the sanctuary, and set Jacob apart for destruction and Israel for abuse.
- **Micah 4:13:** Rise and thresh, Daughter Zion, for I will make your horns iron and your hooves bronze, so you can crush many peoples. Then you will set apart their plunder to the LORD for destruction, their wealth to the Lord of all the earth.

- **Zechariah 14:11:** People will live there, and never again will there be a curse of complete destruction. So Jerusalem will dwell in security.

Now, when we look at what the Bible says about hell, we need to understand this imagery. God has set apart the wicked nations of the earth for destruction (Isa. 34), giving them over to slaughter. They are devoted to destruction, just as the goods of Jericho were. They are not to be ransomed. Destruction is their fate. Anything less than complete destruction of an object or person condemned to חרם was a transgression, a violation of the Mosaic Law.

I ask, based on the texts above, is this image accurate and does it not faithfully describe God’s attitude toward the wicked and their fate?

But, wait — there is more. The New Testament also appears to reflect the concept of חרם in its description of the ultimate fate of the wicked:

- **Matthew 7:13:** “Enter through the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the road is broad that leads to destruction, and there are many who go through it. ...”
- **Matthew 12:25:** Knowing their thoughts, He told them: “Every kingdom divided against itself is headed for destruction, and no city or house divided against itself will stand. ...” (cf. Luke 11:17)
- **John 17:12:** “... While I was with them, I was protecting them by Your name that You have given Me. I guarded them and not one of them is lost, except the son of destruction, so that the Scripture may be fulfilled. ...”
- **Romans 9:22:** And what if God, desiring to display His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much patience objects of wrath ready for destruction?
- **Philippians 1:28:** ... not being frightened in any way by your opponents. This is a sign of destruction for them, but of your deliverance — and this is from God.

- **Philippians 3:19:** Their end is destruction; their god is their stomach; their glory is in their shame. They are focused on earthly things,
- **2 Thessalonians 1:9:** These will pay the penalty of eternal¹³³ destruction from the Lord's presence and from His glorious strength.
- **1 Timothy 6:9:** But those who want to be rich fall into temptation, a trap, and many foolish and harmful desires, which plunge people into ruin and destruction.
- **2 Peter 2:1:** But there were also false prophets among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you. They will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, and will bring swift destruction on themselves.
- **2 Peter 2:3:** They will exploit you in their greed with deceptive words. Their condemnation, pronounced long ago, is not idle, and their destruction does not sleep.
- **2 Peter 3:7:** But by the same word, the present heavens and earth are stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgement and destruction of ungodly men.
- **Revelation 17:8:** The beast that you saw was, and is not, and is about to come up from the abyss and go to destruction.
- **Revelation 17:11:** The beast that was and is not, is himself an eighth king, yet he belongs to the seven and is going to destruction.

¹³³ Do not think that the term "eternal" implies a process that never ends. Destruction that never ends is never destruction. The word translated "eternal" (Greek αἰώνιος) is an adjective describing the destruction as complete or permanent. It is not an adverb describing the process of destroying.

As I was saying at the beginning, conditionalists are often accused of using words like “destruction” in a simplistic, non-biblical sense. But the evidence above shows that when the New Testament authors spoke of the fate of the lost in hell, they often reflected the Old Testament concept of חרם, which implied a literal destruction. The lost are not doomed to live forever in an uncomfortable place. They are not doomed to “substandard/ruinous life in the hereafter.”¹³⁴ They are doomed to die. Eternal life is only for the saved.

PERISH THE THOUGHT

By Rev. Jefferson Vann

Rev. Jefferson Vann explores the Old Testament background behind the term “perish.”

When I taught Bible College, I told my students to always try to get into the bubble. By the term “bubble,” I meant the historical and literary background that original readers and listeners shared with the biblical authors. Since we cannot get into a time machine and go back to that time, the only way we can share the “bubble” of the biblical context is by studying those times, cultures and texts. Today I want to get into the bubble of the biblical word “perish.”

A modern preacher tells us confidently that to perish simply means to be “marred forever, for that is the meaning of ‘perish,’ and not annihilation.”¹³⁵ Is that preacher’s confidence based on actual knowledge?

¹³⁴ Richard L. Mayhue, “Hell Never, Forever, or Just for Awhile?” (Sun Valley, CA: Master’s Seminary Journal, 1998), 141.

