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Death, Dying: New Testament

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[361] The NT often refers to death and dying as basic human and altogether natural processes of life. At the same time, it pays particular attention to the role of the death of one man: Jesus of Nazareth. It thus raises the question of the importance of this singular death for the universal human experience of death and dying. In this regard, the NT gives no simple response, but rather offers a wide range of relationships, which include anthropological, soteriological, and theological aspects. This article refers only to the specific death of Jesus where it is explicitly related to death and dying as universal human phenomena.

1. Presence of Death

Most people in ancient times did not grow as old as they do today. For the population of the Roman Empire, the average life expectancy was less than 30 years; infant mortality was very high. Both pagan and Jewish grave inscriptions, intended to preserve the memory of the deceased, often mourned the earliness and arbitrariness of death; hopes for an afterlife are rarely mentioned. In view of the proximity of death, one is urged to enjoy the gift of even a short life (cf. 1 Cor 15:32). [362] The Christian message presents an alternative to a life darkened by ubiquitous death (1 Thess 4:13–14; 1 Cor 15:17–19; Heb 2:14–15; Matt 4:16 and Luke 1:79 referring to Isa 9:1). Death is rarely personified, yet Thanatos (Death) appears as a ruler (Rom 5:14, 17; cf. Wis 1:14), an enemy (1 Cor 15:26, 54–55; cf. Wis 1:16), and a demonic horserider (Rev 6:8, Death as horseman with Hades; both are destroyed, 20:14). Death is a metaphor for human enslavement to sin, and the world is contrasted with life, a divine gift of salvation (Rom 7:10–8:2; John 5:24–25; 1 John 3:14; and Luke 9:60).

2. Death and Burial

The burial customs of ancient Israel remained in effect in Judaism at the time of Jesus, including ritual washing immediately after death (after three days,

decomposition sets in, cf. John 11:39) and possibly anointing (Mark 16:1; John 19:39–40). The dead were carried to the grave in a funeral procession (Luke 7:12). Burial in Palestinian soil was increasingly popular with Jews of the Diaspora. Grave visits were frequent, mostly within the first three days and after one month (cf. Mark 16:1–8 par.). Special appreciation and reverence were bestowed on the (sometimes monumental) tombs of prophets and other pious persons, especially those of martyrs (Matt 23:29 par.; cf. *Liv. Pro.*).

Tombs from the NT period are mainly found in the wider area of Jerusalem, usually small and simple, often enclosed with large stones; especially typical are niches (*loculi*) for the dead. The tomb that Joseph of Arimathea provided for Jesus cannot be historically confirmed (both in regard to the knowledge of the early church [according to Mark 15:47] and with respect to its continuity with the cave tomb discovered by Constantine in 325/26 [*Aedicula* of the Holy Sepulchre]). In the Herodian period, the bones (after approximately one year) are buried individually in ossuaries after re-anointing. This points to the increasing popularity of faith in personal resurrection.

3. World of the Dead and Visions of the Afterlife

Early Christianity shared the early Jewish spatial concepts of the afterlife, which in turn shared much in common with ancient Near Eastern and Aegean heritages (idea of the underground, gloomy world of the dead [hades] that mutates into hell [*Apoc. Pet.*; *Vis. Pau.*]). Yet Christianity differentiated itself in its concepts of afterlife. Increasingly, as a newer cosmology that placed the earth at the center of the celestial spheres gained ground, the afterlife was associated with the heavens (cf. Ephesians). As in contemporary Judaism, one observes a colorful spectrum of incoherent ideas, ranging from a bodily resurrection of the dead to forms of astral-angelic immortality. Unclear in all this as well is the juxtaposition of individual post-mortem and collective-historical eschatology.

[363] a. The Jesus tradition offers only few perspectives beyond the boundaries of death (Matt 8:11–12), due in part to the fact that this inceptive period of Christianity was still determined entirely by the imminent expectation of the kingdom of God.

Eschatological statements about heaven and hell were increasingly based on the expected destiny immediately after death (such as the phrases “entering into the kingdom” or “into life” [Matt 5:29–30; Mark 9:43–48; Luke 13:23–29; etc.] or the distinction between body and soul [Matt 10:28]). The parable in Luke 16:19–31 stages the reversal of conditions in this world and the hereafter. Luke, a Christian of the 3rd generation more strongly influenced by Hellenism, puts a particular emphasis on the post-mortem destiny of an individual (23:43; cf. 16:9; 20:36, 38; 21:19; Acts 7:55–59, 14:22). The theology of the early church increasingly distinguished the temporary dwelling of the deceased from their final fate (*1 Clem.* 5:4; 50:3–4).

