

# Jesus and the end of life in the synoptic Gospels

Gary Yamasaki

**O**ne of the helpful findings of recent research on Jesus is the realization that he should be viewed as a Jew, steeped in his Jewish heritage, and functioning out of a Jewish worldview. So if we want to understand Jesus's comments on death in the synoptic Gospels, we must read them against the backdrop of how Jews of his day viewed death. We must consider the Jewishness of Jesus.

## Death in Jewish thought

B. A. Mastin summarizes the Hebrew view of death reflected in all but a few isolated passages of the Old Testament: "For the Israelite, man consisted of spirit and body joined in a firm unity, so that

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without the body man could not be properly said to exist. The dead inhabited Sheol, which is quite different from the later hell; it is the 'land which is not a land,' the place of gloom and despair and nothingness which has been emptied of everything that can in any way make life desirable; and above all else it is usually represented as distant from God."<sup>1</sup>

In Hebrew thought body and spirit are seen as a unity. The belief that the spirit leaves the body at death is not Hebraic; it

came into Christianity through Greek thought, which is characterised by a dualism of body and soul. The Greeks saw the body as a prison of the soul, and death as effecting a release of the soul from that prison.<sup>2</sup>

Mastin's assertion that the dead "inhabit" Sheol implies that the dead are actually still alive in some sense. However, Lou Silberman describes the dead in Sheol as "shadows, shades, ghosts in this far land . . . echoes of the living; perhaps they are even fading echoes."<sup>3</sup> So it is probably better to say that the dead

“exist” in Sheol—exist, but “have no experience either of God or of anything else.”<sup>4</sup>

Further, the traditional understanding of Sheol does not include any cognizance of a point at which this state of existence would end. However, two passages in the Old Testament reflect a significant evolution from this position:

*Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise.  
O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy!  
For your dew is a radiant dew,  
and the earth will give birth to those long dead. (Isa. 26:19)*

*Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall  
awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and  
everlasting contempt. (Dan. 12:2)*

These two passages indicate a belief in life after death—life resulting from a resurrection of the dead at a final judgment.

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testamental period. In these writings, existence in Sheol becomes an intermediate state—existence during the time between one’s death and the resurrection of the dead at the end of time. This intermediate state is often referred to as sleep; at death one falls asleep, to be awakened at the resurrection.

In addition to the shift in portrayal of Sheol as an intermediate rather than a permanent state, the understanding of the nature of existence in Sheol undergoes change. In contrast to the older view—existence without experience—the intertestamental literature

begins to suggest that already in Sheol the righteous experience reward and the wicked experience punishment.

At first glance, the view of Sheol in these intertestamental writings appears to parallel the traditional Christian conception of reward in heaven and suffering in hell. However, the experiences of reward and suffering in Sheol are seen as temporary; it is only at

the resurrection that eternal reward and eternal suffering commence. Therefore, experiences in Sheol can be thought of as foretastes of the ultimate destinies of the dead.

### **Death in the synoptic Gospels**

In the synoptic Gospels, death is not a prominent topic; Jesus's focus is clearly on the here and now. In the instances when death is mentioned, the texts reflect the view of death contained in the intertestamental literature. For example, a belief in Sheol and the coming resurrection underlie this exchange: "Another of his disciples said to him, 'Lord, first let me go and bury my father.' But Jesus said to him, 'Follow me, and let the dead bury their own dead'" (Matt. 8:21-22; par. Luke 9:59-60). Jesus is not denying his would-be follower the few days' time we need to bury our dead. Rather, he is addressing a delay of up to a year. The Jewish burial practices of his day were developed to prepare the deceased for resurrection at the end of their stay in Sheol. When people died, their corpses were placed on a shelf in a tomb. At the end of a year, when the flesh had decomposed, the bones were gathered and placed in an ossuary, a limestone container, and put in a niche in the tomb.<sup>5</sup> There they remained, ready to be restored to life at the resurrection.

The intertestamental view of death is even more apparent in Matthew's description of events surrounding the death of Jesus: "The tombs . . . were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised" (27:52). Here Matthew's reference to people who had fallen asleep is to those who were in Sheol.

