

## WAKING UP TO ETERNITY

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### **INTRODUCTION**

My brother-in-law, Ralph, nicknamed Cowboy, died in 2014. Ralph had been a horseman and avid roller skater practically up to the end. From as early as they could walk, he took his children and grandchildren to the roller rink for his favorite form of physical exercise. They loved him for it and participated with him in his skating enthusiasm throughout the varying stages of their own lives. Then at his funeral, as they sobbed quietly and comforted each other in their loss with embraces, strained smiles, and understanding nods, as is often the case, the eulogist proclaimed the familiar sentiment: “Ralph is up in heaven now looking down on us.” The eulogist said, “I can just see him now, not walking, but skating all over heaven, up and down the streets of gold!” Most of

the family, especially Ralph's children and grandchildren, found comfort and rejoiced in that thought.

In his article "Waking Up to Eternity," from which the title for this paper is taken, Philip Rodonioff says regarding the funeral for his grandmother, his first funeral: "I was just a child and what remained in my memory was the sadness, the cloudy emotions, and the 'grayness' of it all. Later, as a medical doctor, I encountered death more frequently, but I never became accustomed to it."<sup>1</sup>

Niels-Erik Andreassen wrote, "Like an unwelcome guest making frequent calls, death walks boldly into our families to claim our loved ones."<sup>2</sup> John Dybdahl added: "All of us have an interest in the topic of death, because we all face it in our future until the Second Coming of Christ. But what is death? What happens to people when they die? Are people conscious in death? Where do immortality and everlasting life come into a person's life? Can the dead communicate with the living? Is the grave the ultimate end? These and other questions have been of special interest from the dawn of history because they have eternal consequences."<sup>3</sup> Scripture, Genesis to Revelation, addresses this quest for understanding (Genesis 2:7; Psalms 6:5; 115:17; 146:4; Ecclesiastes 9:5; 12:7; Daniel 12:2; John 5:28–29; 11:11, 26; Acts 7:60; Romans 6:23; 1 Corinthians 15:51–55; 1 Thessalonians 4:13; Revelation 20:14).<sup>4</sup>

The challenge in the Garden of Eden that resulted in the fall of humankind was on this key understanding. What does it mean to die? By the time of the early church, two conflicting understandings of death had emerged, each responding to the problem of death in a different way: the biblical or Hebrew understanding of death as the sure end of life, which can be restored only by a new re-creative act of God, and the Greek understanding of death as the beginning of new life, with its affirmation of the soul's continued existence after separation from the body at death. Cullmann explained this difference dramatically in his illustrative contrast between the ways Jesus and Socrates faced the experience of dying.<sup>5</sup> As illustrated by the experience of Jesus, the Bible presents death as a foe, the enemy of God, and the destroyer of life. On the

other hand, as illustrated by the experience of Socrates, Greek thought portrays death as a welcome friend, releasing a soul long imprisoned in the body into a new life of the spirit.

## ANTHROPOLOGICAL CONTEXT

In the introduction to the book *What Are Human Beings That You Are Mindful of Them?*, Artur Stele poses the essential questions for a study of life after death: What are human beings? Who am I? Where do I come from? Where am I going? He says, “These are questions that confront us all and which biblical anthropology seeks to answer.”<sup>6</sup> He sets the foundation for anthropological underpinnings in scripture and asserts that the passage in “Genesis 1:26 and 27 has been widely regarded as the key proposition of biblical anthropology.”<sup>7</sup>

Stele warns that it may also be fruitful to explore the connection between anthropological dualism and spiritualism in its diversity of expressions. He queries: To what extent have these two perspectives been connected throughout the history of ideas? Has there been a connection between demonology in dualism? He acknowledges, “Currently much emphasis is being placed on discoveries about the human body, including insights from microbiology and epigenetics, as making important contributions to our understanding of human existence. It seems that in recent discussions within philosophical anthropology the body as an essential substratum for human existence has been rediscovered.”<sup>8</sup>

Stele then notes, “Biblical anthropology is a very broad field of study and quite a difficult one, because it relates to almost every other major biblical teaching. To understand biblical anthropology requires an understanding, first of all, of the doctrine of Creation, as well as of hamartiology, soteriology, eschatology, and even ecclesiology.”<sup>9</sup> He cites eschatology as of special interest to Seventh-day Adventists and notes that concerning contemporary views of life after death, “It is here, in

connection with the biblical view of human destiny, of death and resurrection, that we can make significant contributions.”<sup>10</sup>

Whalen, reflecting on Burnet’s work on the concept of soul, shows that “beginning with Homer, Greek literature provides a wealth of speculation regarding the nature of human beings, death, and the afterlife. The earliest Greek conceptions of which we can be sure identify the human “soul” (psyche) with the breath that the dying person struggles to retain until at last the “ghost” is given up.”<sup>11</sup> He examines also Hebrew perspectives and, quoting James Arieti from “The Vocabulary of Septuagint Amos,”<sup>12</sup> points out, “When the Septuagint refers to the soul of a person it comprehends the whole being or life of the person and cannot be construed in terms of a bipartite (body-soul) or tripartite (body-soul-spirit) concept of human nature.”<sup>13</sup>

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Andreasen notes, “The contrast between the classical (Greek) understanding and the biblical (Hebrew) of death is profound.”<sup>14</sup> Following is a discussion of differences.