¹³⁵ Al Bryant, *Sermon Outlines on the Death, Resurrection, and Return of Christ*. (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel Publications, 1998), 26.

I want to go back to the Old Testament and examine how the people during those times used the term אבד (Hebrew *abad*), the word normally translated “perish.” This word corresponds to the Greek ἀπόλλυμι, which is the word for “perish” used in John 3:16. When the New Testament was translated into Hebrew, they used אבד in John 3:16.

Pharaoh’s officials asked him, “How long must this man be a snare to us? Let the men go, so that they may worship the Lord their God. Don’t you realize yet that Egypt is devastated?”¹³⁶

The context of this quote is the locust plague in Egypt. Perhaps we might delay judgement on this text and say that maybe Pharaoh’s officials were saying that their land had been marred forever. I do not think that is what they are saying, though. Look at how this modern version translates אבד. To perish is to be devastated. It is to be consumed by locusts!

I will destroy among his people anyone who does any work on this same day.¹³⁷

The punishment for those who violated the Sabbath laws was death, not being “marred forever.” God did not keep Sabbath violators in a special place, secluded from his community, and keep punishing them. He destroyed them:

You will perish among the nations; the land of your enemies will devour you.¹³⁸

If the Israelites disobeyed God’s covenant, they would be taken into exile in foreign lands and devoured by those lands. The enemy lands would not simply mar their appearance. They would consume them:

They went down alive into Sheol with all that belonged to them. The earth closed over them, and they vanished from the assembly.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Exodus 10:7, CSB. Unless otherwise specified, all Bible references in this article are to the Christian Standard Bible.

¹³⁷ Leviticus 23:30.

¹³⁸ Leviticus 26:38.

¹³⁹ Numbers 16:33.

This is a rather weak translation, given the history of the word seen above. Remember that this passage is describing the deaths of those who participated in Korah's rebellion. They were swallowed up by the ground as punishment for rebelling against Moses and Aaron's leadership. But, the word "vanished" does preclude any idea that אבד can mean a mere marring. The rebels who followed Korah were wiped out.

Then the Israelites declared to Moses, "Look, we're perishing! We're lost; we're all lost!"¹⁴⁰

God vindicated Aaron by having his rod bud with life, and the Israelites, who had been complaining about his leadership, thought that they were all going to die. Here, they use two words which could be translated "perish," so the CSB translates אבד as "to be lost." But do not think that the word means anything like what the immortalists are saying. To be lost is not to live separated and isolated from God. To be lost for those Israelites was to die. They expected to be annihilated as a people.

... you must drive out all the inhabitants of the land before you, destroy all their stone images and cast images, and demolish all their high places.¹⁴¹

Here, the Israelites getting ready to invade the pagan nations in the promised land are told to אבד the idols and אבד the sacred places of these nations. Simply marring these idols or hanging up "do not enter" signs on the high places would not be enough. These symbols of rebellion against the Lord had to be eradicated or else the land would not be fit for the Israelites to inhabit.

"... I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you today that you will quickly perish from the land you are about to cross the Jordan to possess. You will not live long there, but you will certainly be destroyed. ..."¹⁴²

¹⁴⁰ Numbers 17:12.

¹⁴¹ Numbers 33:52.

¹⁴² Deuteronomy 4:26.

Here, Moses warns the Israelites that they will quickly perish in Canaan if they do not stay true to the Lord. In fact, the word “perish” in this text is actually a combination of two forms of the word אבד. The phrase תִּאֲבֹדוּן is an intensive way of expressing the idea of אבד. The KJV translated the phrase “utterly perish.” That this expression cannot imply anything other than complete extinction is made clear as well by the accompanying statement: “You will not live long there, but you will certainly be destroyed.”

When Athaliah, Ahaziah’s mother, saw that her son was dead, she proceeded to annihilate all the royal heirs.¹⁴³

Athaliah’s murder spree was another example of someone causing someone else to perish. In this case, it was the entire royal family she annihilated (אבד). Athaliah did not imprison the royal family. She had them killed. How can anyone say that the word means to keep someone alive when it is obviously used in passages like this for the exact opposite? The CSB translators even use the word “annihilate” for אבד.