A passage in which Jesus appears to reflect a belief in Sheol is the account of Sadducees confronting him on the question of the resurrection (Matt. 22:23-33; Mark 12:18-27; Luke 20:27-40). Because the Sadducees held that only the Torah was authoritative, they rejected the concept of the resurrection of the dead, which they claimed was not found in the books of Moses. In the Gospel story they pose a dilemma designed to force Jesus to admit that there is no resurrection. In response, Jesus says, "Have you not read in the book of Moses, in the story about the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is God not of the dead, but of the living" (Mark 12:26-27). Jesus's response indicates that he sees the

long-dead Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as being alive. His comment is consistent with the belief in Sheol prevalent at the time.

In two passages from the Gospel of Luke, Jesus's words indicate not only that he believes in Sheol, but also that he conceives of it as consisting of a part for the righteous and a part for the wicked. The first passage is the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31). This story chronicles the fate after death of a poor man named Lazarus, who lived his life in misery, and a rich man who lived his life in luxury. In Jesus's story the poor man is taken to be with Abraham, and the rich man is taken to a place of torment (vv. 22-23a). The rich man is said to be experiencing torment "in Hades" (v. 23).

The Greek term *Hades* is often understood simply as a designation for hell. However, its use in both the Jewish literature of the intertestamental period and in the New Testament suggests that *Hades* is simply a Greek designation for the temporary holding place of the dead designated *Sheol* in Hebrew. So the rich man's torment is not eternal punishment resulting from final judgment against him, but rather temporary punishment in Sheol as he awaits the final judgment at the resurrection of the dead. And what of the poor man? The parable does not specifically say that he is also in Hades, but the fact that the rich man can see him (v. 23b) suggests they are both in the same place, but separated by a great chasm (v. 26). If that is the case, the poor man would be in what A. J. Mattill calls "the happy side" of Hades.<sup>6</sup>

Another passage in Luke's Gospel indicating Jesus's view of Sheol is his interaction with a thief who is being crucified with him (Luke 23:39-43). In response to the thief's repentant words, Jesus says, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (v. 43). The traditional interpretation of this verse holds that the thief went directly to heaven upon his death to be with Jesus there. However, Mattill points out that according to Luke himself, Jesus did not enter heaven immediately upon his death, but rather entered Hades. Peter's address in Acts 2 cites David as prophesying the resurrection of Jesus:

*"For David says concerning him,  
'I saw the Lord always before me,  
for he is at my right hand so that I will not be shaken;*

*therefore my heart was glad, and my tongue rejoiced;  
moreover my flesh will live in hope.  
For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,  
or let your Holy One experience corruption.”*  
(Acts 2:25-27)

*David spoke of the resurrection of the Messiah, saying,  
“He was not abandoned to Hades,  
nor did his flesh experience corruption.”* (Acts 2:31)

According to Luke, then, when Jesus died he entered Hades to await his resurrection and ascension. His words to the thief, “Today you will be with me in Paradise,” do not refer to heaven but to the happy side of Hades.<sup>7</sup>

In these passages Jesus seems to understand death much as many of his contemporaries did, but one Gospel passage shows Jesus challenging some established views on death. Luke 13:1-5 reports an incident in which Jesus is informed about some Galileans who were massacred at the behest of Pilate. Jesus responds, “Do you think that because these Galileans suffered in this way they were worse sinners than all other Galileans? No, I tell you . . .” (v. 2-3a). And he continues with another incident: “Or those eighteen who were killed when the tower of Siloam fell on them—do you think that they were worse offenders than all

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the others living in Jerusalem? No, I tell you . . .” (vv. 4-5a). Jesus’s responses refute the view common in his day that tragedies should be understood as acts of God in response to sin.<sup>8</sup> Here, Jesus asserts that the deaths of these people were not the result of God’s judgment on their sins; in Jesus’s mind, physical death is not linked with divine judgment.

On this occasion, Jesus seizes the opportunity to explain a significance he attaches to death. In refuting the belief that these

Galileans and Jerusalemites met their deaths by the hand of God because of their sins, Jesus issues a warning to his hearers to repent while there is still time (vv. 3b, 5b). So death is significant in that it marks the end of one’s opportunity to repent. For Jesus, the

most important issue is response to his offer of the kingdom of God, and he brings up the specter of death only to emphasize the urgency of making that response.