### *GREEK VIEW*

Prior to the emergence of the philosophers, in the time of Homer (ninth century BC), the Greeks believed that death brought an end to consciousness and thought, leaving only a bodiless, shadowy, unconscious “existence” (*Iliad* 23:69–107; *Odyssey* 11:204–23).<sup>15</sup> In mythology, for example, the hero Orpheus tells of his attempt to achieve a release for his wife from the underworld. The beliefs and assumptions are apparent that something of the individual continues to live after the death of the body.

Other ancient stories equally demonstrate the progression of thought on the afterlife. “By the time of Socrates (470–399 B.C.) and Plato (427–347 B.C.) soul immortality came to clear expression in

public discourse, as illustrated, for example, in the *Phaedo*, which records the last hours of Socrates's life. Socrates expressed his belief that at death the soul is freed from the impure body to live on independently, released from the corporeal."<sup>16</sup> Although Aristotle, Lucretius, and others challenged Plato's idea of an entity called a soul that was separate from the person or body, to this day Socrates's and Plato's theories of a continually existent soul separate from the body are reflected in a wide variety of worldviews.

From the earliest times, these views were considered comforting to those who had lost loved ones in death and assuring to those who faced it. It has been found in Hebrew literature that although from scripture they had a different perspectival foundation, Jewish people also entertained a view of a separately existing and immortal soul. "For example, 2 Maccabees 6:30 reports the death of pious Eleazer with these words: 'I am enduring terrible sufferings in my body under this beating, but in my soul I am glad to suffer these things because I fear him.' Another example is 2 Maccabees 12:43–45 which describes a sin offering of 2,000 silver drachmas for the purpose of making atonement for the dead."<sup>17</sup>

### HEBREW VIEW

The Old Testament root word for death and dying (*mw̄t*) occurs one thousand times in the Hebrew Bible in its various derivative forms.<sup>18</sup> The words for death all indicate the termination of life and all of its functions. In Acts 28:6 and Romans 7:8, the language for dead indicates a state of lifelessness, the opposite of being alive, as in Mark 12:27: "Probably the best explanation of death from a Hebrew standpoint is simply to describe it as the reversal of God's creation of human beings."<sup>19</sup>

The preponderance of biblical perspective on death is summed up in its characterization of death as a sleep (Deuteronomy 31:16; 1 Kings 2:10; Job 14:12; Daniel 12:2; Matthew 9:24; 27:51, 52; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 1 Corinthians 15:18, 51; 1 Thessalonians 4:13). "The symbol of sleep illustrates well both the biblical understanding of death and its

concept of resurrection, an event similar to an awakening (1 Thessalonians 4:15–18).”<sup>20</sup>

The Bible favors the metaphor of sleep to describe the condition in death (Deuteronomy 31:16; 1 Kings 2:10; Job 14:12; Daniel 12:2; Matthew 9:24; 27:51–52; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 1 Corinthians 15:18, 51; 1 Thessalonians 4:13). In his exhaustive study of the sixty-six uses of the term Sheol in Hebrew Bible, Erik Galelnicks found no support for the association of the term with an after-death experience or an underworld in which the dead are conscious. Rather, he demonstrated the opposite.<sup>21</sup> Genesis 3:19 is clear in reference back to chapter 2, verse 7 as it says, “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread; Till you return to the ground, For out of it you were taken; For dust you *are*, And to dust you shall return.”<sup>22</sup>

Yet, while the biblical view of death as an unconscious state (sleep) awaiting the resurrection continued in the early church, over time the apparently incompatible views became blended in Christian teachings on life, death, the soul, an intermediate state, resurrection, and the final judgment.<sup>23</sup> These amalgamations continue to this day. In fact, it appears that “the majority of Christian traditions, as well as non-Christian religions, believe strongly in the immortality of the human soul.”<sup>24</sup>

While for this treatment we draw rather discrete lines of distinction, in reality the lines are not as clear. Note Ruppert’s conclusions from his assessment of various views on the topic of life after death. He says, focusing here on Seventh-day Adventist beliefs:

While there are several verses that would indicate that there is no consciousness after death (Eccl 9:5–6, 10; Ps 6:5), Jesus clearly taught that there is a distinction between body and soul. “And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell” (Matt 10:28). . . . Anyone can kill another person’s body but his soul is not killed. . . . John also spoke of both body and soul as being two parts of our being. “Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers” (3 John 2). The implication

is obvious that our body may or may not be healthy but our souls can prosper regardless of what is happening to our body. . . . The writer[s] of Hebrews, James, and Peter imply that our souls are a separate part of us destined for eternity (Heb 13:17, James 1:21, 5:20; 1 Peter 1:9).<sup>25</sup>

## SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST PERSPECTIVES

Nevertheless, in contrast to the belief in an inherently immortal soul that exists independently of the body, Seventh-day Adventists believe that scripture emphasizes repeatedly that the human person, or soul, is one whole unit of physical body and spirit, and that ceases at death. These beliefs are foundational to many related concepts of the state of the dead. Seventh-day Adventist understandings on human nature, death, and the resurrection compose one interrelated system of knowledge.

First, interpretations of scripture that determine Seventh-day Adventist beliefs on death include the following underlying principles:

1. Only God is innately immortal (1 Timothy 6:16).
2. Immortality is a gift from God to the saved (1 Thessalonians 4:16).
3. Death is a sleep until Christ returns (1 Thessalonians 4:13–15; 1 Corinthians 15:6, 18, 20).<sup>26</sup>

The Seventh-day Adventist Church expresses its foundational beliefs in the *Twenty-eight Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church*. These beliefs constitute the church's understanding and expression of the teachings of scripture. Among these are specific beliefs about death and resurrection that are fundamentals to the Seventh-day Adventist faith base.

For this discussion, we consider two of the fundamentals, although to achieve a full understanding of Seventh-day Adventist beliefs one should study all twenty-eight for context and interrelatedness. However, present space will not permit that study.

The first for this discussion is the Seventh-day Adventist Church's Fundamental Belief 7, "The Nature of Humanity":

Man and woman were made in the image of God with individuality, the power and freedom to think and to do. Though created free beings, each is an indivisible unity of body, mind, and spirit, dependent upon God for life and breath and all else. When our first parents disobeyed God, they denied their dependence upon Him and fell from their high position. The image of God in them was marred and they became subject to death. Their descendants share this fallen nature and its consequences. They are born with weaknesses and tendencies to evil. But God in Christ reconciled the world to Himself and by His Spirit restores in penitent mortals the image of their Maker. Created for the glory of God, they are called to love Him and one another, and to care for their environment.<sup>27</sup>

The key concept in this belief statement is that each human being was created as an indivisible unity of body, mind, and spirit, dependent upon God for life and breath and all else. This belief emerges from an understanding of the following biblical passages within the broader context of scripture (Genesis 1:26–28; 2:7, 15, 3; Psalms 8:4–8; 51:5, 10; 58:3; Jeremiah 17:9; Acts 17:24–28; Romans 5:12–17; 2 Corinthians 5:19, 20; Ephesians 2:3; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 1 John 3:4; 4:7–8, 11, 20).

From his research in theological anthropology, LeRon Shults observes, "In the last two centuries, biblical scholars have increasingly moved toward a consensus that both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament provide a holistic model of the human person."<sup>28</sup> Richard Davidson goes to the creation account in his alignment with this view. In his claims on the constitution of the human being, Davidson declares, "A virtual consensus within biblical scholarship considers the opening chapters of Genesis as foundational for the rest of the canon,"<sup>29</sup> and quotes John Rankin, "Whether one is evangelical or liberal, it is clear that Genesis 1–3 is the interpretive foundation of all Scripture."<sup>30</sup>

"Genesis 1," he asserts, "presents humanity as created in the image of God (*imago Dei*), while the constitution of humans is set forth in

Genesis 2.”<sup>31</sup> Genesis 1 says: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. . . . Then God said, “Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness. . . . So God created man in His *own* image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them” (Genesis 1:1, 26–27).<sup>32</sup> Genesis 2 states, “And the LORD God formed man *of* the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Genesis 2:7).