So the Lord said, “You cared about the plant, which you did not labor over and did not grow. It appeared in a night and perished in a night.”¹⁴⁴

Jonah’s plant had died overnight. It was not simply isolated or marred. It ceased to exist, and that was why Jonah was sad. It was no longer there to offer him comfort from the heat.

So, when the New Testament warns us that unbelievers will perish, what are we to believe about their fate?

Here are some other passages containing the Greek ἀπόλλυμι, which mirrors the idea behind the Hebrew אבד:

After they were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, “Get up! Take the child and his mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I tell you. For Herod is about to search for the child to kill him.”¹⁴⁵

¹⁴³ 2 Kings 11:1.

¹⁴⁴ Jonah 4:10.

¹⁴⁵ Matthew 2:13.

Herod did not want to simply mar the future king of Israel. He wanted to kill him.

If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. For it is better that you lose one of the parts of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell.¹⁴⁶

If you gouge out your eye, it is lost. It perishes. Likewise, anyone thrown into hell, will perish — that is, be destroyed.

Then Jesus told him, “Put your sword back in its place because all who take up the sword will perish by the sword. ...”¹⁴⁷

The sword can mar someone, but Jesus’ use of the term here indicates death by the sword. Any other definition of ἀπόλλυμι does not fit the context.

Immediately the Pharisees went out and started plotting with the Herodians against him, how they might kill him.¹⁴⁸

The Pharisees did not want to simply mar Jesus’ appearance. They wanted him dead.

He was in the stern, sleeping on the cushion. So they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher! Don’t you care that we’re going to die?”¹⁴⁹

The disciples were not afraid of getting stuck on the boat for eternity. They feared being capsized and drowning.

Through these the world of that time perished when it was flooded.¹⁵⁰

The flood of Noah’s day did not keep its victims prisoner for eternity. It destroyed them.

So far, we have examined two Old Testament terms¹⁵¹ that help explain the biblical warnings about hell and describe its

¹⁴⁶ Matthew 5:29.

¹⁴⁷ Matthew 26:52.

¹⁴⁸ Mark 3:6.

¹⁴⁹ Mark 4:38.

¹⁵⁰ 2 Peter 3:6.

¹⁵¹ The term חרם was discussed in the previous article.

nature. So far, we have seen nothing of this concept of a never-ending place of suffering. Instead, we have seen that the biblical audience would have understood these warnings as threats to their lives.

The wages of sin is death,¹⁵² and that death is hell. It is an ultimate death from which there will be no resurrection. It is destruction, annihilation and nothing less.

SPOILING THE VINEYARD

By Rev. Jefferson Vann

Rev. Jefferson Vann explains a Hebrew term for hell that reflects the idea of a spoiled vineyard.

In this series of studies on hell, so far we have examined two Old Testament terms that help explain the biblical warnings about hell and describe its nature.

We looked at the term חרם in “Set Apart for Destruction” and found that all items or souls so dedicated were to be completely destroyed as offerings to God. We also looked at the term אבד (*abad*), the word normally translated “perish,” in the preceding article. We saw that it always refers to death or annihilation, never meaning merely being marred and separated.

So far, we have uncovered nothing of the concept of a never-ending place of suffering. Instead, we have seen that the biblical audience would have understood these warnings as threats to their lives, so that if the words were used to describe hell, the listeners would expect hell to be a second death, an ultimate death.

¹⁵² Romans 6:23.

Today, I would like to center our focus on the Hebrew word *חָשַׁח* (*shachat*), which can have the meaning of “mar” or “spoil.” Could this be where people get the idea that hell is simply going to be suffering and not ultimate death? As usual, I want to look at how the term is actually used in the Bible.

The earliest use of the term is the account of Noah’s flood. Noah’s flood is referred to in the New Testament as a type, a pre-figuring of what the final judgement will be like.¹⁵³

Now the earth was corrupt in God’s sight, and the earth was filled with wickedness. God saw how corrupt the earth was, for every creature had corrupted its way on the earth.¹⁵⁴

The word describes the sinful state that humanity had quickly descended to. It was as if God were a vintner who had left his vineyard on its own and come back to find the vineyard spoiled. If we had only these verses, we might certainly conclude that if *חָשַׁח* (*shachat*) is a word floating around in the minds of the biblical audience, then warnings of hell might involve some kind of perpetual decay. But we must read on:

Then God said to Noah, “I have decided to put an end to every creature, for the earth is filled with wickedness because of them; therefore I am going to destroy them along with the earth.¹⁵⁵

You see, God goes on to pronounce the judgment of destruction upon the planet, destruction that will “put an end” to every creature. What was the verb Moses used for “destroy”? It was the same verb that had been translated “corrupt” in the previous verses. It was *חָשַׁח* (*shachat*)! A ruined, spoiled vineyard is one where the grapes have died. Such a vineyard must be destroyed and replanted.