While Jesus may use the possibility of imminent death to urge a decision for the kingdom, he also makes it clear to those who do make such a decision that following him may actually bring about their death. But he is quick to add that death suffered under such circumstances is not to be feared. As he sends his disciples out to proclaim the kingdom, he says, “Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt. 10:28).

Here again Jesus reflects the Jewish view of death common during his time. He exhorts his disciples not to fear physical death—which would merely consign them to Sheol for a time—but rather to fear the possibility of eternal consignment to hell at the last judgment. In Jesus’s mind, physical death is a relatively minor matter, for it can be overcome by the resurrection of the

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dead at the last judgment. Of paramount importance is receiving a favourable judgment at the resurrection, and that requires covenant loyalty to God while one remains among the living. For Jesus, a life of discipleship takes precedence over preserving one’s physical life.

What is the significance of Jesus’s own resurrection for belief in the general resurrection of the dead at the time of final judgment? At one level, God’s raising Jesus from the dead acts as a divine stamp of approval for

Jesus, a vindication of all that Jesus did and said, including his belief in the future resurrection of the dead. So Jesus’s resurrection serves as God’s assurance of a future general resurrection. The events recounted in Matthew 27, noted above, function as further support for this assurance. The report that at Jesus’s death “the tombs also were opened and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (v. 52) marks a departure from the schema that expected resurrection only at the final judgment. This raising of the dead anticipates the coming general resurrection, and so provides hope to the saints of Jesus’s day.

## Conclusion

What implications for how the church understands the end of life might follow from this survey of the subject in the synoptic Gospels? For one thing, this review should prompt us to exercise some care about what we say when people die. Often Christians simply say that the dead have “gone to heaven.” Does such an understanding of death really accord with the way death is understood in the synoptic Gospels? Or is our belief that the souls of the dead leave their bodies and go off to heaven more the product of Greek influence on the development of Christian thought than the product of Jesus’s understanding of death?

This survey should inform our view not only of death but also of life. Christians today often emphasize the sanctity of life. For Jesus in the synoptics, life is indeed precious because it is given by God, and because it affords us opportunity to respond to the call to participate in God’s kingdom. But in a culture that seeks to prolong youth and avert death at all costs, the church’s emphasis on the sanctity of life may sometimes be seen as attaching an absolute value to preserving our biological life. In contrast, for Jesus something else is of much higher value than preserving our physical existence: living a life of covenant loyalty to God. A life of discipleship, a life lived in allegiance to the kingdom of God, is so important that it is even worth risking our lives to pursue it.

A pastoral theology rooted in the synoptic tradition will remember that the nearness of death makes response to Jesus’s call an urgent matter. But Jesus reminds us that death is not to be viewed as divine judgment on the individual, nor is it something to be feared. The disciples’ security rests not in their power to stave off death but in the God whose power over death is already evident in Jesus’s resurrection, which is an anticipation of their own.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> B. A. Mastin, “Death in God’s Design,” *Theology* 64 (1961): 374.

<sup>2</sup> A. J. Mattill Jr., *Luke and the Last Things: A Perspective for the Understanding of Lukan Thought* (Dillsboro, N.C.: Western North Carolina Press, 1979), 26.

<sup>3</sup> Lou H. Silberman, “Death in the Hebrew Bible and Apocalyptic Literature,” in *Perspectives on Death*, ed. Liston O. Mills (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1969), 21.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>5</sup> This disposition of the bones was known as the second burial, and it is the subject of the Matthew 8 passage. See Bruce J. Malina and Richard L. Rohrbaugh, *Social-Science*

*Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 56, 347–48.

<sup>6</sup> Mattill, *Luke and the Last Things*, 31.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 33–34; Mattill finds support for this position in passages from 1 Enoch and the Noachic fragments of 1 Enoch in which the term *Paradise* is used for the abode of the departed righteous, and in a rabbinic comment on 1 Samuel 28:19 dated to the third century C.E.

<sup>8</sup> See I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 553, for a list of examples of this type of thinking.

### **About the author**

Gary Yamasaki is professor of New Testament at Columbia Bible College, Abbotsford, B.C. He is the author of *John the Baptist in Life and Death: Audience-Oriented Criticism of Matthew's Narrative* (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, Ltd., 1998).