

**What did Old Testament Believers think of life after death?
A Series on the Fate of Your Soul: Part 1**

Was Jesus the one who introduced the idea of life after death? What perceptions did Old Testament Believers have of the after life? Does the Old Testament make any mention of resurrection or life after death? While there are some who do not believe that the Old Testament reveals any firm doctrine, there are several instances where the Old Testament Believers attest to the reality of life after death.

1. Enoch (Gen 5:23-24).

The account of Enoch represents the earliest notion that human beings could inhabit the realms of God. The Hebrew root for the term “took” (Gen 5:24) refers to the snatching of a person’s body up to heaven. And because any mention of Enoch’s death is absent, this account elicits the theological question of whether Enoch was resurrected or received a glorified body without physical death.

2. The expression “gathered to his people” or “to go to his fathers.”

Some have mistakenly understood this expression to refer to the burial of an individual in their family grave or in the area of their ancestors. However the biblical text makes a distinction between this expression and the actual act of burial. Furthermore the burial did not necessarily mean that it was with his ancestors; for example, Abraham was buried in a plot he purchased specifically for his wife (Gen 23:1-20; 25:10).

“Gathered to his people” or “to go to his fathers”	The act of burial
Abraham (Gen 15:15; 25:8)	Abraham (Gen 25:10)
Ishmael (Gen 25:17)	
Isaac (Gen 35:29)	Isaac with Abraham (Gen 49:30)
Jacob (Gen 49:29, 33)	Jacob with Abraham (Gen 49:30; 50:4-11)
Aaron (Num 20:24, 26)	
Moses (Deut 32:50)	Moses (Deut 34:6)
The first generation after Joshua (Judges 2:10)	
David (1 Chron 17:11)	David (1 Kings 2:10)
Josiah (2 Kings 22:20)	Josiah (2 Kings 23:29-30)

It is of significance to note that God Himself uses the expression “gathered to his people” to Moses in the context of ascending somewhere, and that God Himself buries Moses in an unknown spot:

Then die on the mountain where you ascend, and be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother died on Mount Hor and was gathered for his people, (Gen 32:50)

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And He buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows his burial place to this day. (Deut 34:6)

The expression “gathered to his people” or “to go to his fathers” is not a euphemism for death or where one may be buried. Rather it indicates the belief of the existence of those who have died and that another will be about to join them. While this expression does not reveal much about the after life, it does suggest that people will be able to recognize each other in the context of joy and comfort.

2. The necromancer of En-dor (1 Sam 28:3-25).

As one of the most baffling passages in the Bible, questions abound about the woman who called up and communicated with the dead Samuel. Did she really have the supernatural power to call up the dead? Was this power from Satan or God? Was Samuel really seen physically or as an apparition or a figment of Saul’s imagination?

While it will never be known what exactly took place in this biblical account, the textual evidence supports the view that God used the necromancer as the means to bring about a genuine appearance of Samuel as an apparition.

The necromancer was surprised and fearful, perhaps because she succeeded in calling up Samuel (1 Sam 28:12-13).

Saul recognized Samuel and bowed down in obeisance (1 Sam 28:14).

Saul recognized that the message from Samuel was from God (1 Sam 28:16-19).

Later biblical accounts of the event affirm what took place.

So Saul died for his trespass which he committed against the Lord, because of the word of the Lord which he did not keep; and also because he asked counsel of a medium, making inquiry of it, and did not inquire of the Lord. Therefore He killed him and turned the kingdom to David the son of Jesse. (1 Chron 10:13-14)

The Bible clearly warns against the practice and participation in such satanic arts as spiritists, mediums and necromancy (Deut 18:9-14; Ex 22:18; Lev 19:26, 31; 20:6, 27; Jer 27:9-10)

Regardless of the interpretive issues posed by the necromancer of En-dor, the passage indicates that Old Testament Believer understood the after-life to include the familiar physical form of a person. And because of the reality of the after-life, God specifically warns the Israelites not to contact anyone who has passed away.

3. Man is like the beasts that perish (Ps 49:12-20; Ecc 3:19-21).

These passages present a contrast of what happens at the end of the life between wicked and the righteous. The wicked are the “beasts that perish” and the righteous can expect that “God will redeem from the grave (Sheol).”

Regardless of one’s wealth, power or position, God will take or receive those who believe in Him to Himself. These passages from Wisdom literature attest that all Believers will be resurrected and defeat death, which is a hope beyond what wealth, power or position promise.

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4. The prophecy of the End Times (Dan 12:2).

In perhaps the most explicit passage of the Old Testament about the resurrection, this passage in Daniel refers to the resurrection of both Believers and the wicked. The term “sleep” is the euphemism for death as its context indicates, and “awake” is a reference to resurrection.

5. Song of Trust in God’s Protection (Isa 26:19).

In this poetic passage, Isaiah, addressing his faithful peers, assures them that their dead will rise in resurrection.

It is clear that the Old Testament Believer never saw death as the end of life; there was life after death and that life was to be in the presence of the living God.

Reference:

1. Kaiser Jr WC, Davids PH, Bruce FF and Brauch MT, *Hard Sayings of the Bible*, Illinois: InterVarsity Press (1996).