Davidson acknowledges, “It has become increasingly apparent that Genesis 2:7 (like 1:26) articulates a wholistic view of the human being; [that] he/she does not *have* a soul, but *is* a soul, a psychophysical unity. Genesis 2:7 gives the basic ‘formula’ for the constitution of humans: ‘dust’ + ‘breath of life’ = ‘soul.’”<sup>33</sup> Genesis 2:7 says, “Then the Lord God formed man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being” (Gen. 2:7). So, again, the schematic formula for human life is: dust of the ground (*’āpār min hā ’ḏāmāh*) + breath of life (*nišmat hayyim*) = living being (*nepeš hayyāh*).<sup>34</sup>

In the Flood narrative, the phrase “breath of life” in Genesis 2:7 is equivalent to “spirit of life” or the longer form, “breath of the spirit of life” (Genesis 6:17; 7:22).<sup>35</sup> (We also say heart when we mean mind.) The presentation in Genesis 2:7 makes clear that the breath is not a conscious entity within the human being, but rather it is the “animating ‘life principle’ or ‘vital power’ bestowed by God on living beings.”<sup>36</sup> Of the 378 times the term refers to humans in the Old Testament, it is used in regard to human dynamic vitality.<sup>37</sup>

The Hebrew word for “being” means life or person, not an eternal separate entity. The Bible is consistent in its discussion of life and death. If life came when God formed humans from the elements of the earth and breathed life into them, death is described as the exact opposite. Ecclesiastes 12:7 says, “Then [at the point of death] the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it.” Death unravels the association of God’s breath or spirit with the elements of the earth, and the person as living being ceases to exist

(see Psalm 115:17; 146:4; Daniel 12:2; John 11:11–14; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–14).<sup>38</sup>

In Genesis 2:7 the Hebrew word used 754 times in the Old Testament and translated as “person,” “being,” or “individual” consistently never refers to an “indestructible core of being” that lives beyond the physical being. Davidson notes, “Since the early 1950s and the rise of the biblical theology movement, this view has become the standard interpretation, leaving no room for a platonic/philonic dichotomy of body and soul. Rather, the picture of the constitution of humans throughout the Hebrew Bible is one of wholism.”<sup>39</sup>

Francis Nichol observes, “The word ‘to form,’ *yašar*, implies an act of molding and fashioning into a form corresponding in design and appearance to the divine plan. The word is used in describing the activity of the potter (Isa. 29:16; 49:5; etc.), of the goldsmith fashioning idols (Isa. 44:9; Hab. 2:18), and of God, who fashions various things, among others, the light (Isa. 45:7).”<sup>40</sup>

God did not simply speak man and woman into existence but rather formed each of them using his hands, as it were, and man (Hebrew *’adam*) is created from the dust of the earth (Hebrew *’adamah*) and not from divine matter as in other contemporary creation accounts. He will return to dust when he dies (Genesis 3:19).<sup>41</sup>

From the Source of all life the life-giving principle [breath, or *neshamah*] entered the lifeless body of Adam. The agency by which the spark of life was transferred to his body is said to be the “breath” of God. The same thought appears in Job 33:4, “The breath [*neshamah*] of the almighty hath given me life.” Imparted to man, the “breath” is equivalent to his life; it is life itself (Isa. 2:22). At death there is “no breath [*neshamah*, life] left in him” (1 Kings 17:17). . . .

When the lifeless form of man was infused with this divine “breath,” *neshamah*, of life, man became a living “soul,” *nephesh*. The word *nephesh* has a variety of meanings: (1) breath (Job 41:21), (2) life (1 Kings 17:21; 2 Sam. 18:13; etc.), (3) heart as the seat of

affections (Gen. 34:3; S of Sol. 1:7; etc.), [and] (4) living being (Genesis 12:5; 36:6; Lev. 4:2; etc.). . . . Note that the *nephesh* is made by God (Jer. 38:16), and can die (Judges 16:30), be killed (Num. 31:19), be eaten (metaphorically, Eze. 22:25), be redeemed (Ps. 34:22), and be refreshed (Ps. 19:7, Heb.). None of this applies to the spirit, *ruach*, indicating clearly the great difference between the two terms. This passage may rightly be translated: “Man became a living being” (RSV). When “soul” is considered synonymous with “being,” we gain the Scriptural meaning of *nephesh* in this text.<sup>42</sup>

Next consider the Seventh-day Adventist Fundamental Belief 26, *Death and Resurrection*. It declares:

The wages of sin is death. But God, who alone is immortal, will grant eternal life to His redeemed. Until that day death is an unconscious state for all people. When Christ, who is our life, appears, the resurrected righteous and the living righteous will be glorified and caught up to meet their Lord. The second resurrection, the resurrection of the unrighteous, will take place a thousand years later.