¹⁵³ Matthew 24:37; Luke 17:26.

¹⁵⁴ Genesis 6:11-12. Unless otherwise specified, all Bible references in this article are to the Christian Standard Bible.

¹⁵⁵ Genesis 6:13.

The Greeks used the words φθείρω and καταφθείρω to translate נחש in the above verses. These words are useful because they also have that double meaning of both “ruin” and “destroy.”

Note how φθείρω is used in the New Testament to describe the final judgement:

If anyone destroys God’s temple, God will destroy him; for God’s temple is holy, and that is what you are.¹⁵⁶

You can see the idea of spoiling the vineyard here as well, although the metaphor Paul uses is that of defiling a temple. Both ideas (that of spoiling and of destruction) are present in the same verse and use the same word.

But these people, like irrational animals — creatures of instinct born to be caught and destroyed — slander what they do not understand, and in their destruction they too will be destroyed.¹⁵⁷

But these people blaspheme anything they do not understand. And what they do understand by instinct — like irrational animals — by these things they are destroyed.¹⁵⁸

Both Peter and Jude use the word *shachat* as well to describe the ultimate destruction of false teachers. It is a helpful word because it weds the idea of a spoiling crop with the destruction of that crop to make room for a new one. That is the idea behind נחש in the Old Testament.

Shachat is sometimes translated “the pit,” as if describing death by referring to the grave where the dead are placed.

to preserve them from the pit, their lives from perishing by the sword.¹⁵⁹

He draws near to the Pit, and his life to the executioners.¹⁶⁰

... and to be gracious to him and say, “Spare him from going

¹⁵⁶ 1 Corinthians 3:17.

¹⁵⁷ 2 Peter 2:12.

¹⁵⁸ Jude 1:10.

¹⁵⁹ Job 33:18, NIV.

¹⁶⁰ Job 33:22.

down to the Pit; I have found a ransom ...”¹⁶¹

He redeemed my soul from going down to the Pit, and I will continue to see the light.¹⁶²

The Greek words used to translate תַּשׁוּ in these instances were either θάνατος (death) or διαφθορά (decay). Both words show that the pit was not seen as a place where anyone goes alive.

The term תַּשׁוּ is used prophetically of the fact that, when the Messiah descends to the place of the dead, he will not stay there long enough to rot:

For you will not abandon me to Sheol; you will not allow your faithful one to see decay.¹⁶³

This parallelism shows the connection between being in the grave (Sheol) and what you do there (decay). Here again, the image of a spoiled vineyard helps us to see what is being expressed. There is no concept of continued existence once a person has gone down to the pit. Death is all there is, unless God intervenes, as he will with the Messiah.

To go down to the pit is to be reduced to dust:

What gain is there in my death, if I go down to the Pit? Will the dust praise you? Will it proclaim your truth?¹⁶⁴

To go down to the pit is the opposite of living forever:

... so that he may live forever and not see the Pit.¹⁶⁵

Isaiah uses the term with a heavy dose of that (spoiled vineyard) allusion.

¹⁶¹ Job 33:24.

¹⁶² Job 33:28.

¹⁶³ Psalm 16:10.

¹⁶⁴ Psalm 30:9.

¹⁶⁵ Psalm 49:9.

The Lord says this: “As the new wine is found in a bunch of grapes, and one says, ‘Don’t destroy it, for there’s some good in it,’ so I will act because of my servants and not destroy them all. ...”¹⁶⁶

The prophet expresses God’s love for his people, and his desire to rescue them from their corruption and to restore his vineyard.

What can we learn about hell from this study? We learn that hell is not what God wants. He wants his people to live and be fruitful. But hell awaits all those who become corrupted and are never restored to spiritual fruitfulness. It is death. It is decay into dust. It is ultimate destruction.

