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**THE CONCEPT OF DEATH IN THE BIBLE: FROM SEPARATION
TO LIBERATION**

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of the Requirements for the Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Religious
Studies

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Student's Declaration

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal reading, scientific research method and critical reflection. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts in Theology. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

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This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

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Dedication

I dedicate this piece of work to my late Dad and Grandma and to all the Christians especially the Preachers of Good News.

I glory to you my God,
for you have allowed me to glory in your life,
that you may be glorified.
May the dead in you find rest.
Amen.

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

From time immemorial, the mystery of death has remained subtle to man. Efforts have been made to understand this reality, but little light shade to the oddity of the mystery of death and the dread that accompany it. Struck by the same curiosity and lack of satisfactory answers about the mystery I thought of embarking on trying to grasp the concept of death in the Bible, as it is a reliable source of Christian faith.

The research the first Chapter starts with the curiosity to understand the concept of death in the Old Testament. Before I enter in to the core of the study I will first research on the concept of death in the Ancient Near Eastern cultures, for these cultures had much influence on the understanding of the concept of death in the Old Testament. As it will be seen, death in these cultures is something to be feared, that which alienates one from the joy of living. In these cultures still man is to blame for the fate that begot humanity of lacking immortality. In the second and third parts of the chapter we shall focus on the Old Testament understanding of the concept of death. We shall see why death is said to be separation from God and from his people. We shall see the origin of death as effect of sin. Elaborate study will be given also to sanctions against dead and the historical development of the concept of death from creation to the inter-testamental period. In all these we shall see how death is understood as that which separates or rather divides people.

Chapter two will give a substantial change of the concept of death from the idea of separation to means of liberation. We shall see how the understanding of death is spinned around the victorious death of Christ Jesus. Jesus transformative action of the

concept of death will be dealt in length. We shall see the mysterious liberation concept of death which seen contradictory to Old Testament.

In the third chapter we shall endeavor to present how we are to understand death today. We shall see how we are to conceive of death in a positive and more spiritual way and how we can apply the concept of death in our lives.

Generally the research will be answering whether concept of death today is still the same as it was? Is death still the punishment for sin; is it still separation or means to liberation (way to eternity?

CHAPTER ONE

THE CONCEPT OF DEATH IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST AND IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

1. Introduction

From time immemorial, the mystery of death has remained elusive to man, in spite of the fact that death is a reality to both man and beast. Attempts have always been made to try and comprehend the reality of this mystery, but none has ever yielded a satisfactory answer that could calm both the curiosity and the fear that surround death.

Chapter one will focus mainly on the concept of death in the Old Testament. In the first part, we will first explore the understanding of death in the Ancient Near East, being as it were the cradle of civilization and the source of most of the concepts in the Old Testament.

The second part of the chapter will focus on the Old Testament understanding of death as; a consequence of sin, we shall look at the retribution theory and its refutation basing our search on Job, separation from God and from the people of God. Israel as the chosen people of God was to remain holy so that the other nations may learn the will of God through them. For Israel to detach themselves from God was against their call for

holiness and mission of being the mediators between God and His people. The priests too being the representatives of God were sanctioned against the dead, for this would severance them from God. As mediators they were to remain always in constant communion with God, though it was a virtue expected for all. We shall therefore offer a brief discussion on those sanctions. Lastly, the third part will endeavour to present a historical development of the concept of death during the Pre-Exilic, Exilic, Post-Exilic and inter-testamental periods.

1.1. Death in the Ancient near East Cultures

The concept of death in the Ancient Near East differed from one group of people to the other. In order to present unbiased concept, the vast coverage will include Egypt, Phoenicia and Mesopotamia. For most cultures, the concept of death depended on the concept of life. It was believed that, gods commanded a great deal in life of the Near Eastern people, thus even death was the work of gods.

“Egyptians regarded death as the separation of the spiritual and corporal elements of man”.¹ This arose from their dualistic conception of human nature. Human being, they believed is composed of two elements, the immaterial principle and the material principle, a concept which was borrowed later by the Greeks. In the Egyptians’ mind, there was a strong belief in the human survival after death. This belief is evidenced by their ritualistic burial customs, like Palaeolithic peoples’ burial ritual: “The corpse was covered with a red pigment (associated with blood or vitality) which suggest a hope that vitality would be restored, and a belief in an after life; food, tools and weapons were found in their graves which indicated a belief that they would be needed in some way in the next world; the dead were usually buried on their side, legs tightly flexed, hands covering their face, in the fatal position, as if to prepare them for a

¹ETIENNE D., GEORGES C., J. DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, *Religions of the Ancient East*, 44.

rebirth from the grave/womb of mother earth”.² This burial ritual substantiate the strong belief the Egyptians had of the after-life existence.

The living continued to have relationships the dead. The thought of death was not a concept to spend time on but rather the eternal existence afterlife. Ernest Wright tells us, “The great emphasis is on eternal life after death, and yet the Egyptians were not morbidly preoccupied with the thoughts of death, but scrambled eagerly for the fruits of this life”.³

As an Egyptian lived, he “worked out a mean programme for his life after death; spending the daytime in the cool air of his cell, using provisions brought to him by descendants or by magic; at nightfall he would join the sun’s boat to safely sail through dangerous regions”⁴. The major pre-occupation about the after life was not just death but after life, the eternal existence after death as one joins the gods, in their paradises.