b. The question of an intermediate state between individual death and cosmic consummation is also particularly suitable for Paul, since both ideas coexisted for him (cf. Phil 1:21–23 [martyr’s reward?] with 3:11, 20–21; 2 Cor 5:1–10 with 1 Cor 15:35–58). In John’s Gospel, Jesus promises to his disciples that upon his return, he will lead them up to their “homes” in his father’s house (14:2–3; cf. 12:26, 32; 17:24). Revelation differentiates the heavenly resting place for the souls of the pious who were violently slain (6:9–11; 14:13) from the kingdom of Christ (20:4–6) and the consummation which begins with the resurrection of the dead and the Day of Judgment (20:11–14). The martyrs, however, impatiently looked forward to God’s judgment and salvation, in which the whole people of God will be gathered before the throne of God (7:1–17; 14:1–5) and will reign with Christ (if not only martyrs are being considered here). As a rule, one expects the Day of Judgment after the resurrection of the dead (Christ as judge: Acts 10:42; 2 Tim 4:1), in the event it does not already take place immediately after death (Heb 9:27).

c. Some texts differentiate between the earthly and the final otherworldly death. Thus, Revelation warns of the “second death,” i.e., before the eschatological annihilation in the sea of fire (Rev 2:11; 20:6, 14; 21:8), while the earthly death looms before many or even all steadfast Christians (20:5–6). The eternal death forms the contrast to “(eternal) life” (Matt 7:13; John 3:15–16; Rom 9:22; 1 Cor 3:17; 15:18; Phil 1:28; Heb 10:39), sometimes identified with the eternal torments

of hell (Rev 20:10; cf. Matt 5:22, 29–30; 25:41). The martyrdom paraenesis of Matt 10:28 assumes the destruction of body and soul in hell.

4. Death and Guilt

As in ancient Judaism, there is an intrinsic connection in early Christianity between death and guilt (cf. Jas 1:15; 1 Cor 5:5; [364] 11:30; Rom 6:23). This is especially true for the reading of Gen 3, according to which mortality and death came into the world only through the fall of humanity (Rom 5:12–21; 8:18–22). The old aeon is marked by the sign of death, from which only Jesus Christ can save (Rom 6–7).

5. Jesus' Raising of the Dead and Jesus' Resurrection

a. The narratives on the resurrection of the dead in the Jesus tradition (Mark 5:21–43 par.; Luke 7:11–17; also cf. John 11:1–44; Acts 9:36–43; 20:7–12) pick up on those of the OT (1 Kgs 17:17–24 and 2 Kgs 4:18–37) and symbolize beyond the overcoming of a crisis a partial victory over the power of death (explicit in John 11:21–27). With this, the miracle worker Jesus fulfills not just an OT promise (an allusion to Isa 26:19 in Luke 7:22), but also significantly points ahead to his own destiny (cf. John 11:45–53).

b. Early Christianity professed a singular act of God in numerous formulaic confession-like phrases: God raised the deceased Jesus up from the dead (Rom 4:24; 8:11; 10:9; 1 Cor 6:14; 2 Cor 4:14; 1 Thess 4:14; esp. 1 Cor 15:3–5). The Gospels are completed by Easter stories (grave and appearance stories: Mark 16; Matt 28; Luke 24; John 20–21; cf. *Gos. Pet.* 35–60). The message and mission of the earthly Jesus are eschatologically confirmed through his resurrection by God. At the same time, there is a new self-definition of God which accompanies that of his saving action in Exodus (Exod 20:2; Num 15:41) and his eschatological resurrection of all the dead (Rom 4:17; 2 Cor 1:9). Early on, the concept emerges that Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of the resurrection of all believers (Acts 26:23; Rom 1:4; 1 Cor 6:14; 15:20, 23; Col 1:18; Rev 1:5). At the turn of the second century, the unique overcoming of death by the dead, buried and risen

Christ is condensed in the dramatic image of his descent into Hades (prepared in 1 Pet 3:19–21; 4:6).

6. The Resurrection of the Dead

a. Jesus, in his dispute with the Sadducees (Mark 12:18–27 par.), expresses the confidence of Israel in the faithfulness of God that no longer embraces only the living, as in most of the HB/OT, but now also the dead. Moreover, he not only shares the beliefs of many Jewish groups in the resurrection or an afterlife of the patriarchs (e.g., *T. Jud.* 25:1; 4 Macc 7:19; 16:25; cf. Luke 16:23), but also the expectation of an “angelic life” of those resurrected (cf. *1 En.* 15:6–7; *2 Bar.* 51:10). The theocentric basis for the resurrection of the dead probably goes back to the historical Jesus (cf. Matt 8:11–12 par.).