SWEPT AWAY

By Rev. Jefferson Vann

In swept away, Rev. Jefferson Vann discusses a fourth Old Testament word for final punishment that implies literal destruction.

We conditionalists are often accused of using words like “destruction” in a simplistic, non-biblical sense. But in the three previous articles, I have examined the Old Testament Hebrew concepts of חָרַם (*charam*),¹⁶⁷ אָבַד (*abad*)¹⁶⁸ and שָׁחַת (*shachat*),¹⁶⁹ and showed that they all consistently imply a literal destruction. Matching New Testament references to final punishment were shown to have the same implications. I concluded that the Bible

¹⁶⁶ Isaiah 65:8.

¹⁶⁷ see “Set Apart for Destruction.”

¹⁶⁸ see “Perish the Thought.” \\192.168.1.140\company\Henceforth\2018\Winter\ <https://www.afterlife.co.nz/2018/01/perish-the-thought/>

¹⁶⁹ see “Spoiling the Vineyard.”

depicts the lost not as doomed to live forever in an uncomfortable place or doomed to “substandard/ruinous life in the hereafter.” They are doomed to die. Eternal life is only for the saved.

Another Old Testament word reflecting the concept of final punishment is סָפַח (*safah*) which means “to take, sweep or snatch away.”¹⁷⁰

Safah is used a number of times in connection with the story of God’s judgment upon Sodom and Gomorrah.

- After discovering that God planned to destroy the two cities, “Abraham stepped forward and said, ‘Will you really sweep away the righteous with the wicked?’”¹⁷¹
- Abraham inquired about the limits of God’s wrath when he asked, “What if there are fifty righteous people in the city? Will you really sweep it away instead of sparing the place for the sake of the fifty righteous people who are in it?”¹⁷²
- The destroying angels also used the term to describe the punishment of the cities: “At daybreak the angels urged Lot on: ‘Get up! Take your wife and your two daughters who are here, or you will be swept away in the punishment of the city.’”¹⁷³
- After rescuing Lot and his daughters: “As soon as the angels got them outside, one of them said, ‘Run for your lives! Don’t look back and don’t stop anywhere on the plain! Run to the mountains, or you will be swept away!’”¹⁷⁴

The apostle Peter referred to the same act of destruction when he said that God “reduced the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to ashes and condemned them to extinction, making them an example of what is coming to the ungodly.”¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁰ Holladay lexicon, no. 5939.

¹⁷¹ Genesis 18:23, CSB. Unless otherwise specified, all Bible references in this article are to the Christian Standard Bible.

¹⁷² Genesis 18:24.

¹⁷³ Genesis 19:15.

¹⁷⁴ Genesis 19:17.

¹⁷⁵ 2 Peter 2:6.

The verb *τεφρώσας* is a form of *τεφρώω*. Frederick Danker gives only one definition for the term: to reduce to ashes. Louw-Nida defines it as “to destroy by reducing something to ashes.” It is a derivative of the noun *τέφρα* (ashes), which does not appear in the New Testament. In ancient Greek, *τέφρα* referred to the ashes of a funeral pyre, and was related to three other nouns: *τεφροδοχείο* (*tefrodochéio*, “ash tray; urn”), *τεφροδόχος* (*tefrodóchos*, “burial urn”) and *τεφροδόχη* (*tefrodóchi*, “ash pan; urn”).¹⁷⁶ But, *τέφρα* is not the same word that Malachi used to refer to those defeated in battle.¹⁷⁷

The verb *κατέκρινεν* is a form of *κατακρίνω*. This word was used of the specific condemnation of the death penalty Jesus received at his trial, leading to his execution on the cross.¹⁷⁸ The word is used of general condemnation,¹⁷⁹ or of the condemnation of Jesus’ generation for not recognizing him.¹⁸⁰ But the shadow of death is never far from that word in the New Testament. It is used of the fate that the woman caught in adultery almost encountered.¹⁸¹ It is used of the atonement of Christ on the cross — what it did to sin.¹⁸² Peter says that this condemnation (the death penalty) is “an example of what is coming to the ungodly.” This specific use of *κατακρίνω* is also reflected in two other New Testament texts. Mark 16:16 says that unbelievers will be *κατακριθήσεται*. This future passive use of the verb shows that the event of final punishment is in view. Likewise, 1 Corinthians 11:32 says that when believers allow themselves to be disciplined by the Lord, the end result is that we will not be *κατακριθῶμεν* when the rest of the world is condemned.

