

Life-after-death in the Psalms

1. The Psalms regard death as something terrible (55:4)
2. The Psalms don't explicitly deny existence after death and in some places seem to affirm continued existence after death.
 - a) Ps.16:10 "...will not abandon me to the grave...will...fill me with...eternal pleasures at your right hand."; Ps.21 "surely you have granted him eternal blessings..."; Ps.49:15 "but God will redeem my life from the grave; he will surely take me to himself." Ps.23:6b "I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever" It might be that the psalmist is engaging in hyperbole but compare 49:14 with 49:15.
 - b) Other OT passages seem to suggest existence after death (e.g. the accounts of Enoch & Elijah being translated to heaven; David assured that he would join his dead child one day;¹ Samuel appearing to Saul through the witch of Endor {1Sam.28}; see also Ps. 73:24; Isa.26:14,19; 57:1f; Da.12:2-3).
 - c) The careful attention that the Hebrews paid to the remains of their dead suggest some notion of an afterlife (e.g. burial, burial rites, dis-internment and re-burial, defense of dead bodies from predators, rescue of dead bodies being dishonored by enemies and so on). This is typically used by anthropologists as evidence for such a belief, at any rate.
3. While the Psalms and the rest of the OT do not deny existence after death, what they do affirm about the post-mortem experience contrasts significantly from such descriptions in the NT.
 - a) The dead cannot remember or praise God (Ps.6:5; 30:9; 88:10-12; 115:17; Isa.38:18)²
 - b) The dead know, plan & do nothing (Ecc.9:10)³
 - c) Several significant passages use terms related to sleep/wake to describe a future state of the godly dead (e.g. Isal.26:14,19; 57:1f & Dan.12:2-3).

It is possible that death might have been a different state of being at one time. In the NT, however, death seems to have the status of a conscious spiritual state. Possibly, prior to Christ's resurrection the people of God entered a state of 'sleep' and that after Christ's resurrection, they awoke to eternal life.

But, Jesus story about Lazarus & the rich man, if not a parable, would suggest that sleep was not the state people's souls were in, prior to Jesus' resurrection.

We may have to remain ambivalent about the meaning of these statements for now.
4. The psalmist is trying to describe life, not afterlife.
 - a) Psalms are concerned with the future as it pertains to God's promises rather than the future in and of itself. That is, they are concerned with God as creator, sustainer, redeemer and king rather than, "What's going to happen to me when I die?"⁴
 - b) Psalms are concerned with polemics against paganism, that God alone controls death (Ps.139) as contrasted with Mot,⁵ Osiris,⁶ and others.⁷

¹ That he's comforted by this fact tends to argue against the notion that he, like his dead child would someday cease to exist.

² Some suggest these passages are to be understood from an earthly perspective: that the dead do not remember God in that they cannot testify to the living about God (i.e. the term 'remember' often means, not an internal mental state of recollection but a public testimony about God to others); that the dead do not praise God in the Temple congregation. Thus, it may be that the passages are not attempting to describe a postmortem experience at all.

³ Although, it needs to be said that Ecclesiastes affirms many things that are not true according to the rest of scriptures. The ungodly and even the godly, under duress, may say things that are theologically false without us concluding that they teach contradictory theologies (e.g. Job says it doesn't matter if we serve God or not; that God doesn't see his duress; that God would resort to power in the face of His own guilt over Job's trials, etc.).

⁴ Ps.71:20; 18:4f; 28:1; 30:1,3; 56:13; 27:4

⁵ Canaanite god of death

⁶ One of many gods associated with death in Egypt – a nation obsessed with the afterlife.

- c) Psalms are concerned with apologetics for God (Ex.19:5-6):
- He is both sovereign and benevolent toward individuals & nations – thus, a practical focus on the here and now would be expected.⁸
 - He enters into covenants with people (Abrahamic & Mosaic covenants) – thus, a focus on how those covenants work out here and now would also be expected.⁹
5. Words associated with death:¹⁰
- a) *sheol* or *se'ol* – grave; “a typical Palestinian tomb, dark, dusty, with mingled bones...” R. L. Harris *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, in VanGemeren p. 572
 - b) ^a*baddon* – destruction; used in parallel with *sheol* (Prov.15:11; 27:27) and *qeber* (Ps.88:11); it is the place where the body decomposes; personified as Satan (Rev.9:11).
 - c) *mawet* – death; the state of death, the place of the dead or the god that rules the place of the dead (e.g. Mot in Ugaritic literature).
 - d) *bor* – pit; synonymous with *sheol* (Ps.88:3; Prov.1:12; Isa.14:15); a place where people are powerless (Ps.88:4; 40:2); *bor tahtiyot* refers to the lowest pit.
 - e) *tahtiyot* – lowest parts of the earth; it referred to the netherworld in ANET but seems to be demythologized in the OT...meaning only the grave (Ps.88:6).
 - f) *dumah* – silence (Ps.94:17; 115:17).
 - g) *mahsak* – darkness; synonymous with *bor tahtiyot*, the lowest pit (88:6) and the place of the dead (143:3); as an emotional description it refers to alienation from friends (Ps.88:18).
 - h) *sahat* – pit (Ps.7:15 {c.f. 9:15, 35:7}) OR corruption (Ps.49:23; 55:23); it's sometimes correlated with retributive justice (Ps.94:13)

⁷ Indeed, God is the only actual god (Ps.74:14; 78:58) who is sovereign over all things. I just mentioned death because that is the focus of this particular paper.

⁸ Psalms 1, 2 & 4

⁹ When things go poorly, the pagans taunt with the words, “Where is your god?” Part of the focus on covenant is an explanation for that taunt. “Our god is powerful and merciful. The only reason you've succeeded against us is that He has permitted it due to our covenant violation.”

¹⁰ from W. A. VanGemeren, *Psalms*, In: *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, Frank Gaebelin, General Editor, Zondervan, Volume 5, p. 572.