The core of Seventh-day Adventist belief on this topic is that *death is an unconscious state for all people who will be resurrected when Christ appears at the Second Coming*. This belief emerges from an understanding of the following biblical passages within the broader context of scripture (Job 19:25–2; Psalm 146:3–4; Ecclesiastes 9:5, 6, 10; Daniel 12:2, 13; Isaiah 25:8; John 5:28–29; 11:11–14; Romans 6:23; 16; 1 Corinthians 15:51–54; Colossians 3:4; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–17; 1 Timothy 6:15; Revelation 20:1–10).<sup>43</sup>

## STATE OF THE DEAD

Ignatius of Antioch (ca. AD 107) wrote, “Labour together with one another; strive in company together, run together, suffer together, sleep together [in death], and awake together [in the resurrection], as stewards, and associates, and servants of God.”<sup>44</sup>

The dead know nothing (Ecclesiastes 9:5). They cannot talk or praise God (Psalms 6:5; 88:11; 115:17), their thinking and planning have ceased (Psalm 146:4), they do not sense God's presence (Job 7:21), and they have no hope (Isaiah 38:18).<sup>45</sup> Andraesen writes, "At death all ordinary life processes as we know them cease. In death work, and thus rewards, cease (Eccl. 9:5). Love, hate, and envy perish, along with participation in life's events (verse 6). Thought, knowledge, and wisdom no longer exist (verses 5, 10). The dead cannot lay plans (Ps. 146:4), and there is neither remembrance of the dead (Ps. 6:5; Eccl. 9:5) nor praise of God after death (Ps. 88:10, 11; 115:17; Isa. 38:18). The dead remain in the grave (Acts 2:29, 34)." He adds, "Biblical descriptions portray the experience of dying as slipping into an unconscious state in which all normal mental functions such as thinking, planning, loving, hoping, and believing cease"<sup>46</sup> (compare Ecclesiastes 9:5, 6, 10; Psalm 88:3–7).

Scripture does not teach that the righteous go to their reward or the wicked to their punishment immediately at death. Andraesen notes that the dead "are represented as sleeping until the resurrection (1 Thess. 4:14; Job 14:10–12). In the very day when the silver cord is loosed and the golden bowl broken (Eccl. 12:6), man's thoughts perish. They that go down to the grave are in silence. They know no more of anything that is done under the sun (Job 14:21)."<sup>47</sup> He adds, "Time, be it long or short, is but a moment to them. They sleep; they are awakened by the trump of God to a glorious immortality. 'For the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory' (1 Corinthians 15:52–54)."<sup>48</sup>

## THE RESURRECTION

Andraesen writes, "No one, whether saint or sinner, receives the final reward, salvation or damnation, at death. That must await the resurrection.

‘For the hour is coming when all who are in the tombs will hear his voice and come forth, those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the resurrection of judgment (John 5:28, 29; cf. Dan. 12:2).’ Death does indeed seal everyone’s fate according to what was done in life, but the dead themselves are unconscious of any human activities, as in sleep, awaiting the resurrection, the judgment, and their respective rewards (2 Cor. 5:1–4, 10; Heb. 9:27).”<sup>49</sup>

All matters associated with eternal life or death must therefore follow the resurrection, either the resurrection unto life—leading to an imperishable body, immortality (1 Corinthians 15:52–54), and the eternal presence of God (1 Thessalonians 4:17) for God’s Saints—or the resurrection unto death—bringing destruction and eternal obliteration for those who have rejected the salvation of God (Matthew 25:31–46; Revelation 20).<sup>50</sup>

The resurrection hope is firmly established in both the Gospels and the Epistles (Matthew 22:31, 32; Luke 20:27–38; John 11:24; 1 Corinthians 15:51–53; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18; Hebrews 11:19). “Jesus gave advanced assurance of this hope by raising the dead to life (Matt. 9:23–25; Luke 7:11–17; John 11:38–44), an assurance God affirmed by raising Christ from the dead, whereby all believers may enjoy eternal life (John 3:16; 5:25–29; 6:39, 40; 1 Cor. 15:20–23; 1 Peter 1:3; 1 Cor. 15:51–53; 1 Thess. 4:13–18).”<sup>51</sup>

### *THE ERADICATION OF DEATH THROUGH THE RESURRECTION*

Andreasen writes, “Following the resurrection, God’s gift of eternal life to all who believe in Christ will signify the end of the power of death and break its dominion over humankind (2 Tim. 1:8–10). Christ accomplished this through His own death and resurrection: ‘For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him’ (Rom. 6:9; cf. Rev. 1:18). A resurrection, unlike a resuscitation, does not cheat death of its power in the last minute

but effectively breaks the power of death. Hence ‘death no longer has dominion over him’ (Rom. 6:9).”<sup>52</sup>

A wonderfully animated illustration of the resurrection is found in Ezekiel 37:1–14:

The hand of the LORD came upon me and brought me out in the Spirit of the LORD, and set me down in the midst of the valley; and it *was* full of bones. Then He caused me to pass by them all around, and behold, *there were* very many in the open valley; and indeed *they were* very dry. And He said to me, “Son of man, can these bones live?”

So I answered, “O Lord GOD, You know.” Again He said to me, “Prophecy to these bones, and say to them, ‘O dry bones, hear the word of the LORD!’” Thus says the Lord GOD to these bones: “Surely I will cause breath to enter into you, and you shall live. I will put sinews on you and bring flesh upon you, cover you with skin and put breath in you; and you shall live. Then you shall know that *I am* the LORD.”