¹⁷⁶ <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/τέφρα>

¹⁷⁷ Malachi predicts that the Israelites “‘will trample the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day I am preparing,’ says the Lord of Armies” (4:3). The word for “ashes” here is *σποδός*, which is a more general term for ashes.

¹⁷⁸ Matthew 20:18; 27:3; Mark 10:33; 14:64.

¹⁷⁹ Romans 2:1; 8:34; 14:23; Hebrews 11:7.

¹⁸⁰ Matthew 12:42; Luke 11:31-32.

¹⁸¹ John 8:10-11.

¹⁸² Romans 8:3.

The specific means of condemnation Peter mentions is what the CSB version renders “extinction.” This is the noun καταστροφῆ, immediately recognized as the source for our English word “catastrophe.” It combines κατά (over) and στρέφω (turn), so the word “overturn” would be appropriate. Danker gives the words “ruin” and “destruction” as alternatives for translating the noun, and lists 2 Peter 2:6 as an example. He also says the word can imply “harm wrought by useless argumentation,” citing 2 Timothy 2:14 as an example of that meaning. So, the CSB uses “ruin” in that text. But “overturn” or “extinction” would work there too.

The next occurrence of סָפַח (*safah*) is in reference to Korah’s rebellion. Moses “warned the community, ‘Get away now from the tents of these wicked men. Don’t touch anything that belongs to them, or you will be swept away because of all their sins.’”¹⁸³ Here again, the imagery speaks of a cataclysmic loss of life and existence. The rebels under Korah were not isolated and tortured for eternity. They were swallowed up by the ground, wiped out of existence.

The CSB almost consistently translates סָפַח with words or phrases that imply complete destruction:

- destroy (Deut. 20:19)
- bring destruction to (1 Chron. 21:12)
- pile disasters on (Deut. 32:23)¹⁸⁴
- perish (1 Sam. 26:10)
- shave off (hair of head, legs and beard) (Isa. 7:20).
- take (a person’s) life (Ps. 40:14)
- be swept away (Gen. 18:23-24; 19:15, 17; Prov. 13:23; Jer. 12:4).

For some reason, the CSB translators chose “caught” for סָפַח (*safah*) in Isaiah 13:15. This would be the only translation of the word which does not necessarily imply destruction. But, a look at the entire verse shows that death is the punishment implied.

¹⁸³ Numbers 16:26.

¹⁸⁴ This form is actually a rare *hifil* pattern, signifying to gather together or pile up something.

“Whoever is found will be stabbed, and whoever is caught will die by the sword.” The CSB translators assumed (as do other versions) that this verse is an example of synonymous parallelism, so they rendered סָפָה as “caught” to match the idea of מָצָא (found) in the first part of the verse. The closest equivalent use would be David’s prayer that those trying to take (סָפָה) his life be ashamed and humiliated (Ps. 40:14). In any case, the fate of God’s enemies is clear from the verse: loss of life.

This overview of the Hebrew verb סָפָה (*safah*) in the Old Testament shows that it, like the other three words studied, consistently refers to destruction. *Safah* itself denotes a cataclysmic loss of life. It is used when the biblical authors wanted to describe a judgment event in which human lives were taken or swept away.

Also, just like the other three terms studied, the New Testament is shown to reflect the same idea. This is important because Robert Peterson’s criticism of Basil Atkinson’s linguistic study defending conditionalism was that it relied too heavily on the Old Testament meanings of words.¹⁸⁵ But, even Peterson admitted that Atkinson was “an accomplished linguist.”¹⁸⁶ He went back to the Hebrew words because they formed the linguistic background that readers of the New Testament had. Atkinson’s point was that these Old Testament words (like the four we have surveyed) have already provided theological content, and that content should not be ignored in favor of popular exegesis of a few obscure New Testament passages. This is especially true when we see the same Old Testament concepts reflected in the New Testament.

Three of the Old Testament instances of סָפָה in the Old Testament¹⁸⁷ are translated in the Greek Septuagint as συναπόλλυμι.

