Significant recent scholarship emphasizes the material and biblical evidence for the assumption within regular Israelite piety that the living may seek to relate to the dead, to contribute to their needs, and to benefit from their knowledge and powers; that clearly implies that the “dead” are in some sense actually alive.¹ In light of this possibility, we will here reconsider the attitudes to death and afterlife expressed in the piety of the Psalms.

According to a traditional critical understanding of this matter, generally these writings assume that this life is the only worthwhile life we have, though a small number of passages speak explicitly of a worthwhile afterlife.² Mitchell Dahood interpreted a much larger number of passages that speak of “life” as referring to an afterlife,³ but this thesis has not carried conviction. The present writer’s conclusion is that even passages that have been more commonly understood to refer to a worthwhile afterlife do not do so. The Psalter’s consistent hope is for fullness of life in this life, and it continues to maintain that hope even when it is most severely threatened; it is the same hope as is assumed by Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes. These strands of Israelite faith implicitly or explicitly opposed belief in a positive afterlife.


Death

What happens when someone dies? What happens after death is pictured in a way that reflects what happens to the body in particular.\(^4\) When someone dies, their body becomes lifeless and incapable of activity, though it does not cease to exist. Yahweh who gave their breath now takes it away (Ps. 104:29). Normally and ideally the body is put into a pit or a cave, where it joins the remains of members of the person’s family who have already died, or into a communal grave. Where necessary, the remains of the existent bodies, from which the flesh is now gone so that they comprise only bones, are moved to make room for the new corpse; the pit or cave is then re-closed.

So death involves going down to the soil (‘apar; 22:16, 30 [15, 29]), back to that from which we came (90:3)—deathly soil (22:16 [15]), where the worm consumes (Job 17:14). We go to destruction (Ps. 88:12 [11]).\(^5\) We go down to the pit (Ps. 28:1; 30:4, 10 [3, 9]; 88:5 [4]; 143:7). We go down to silence (115:17), to a place of darkness (49:20 [19]; 88:7, 13 [6, 12]; 143:3) like that of a deep ravine (23:4). Death is like an extreme form of sleep (13:4 [3]; 76:6-7 [5-6]; 90:5 MT). Job 3:11-19 especially emphasizes the point, no doubt with some irony: death is above all a place of rest, not least for people such as the tired, the prisoner, and the slave—and a sufferer such as Job. It is a sleep from which one never wakes (14:12). Ec. 6:4-5 also sees death as a place of darkness and rest but adds that there are advantages to never having seen what happens on earth (4:1-3).\(^6\)

Presumably the empirical evidence for the fate of the outer person suggests the conceptualization for the fate of the inner person or the

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\(^5\) NRSV transliterates as Abaddon, but the word has the article here, though not at Job 26:6; 28:22; 31:12; Prov. 15:11; 27:20.