So I prophesied as I was commanded; and as I prophesied, there was a noise, and suddenly a rattling; and the bones came together, bone to bone. Indeed, as I looked, the sinews and the flesh came upon them, and the skin covered them over; but *there was* no breath in them.

Also He said to me, “Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man, and say to the breath, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Come from the four winds, O breath, and breathe on these slain, that they may live.”’” So I prophesied as He commanded me, and breath came into them, and they lived, and stood upon their feet, an exceedingly great army.

Then He said to me, “Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. They indeed say, ‘Our bones are dry, our hope is lost, and we ourselves are cut off!’ Therefore prophesy and say to them, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD: “Behold, O My people, I will open your graves and cause you to come up from your graves, and bring you into the land of Israel. Then you shall know that *I am* the LORD, when I have opened your graves, O My people, and brought you up

from your graves. I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I, the LORD, have spoken *it* and performed *it*," says the LORD."

Ezekiel's third vision (Ezekiel 37:1–14) depicts a resurrected nation. God's word and breath (Spirit) bring life back into the dead dry bones (37:4–5). Dybdahl writes, "It is the imagery about God who will resurrect the dead, exiled nation (v. 11) from the grave into life, giving them their land (v. 12), and a new spiritual life through His word and Spirit (vv. 12, 14; Titus 3:4–6)."<sup>53</sup> This illustration is a vivid portrayal of restoration of the individual in the resurrection as well. Kwabena Donkor summarizes:

The Bible teaches that in the resurrection God restores the body to life (Rom. 8:11; Phil. 3:20, 21). In other words, biblical resurrection is a bodily resurrection. Remember that when Christ was resurrected, the tomb was empty. But biblical resurrection is not the result of an eternal immortal soul reuniting with the new, physical body. In the Bible the word translated "soul" does not depict a self-subsistent, immortal entity. Scripture teaches that only God has immortality (1 Timothy 6:16) and an immortal soul in humans would mean that they have innate immortality. . . Resurrection is God's supernatural answer to the problem of death. (1 Cor. 15:52–54).<sup>54</sup>

## HERMENEUTICS

This may be a logical point at which to declare Seventh-day Adventist hermeneutical perspective. Hermeneutics, the study of methods for interpreting scripture or the science and art of the correct interpretation of the Bible, underlies comprehension in biblical interpretation. Therefore, any discussion of belief should contain a declaration of hermeneutical perspective and disclosure of methodology to aid the reader or hearer in accurate reception of the message.<sup>55</sup>

Ekkehardt Mueller observes, “A crucial and very practical issue today involves the question of which method should be employed to interpret Scripture, for interpretation is necessary, as pointed out even by Jesus (Luke 24:27).”<sup>56</sup> He affirms that Seventh-day Adventists rely on the historical-biblical method. He demonstrates that, “in contrast to most other approaches, the historical-biblical method acknowledges the self-testimony of Scripture and studies its phenomena.”<sup>57</sup>

Alberto Timm asserts:

The Christian church was originally built upon the hermeneutical platform of the Bible as it's on interpreter. Soon after the apostolate, however, the church began to move from that platform to accepting certain nonbiblical hermeneutical alternatives. The Scriptures came to be re-interpreted in many Christian circles from perspectives drawn from surrounding pagan cultures, cultural traditions, ecclesiastical authority, human reason, and even personal experiences. Major struggles and tensions arose between those who subscribe to such hermeneutical alternatives and those who try to re-orient the church back to its original hermeneutical platform.<sup>58</sup>

Sound hermeneutical principles for Bible interpretation are imperative. “The basic task of biblical hermeneutics is to determine what God has said in sacred Scripture and what it means for us today.”<sup>59</sup> Mueller declares regarding the historical-biblical method:

- It accepts the claim that God revealed himself (1 Samuel 3:21).
- God entered into a relationship with the human authors of scripture (Amos 3:7; Ephesians 3:5).
- God also revealed propositional truth and communicated messages (Daniel 10:1; Titus 1:3).
- God inspired the human office to share these messages with others (2 Timothy 3:16; 1 Peter 1:10–12; 2 Peter 1:19–21).
- Then the inscripturated message is the Word of God (Mark 7:10–13).<sup>60</sup>

Ron du Preez, in his examination of methods for applying biblical ethics in interpreting scripture, sets up a fivefold task with guiding questions:

1. Supplication—the submissive task: What does the Spirit desire to teach us?
2. Observation—the descriptive task: What does the specific passage say?
3. Synthesization—the integrative task: What do the Scriptures, as a whole, say?
4. Interpretation—the hermeneutical task: What does this text mean for us?
5. Application—the pragmatic task: What then shall we do?<sup>61</sup>

A valid and reliable hermeneutical process requires “a sound system of principles that allows the text to speak for itself through *exegesis*, a procedure that consistently leads truth out of Bible texts. *Hermeneutics* refers to the machinery, and *exegesis* to the method, of biblical interpretation.”<sup>62</sup> Gugliotto provides a tested six-step analytical procedure for exegesis found useful for personal growth, public teaching, or pulpit preaching.