¹⁸⁵ Robert Peterson, “Basil Atkinson: A Key Figure for Twentieth-Century Evangelical Annihilationism” *Churchman* 111/3, 198-217.

¹⁸⁶ Peterson, 199. For an excellent general rebuttal of Peterson’s arguments against conditionalism, see Glenn Peoples, “Fallacies in The Annihilationism Debate: A Critique of Robert Peterson And Other Traditionalist Scholarship” *JETS*, 50/2 (June 2007): 329–47.

¹⁸⁷ Genesis 18:23; 19:15; Numbers 16:26.

This combination of σύν (with) and απόλλυμι (perish, or be destroyed) is found in Hebrews 11:31, which tells us, “By faith Rahab the prostitute welcomed the spies in peace and didn’t perish with those who disobeyed.” This passage is significant to the debate about final punishment because it shows that the New Testament authors had not gained some new understanding of the meaning of απόλλυμι. The author of Hebrews continued to use the word to reflect the idea of being swept away in death.¹⁸⁸

Ἀπόλλυμι itself is used in the Septuagint to translate הָפַד twice. In both Genesis 18:24 and Proverbs 13:23, the word refers to the taking of human life. This is the predominant use of the word in the New Testament as well.¹⁸⁹

Ἐξαίρω — meaning “to remove or drive away” — is used once,¹⁹⁰ Paul used that word when he suggested that someone be removed from the congregation at Corinth.¹⁹¹

Συνάγω — meaning “to gather together” — is used for הָפַד in Isaiah 13:15. This reflects the idea of judgment being a great harvest and is used in similar ways in the New Testament as well.¹⁹²

Ἀφανίζω is used for the killing of animals and birds in Jeremiah 12:4. The New Testament uses it for the destructive activity of moths and rust,¹⁹³ the fate of scoffers (i.e., they will perish)¹⁹⁴ and the fact that human life is like a vapor that will soon vanish.¹⁹⁵

Finally, הָפַד is translated with ἐξολεθρεύω in 1 Chronicles 21:12. The word means “to destroy” or “utterly root out something.” Peter used the word in his sermon at the temple. He warned that “everyone who does not listen to that prophet will be completely cut off from the people.”¹⁹⁶

¹⁸⁸ For more on the meaning of απόλλυμι, see: <https://www.afterlife.co.nz/2012/11/the-meaning-of-apollumi-ἀπόλλυμι/> and <http://www.rethinkinghell.com/2012/10/the-meaning-of-apollumi-in-the-synoptic-gospels/>; <https://www.afterlife.co.nz/2018/01/perish-the-thought/>.

¹⁸⁹ see Matthew 2:13; 12:14; 27:20; Mark 1:24; 3:6; 9:22; Luke 20:16.

¹⁹⁰ Psalm 40:14 (39:15 LXX).

¹⁹¹ 1 Corinthians 5:2.

¹⁹² Matthew 3:12; 13:30; Luke 3:17.

¹⁹³ Matthew 6:19.

¹⁹⁴ Acts 13:41.

¹⁹⁵ James 4:14.

¹⁹⁶ Acts 3:23.

When traditionalists go to the Old Testament looking for evidence of the eternal conscious torment theology, they find very little to help them with their objective. But, when we conditionalists go to the Old Testament, expecting it to reflect the fact that the wages of sin is death, we find ample corroborating evidence. The Bible consistently teaches that God’s permanent life is a gift he intends to give only to the redeemed. All others will be swept away in the permanent condemnation of the second death.

THE END AND THE BEGINNING (Looking ahead to issue XLV/1)

- The theme for the Spring 2019 issue will be Eschatology, looking at the doctrines of the last things.
- If you find anything written on eschatology, feel free to review it, pro and/or con.
- Letters to the editor are welcomed.
- Reviews of Advent Christian or conditionalist writings are always welcomed.
- Any biblical or theological papers (regardless of topic) are also encouraged.

PLEASE SUBMIT ALL LETTERS, ARTICLES OR REVIEWS BY EMAIL TO jeffersonvann@yahoo.com AND SPECIFY WHICH ISSUE THE ARTICLE IS INTENDED FOR OR WHICH ARTICLE THE LETTER IS RESPONDING TO.