b. Because the Thessalonians were confronted with the first deaths, Paul based the Christian hope with faith in the resurrection of Jesus (1 Thess 4:13–18); salvation now includes, in addition to the living (as with previous eschatology), the dead as well (cf. *4 Ezra* 5:41–42; *2 Bar.* 30:1–2; 51:13). [365] In 1 Cor 15 he responded to Corinthian difficulties in understanding the belief in resurrection (vv. 12, 34–35; cf. Acts 17:32). As in 1 Thessalonians, the apostle expects to experience the second coming of Christ, including the resurrection of the dead (vv. 51–52; probably different: 2 Cor 1:8–9; 5:1–10; Phil 1:21–23). The proven theological necessity of resurrection in vv. 12–34 connects to an anthropological interpretation of the resurrection as God’s creation in vv. 35–58. The focus of the eschatological instruction is the victory of God over death (vv. 20–28, 53–57; with a mixed quotation from Isa 25:8a [like Theodotion] and Hos 13:14b). While the Christological confession defines God as the one who raised Jesus from the dead, the theological confession of the one and only God, who is “all in all” (vv. 28), looks forward to his pending overcoming of the power of death. It is the eschatological reign of God alone over creation which fully concretizes the unity of God according to Deut 6:4, the basic confession of Israel (vv. 28c; cf. Zech 14:9); for the Christians, this ancient Jewish hope won new plausibility in the resurrection of Jesus.

c. The Gospel of John deepens a traditional narrative of an awakening of the dead to a christological redefinition of “resurrection” and “life” (11:21–27; cf. 14:19; 5:24; 6:50–51; 1 John 3:14). John telescopes the present into the end time to such an extent that the pending future can no longer decisively surpass the true life dawning here and now (cf. 5:24–29). The entry into the heavenly world promised to believers (14:2–3; 17:24; cf. 12:26) is in this respect to be considered as a prolongation of the present salvific experience (14:23), whereas a later Johannine school will once again differentiate more strongly between the present and the future (1 John 2:28–3:3).

d. The final visions of the Revelation first deal with the destruction of death and the underworld (20:14), which is made possible by the victory over Satan and his entourage (20:10; cf. 19:20), and with the resurrection of the dead for the last judgment (20:13). In the new world of God, death with all its negative consequences will “no longer exist” (21:4; the night and the sea have also disappeared, 21:1, 25; 22:5); the stream of life and the tree of life symbolize eternal life. The mentioning of the destruction of death in the lake of fire (20:14) prepares the patristic linguistic creation of the “death of death,” which has been anticipated in the resurrection of Jesus (Athanasius, *Inc.* 27; 30).

7. Living with Death

a. The victory over death in Jesus’ resurrection fundamentally changes numerous experiences of death which believers are exposed to in the present world. In the Jesus tradition, death comes into view of those following Jesus Christ. Even Jesus requires of his disciples the willingness to suffer martyrdom (Luke 17:33 par.; Mark 8:35 par.; John 12:25). Mark designed his [366] gospel as a way to follow in the suffering and crucifixion of Jesus (esp. 8:27–10:52); the disciples, transparent for the Christians, experience the presence of their Lord in the midst of suffering – in acute distress as well as in the everyday hardship of life. The other two Synoptics also heavily emphasize the discipleship of suffering; with Luke, it continues in the world mission (Acts 14:22; 5:41; 9:16; 20:22; 21:13). In the Gospel of John, it is deepened christologically and connected with the promise of eternal life (12:23–

26; cf. 14:3; 17:24). The farewell speeches (esp. 15:18–16:33) encourage the preservation of life gained here and now (5:24; cf. 1 John 3:14) amidst a world darkened by death (12:35–36; 13:30) in spite of sorrow and fear, because Jesus has overcome the world (16:33).

b. Paul consistently correlates death in the lives of believers with the death of Christ. He presents the “conformity” of the believers with the crucified and risen Lord by drawing on older traditions, according to which the Christians participate in the death and resurrection of Jesus through baptism (esp. Rom 6:3–11). With Christ’s crucifixion and resurrection, the nature of death is transformed: death no longer causes separation from God’s life, but from the power of sin. This fundamental insight, which has its origin in the Easter “death of death,” is unfolded by Paul in temporal dimensions (Rom 5–8). The believers are freed from death as an ungodly power, although they are still subject to mortality. The Apostle himself clearly represents the suffering in communion with the crucified Christ (2 Cor 4:10–12; Gal 6:17; Phil 3:10–11; cf. the “peristasis catalogues” 1 Cor 4:11–12; 2 Cor 4:8–9; 6:4–10; 11:23–29; 12:10). In the eschatological resurrection, the bodies of those raised as well as of those still living will be transformed into divine glory (Rom 8:17–30; 1 Cor 15; Phil 3:20–21). In contrast, the Pauline school places the life in resurrection in the present, even more so than Paul himself (Col 2:12–13 [but cf. 3:3–4]; Eph 2:5–6; 5:14).

c. Thanks to the resurrection of Jesus, death and dying have lost their dread in the lives of believers. Relationships (with God, Christ, and one’s neighbor) now take the place of the formlessness that has marked death thus far, extending over both life and death: “If we live, we live unto the Lord, if we die, we die unto the Lord. Whether we live or we die, we are the Lord’s.” (Rom 14:7–9; cf. Phil 1:21; 2 Cor 5:14–15; Luke 20:38). With this de-dramatization of dying, the NT again approaches the realism – supported by serenity and confidence – of the HB/OT in dealing with death.

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