1. *Contextual Analysis*: Locate the text in the larger body of revelation. Move through Old Testament to New Testament tracing the flow of the writer’s thought, considering where and how the selected text fits into the full book—the immediate context.
2. *Structural Analysis*: Analyze the writer’s literary style and determine the overall pattern. Identify characteristic features and categorize the passage by type of literature. Determine organization, views, main and supporting arguments, and the writer’s series of connected thoughts. Mark the starting and ending points of the topics and themes.
3. *Verbal Analysis*: Focus on individual words and details to discover the writer’s intentions. Explore the original setting

and the writer's language. Study unfamiliar words and decipher figures of speech and symbols. Define key terms within context.

4. *Cultural Analysis*: Investigate the historical-cultural background to the text using insights from history, anthropology, geography, and the environment. Seek to recover the original setting and immerse mentally in the writer's world.
5. *Theological Analysis*: Tie things together to build the whole story by expanding the range of study and relating the selected text to the rest of the Bible. Situate the passage in the broader context of the plan of salvation tracing it from promise to fulfillment to find its beginning and destination. Study its Old Testament roots or New Testament developments. Let earlier passages shed insight into later texts and later texts to understand earlier ones more fully.
6. *Homiletical Analysis*—Draw out the writer's meaning considering stylistic, physical, and psychological factors to connect that meaning in relevant ways to current context.<sup>63</sup>

## **SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST UNDERSTANDING OF CERTAIN DIFFICULT PASSAGES**

While many passages appear to be clear on the nature of humankind and the state of the dead, others are less so and indeed can present problems of apparent contradictions. A few of these passages pose serious questions in light of Seventh-day Adventist views of the biblical portrayal of life and death. However, a review of the weight of evidence indicates harmony with biblical concepts of the wholeness of the human construct and rejection of inherent immortality of the soul.<sup>64</sup> Refer to official Seventh-day Adventist Church commentaries for extensive examinations of these passages. Here is provided only a cursory study of several passages for insight into the Seventh-day Adventist positions.

The following examples are excerpts, particularly from Niels-Erik Andreassen, from the *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*.<sup>65</sup>

*LUKE 23:43*

Perhaps the passage cited most often in favor of immediate transport to Heaven at death is Luke 23:43, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise.” If read with a pause (or comma) after the words “Truly, I say to you,” this verse states that Jesus invited the second thief on the cross to accompany him to paradise that day, implying immediate transport to heaven at death and perhaps continued soul existence after death. The meaning becomes altered dramatically if the pause (or comma) follows the word “today.” In this case Jesus would promise, “Truly, I say to you today,” indicating a present promise of a future entrance into heaven and eternal life.

Unfortunately, the oldest Greek manuscripts come without punctuation, so we must examine this verse in its context to determine its precise meaning. The intention of the verse is to offer the repentant thief on the cross salvation. Thus, there is no discussion of eternal reward or punishment, about entrance to heaven or hell. Instead, the immediate context is the subject of salvation on a day of extreme trouble for three men. In his reply Jesus offered immediate assurance of salvation to the repentant thief.

Jesus would not enter his kingdom that day or even the next day (John 20:17). He only wanted to give the repentant man assurance of salvation that very day. Thus, Luke 23:43 teaches assurance of salvation but not admission to the kingdom at the point of death.

*2 CORINTHIANS 5:1–10 AND PHILIPPIANS 1:19–26*

Next are two passages that pose a similar problem. They seem to favor death over life on the grounds that death would bring the faithful into a special, immediate relationship with their Lord. But closer examination

of these texts reveals a different perspective, harmonious with the rest of the Bible.

The Apostle Paul divides human existence into three phases. The first, the present life in the flesh, is illustrated by an earthly tent in which we live and labor or by which we are clothed (2 Corinthians 5:1, 2; Philippians 1:22, 24). The second phase, death, is illustrated by nakedness, a state of being unclothed (2 Corinthians 5:3, 4). The apostle desires to avoid this phase through the experience of translation (1 Corinthians 15:51–57; 2 Corinthians 5:4), for nakedness represents an awkward condition in which he cannot benefit the church with his ministry (Philippians 1:24).

Elsewhere, Paul refers repeatedly to death as a sleep, confirming that death represents an inactive period during which one is unable to benefit the church, while not yet enjoying the presence of his Lord (1 Corinthians 15:6, 51; 1 Thessalonians 4:14). The third phase is represented by the life of resurrection and is illustrated by a building, a house not made with hands but made by God (2 Corinthians 5:1). Clearly this phase represents the apostle's ultimate aspiration, for it will bring him near the Lord (5:6, 8; Philippians 1:23).

Since this third phase is separated from the first earthly phase only by unconscious sleep with no sense of the passing of time for the deceased, it is natural for the text to juxtapose these two phases (Philippians 1:23). Only a resurrection from the dead or a translation from the living, not death itself, will bring the apostle to the last phase. For reasons already stated, he would rather not die (be unclothed) (2 Corinthians 5:9; Philippians 1:20–25). As for death, the state of nakedness, the apostle joins the biblical witness in decrying it and hoping for the day when “what is mortal may be swallowed up by life” (2 Corinthians 5:4).

#### *1 THESSALONIANS 4:14*

The troubling question here concerns those saints who have died and whom God will bring along with Christ. They will not accompany Christ from heaven to earth, but rather they will be raised from the grave to

accompany Christ to heaven, as evidenced by the context (compare 1 Corinthians 6:14; 2 Corinthians 4:14). The dead in Christ shall rise first, then Jesus turns to those who are alive, the resurrected with him. Those who have died in the Advent hope they will not be left behind (1 Thessalonians 4:15) but will rise to meet the Lord first, even before he turns his attention to those who are still alive (4:16–17).

#### *HEBREWS 12:23 AND REVELATION 6:9*

These two texts speak of “spirits” and “souls” as though they were persons who had died. In the first is found the expression “spirits of just men made perfect” (Hebrews 12:23), and the second refers to souls under the altar, “slain for the word of God and for the witness they had borne” (Revelation 6:9). Together they illustrate two different uses of symbolic language.

In the first case, the apostle draws a distinction between two groups: the original Hebrews who came to Mount Sinai (Hebrews 12:18–19) and the Christian Hebrews to whom the epistle is addressed and who have come to Mount Zion (12:22). As with that first assembly at Mount Sinai (12:18–21), this second gathering at Mount Zion consists of God’s saints, angels, humans, and Hebrew Christians, the firstborn of faith through the new covenant mediated by Jesus. They are not disembodied saints but real people, to whom the apostle appeals, “See that you do not refuse him who is speaking” (12:25).

The second passage symbolically describes events under the fifth seal (Revelation 6:9–11). It reports on the fate of Christian martyrs not yet avenged by God for their innocently spilled blood. Like the blood of innocent Abel crying to heaven for help (Genesis 4:10), so the blood of these martyrs, symbolically speaking, calls for God to attend to their case. The imagery of speaking blood is familiar in the Bible (compare Hebrews 12:24). It refers to the voice of the life represented by that blood, a life taken or given through the spilling of blood. The martyrs are told to wait (since two more seals remain to be opened) and to rest a little longer in their grave (Revelation 6:11). In this symbolic presentation of

the resurrection hope held by those who died long ago, the dead play no active role but must patiently wait for the time established by God. This confirms the biblical understanding that the dead rest in the grave until called forth at the time of the resurrection.<sup>66</sup>

## **CONCLUSION: THE SEVENTH-DAY ADVENTIST POSITION**

Some understand human nature in terms of trichotomism, which divides it into body, soul, and spirit. Practically, trichotomism comes close to dichotomism (a form of dualism) because it divides human nature into parts, with at least one able to live independently of the others. Some associate dualism with Greek thought and monism with Jewish thought. Modern Christian thinking tends in the direction of wholism, ascribing salvation to the entire human being, not just a separate soul.<sup>67</sup>

In the mid-nineteenth century, a position with adherence to wholism, advanced by eighteenth-century clergymen and scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, was adopted by the young Seventh-day Adventist Church for several reasons: (1) It represents the biblical view, free of philosophical speculation and ecclesiastical tradition; (2) it was held by the early church, reemerging during and after the Reformation; (3) it affirms the familiar biblical portrayal of death as a sleeplike unconsciousness, rejecting the view of the soul's continued existence after death; (4) it supports the biblical teaching that immortality is not inherent in the nature of the soul, or bestowed at death, but granted only at the resurrection from the dead; (5) it underscores the New Testament emphasis on Christ as the only way to eternal life without consideration of any merits accruing to the soul following death.<sup>68</sup> Andreasen offers an apt conclusion: "The wholistic understanding of human nature, coupled with the teaching of conditional immortality, has been advocated consistently from the pulpit of the Seventh-day Adventist Church since its founding."<sup>69</sup>

**NOTES**

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