Like the Egyptians, the Phoenicians too had a belief in life after death. Their concept was slightly different and negative compared to that of Egyptians. For them, “the life of the other world was joyless and vegetative, and depended on the fate of the body it had animated. The dead man needed offerings and rest too in his eternal abode”⁵. The fate of the dead depended on the living; for the living had the obligation to provide for “all that the dead man needed for his life in the next world”⁶. This gives a clear sign of the Phoenician’s “belief in material existence in the next world”.⁷

² KENNETH K., *The Sacred Art of Dying*, 94.

³ ERNEST W., *The Bible and the Near East*, 411.

⁴ ETIENNE D., GEORGES C., J. DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, *Religions of the Ancient East*, 46.

⁵ ETIENNE D., GEORGES C., J. DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, *Religions of the Ancient East*, 79.

⁶ ETIENNE D., GEORGES C., J. DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, *Religions of the Ancient East*, 75.

⁷ ETIENNE D., GEORGES C., J. DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, *Religions of the Ancient East*, 77.

Speaking of Mesopotamia, there was a belief in the existence of life after death. That immortality could not be achieved was because of human error, thus, “faced with the inevitability of death, they explained death as due to human error”⁸. After death one goes to “the underworld, hell, the great land, the country of no return”⁹. The life led in the underworld is really unpleasant as some text puts it, “the dead are covered with garments of wings, and have slow, miserable life. All is dark, dust, and the scourge of the orient is everywhere”¹⁰. If the living do not provide for the needs or give “funeral offerings for the dead, then, the dead have recourse to the provisions brought by the living. The dead actually lead sad, miserable and hopeless life.”¹¹ Raymond Moody says that, “graves from very early sites all over the earth give evidence to the belief in human survival of bodily death”¹². There is also evidence that, not everybody lived the same existence after-death. Some joined deities and were good to the living, others were, “thought of as potentially dangerous to the living and as needing to be either placated or tricked into quiescence”¹³. In some customs the “Kings, heroes and Emperors were immortalized; while others lived shadowy existence. This is to say that, if one did not belong to the class of kings, heroes or emperors, had to live a kind of shadowy existence and no immortalisation for him.

In death, one was detached from himself, society and deprived of all joys and light that is enjoyed by the living. It was like a curse especially, if one died when he

⁸ ETIENNE D., GEORGES C., J. DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, *Religions of the Ancient East*, 104.

⁹ ETIENNE D., GEORGES C., J. DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, *Religions of the Ancient East*, 112.

¹⁰ ETIENNE D., GEORGES C., J. DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, *Religions of the Ancient East*, 112-113.

¹¹ ETIENNE D., GEORGES C., J. DUCHESNE-GUILLEMIN, *Religions of the Ancient East*, 113.

¹² RAYMOND A. MOODY, *Life after Death*, 13.

¹³ JOHN H. HICK, *Death and Eternal Life*, 58.

was young. From the foregoing, it would seem that in all the above cultures, death was something to be feared and especially by those who belonged to the lower class in the society. For those who belonged to the upper class it was a transition from human life to immortal existence. Generally speaking death was viewed as separation from the society and a deprivation from all joys and light that is enjoyed by the living.

1.2. The Concept of Death in the Old Testament

The concept of death in the Old Testament was greatly influenced by the Ancient Near Eastern concept of death. As a reality, it went through gradual change in understanding, from physical to spiritual alienation and later both were to comprise the whole idea of death. The concept of death therefore, has been understood in three different ways, “as biological cessation, as a power which opposes God’s creation and as a metaphor for anything which leads a person away from God”¹⁴. The emphasis as we shall see is on death as biological cessation, though later the other two ideas unfold but not as emphasised as the biological cessation. The base of death as biological cessation is strongly grounded on the idea of separation as a punishment for sin.

¹⁴ KENNETH K., *The Sacred Art of Dying*, 125.

1.2.1. Death as consequence of sin

Looking at the concept of death from the beginning of Israel's history, it is clear that the idea was that of physical alienation, though through history it has rather been developed by scholars to include spiritual alienation. From the beginning of history, while death could be said to be inevitable for humanity and part of the human reality, it is rather understood as punishment for sin. Death originates from the sin of disobedience of our first parents, when God gave them instruction "not to eat from the tree of knowledge of good and bad for if they eat" (Genesis 2, 17). They actually defied God's orders and ate from the tree, and so they incurred a curse upon themselves and upon humanity.

Among other curses as in Genesis because of sin include, working for basic needs. "By the sweat of your face shall you get bread to eat until you return to the ground from which you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust, you shall return" (Genesis 3,19). Though, "the so called suffering reflect rather the human situation, a situation grounded in the nature of man and independent of whether he sins or not"¹⁵

Sin was the original source of death as punishment (divine retribution *discussed in the next sub-topic*). This is not to say that if our first parents did not sin then

¹⁵ HERBERT HAAG, *Is Original Sin In Scripture*, 86.

man/woman would remain immortal. The biological end of man still would remain valid though death would not be seen as punishment.

When the people of God defied Him by turning away from Him, then God, “wiped away all the sinful of the earth through death by flood and saved Noah and all the selected good creatures”(Genesis 7:23). Moses the prophet of God to the Israelites was “punished by death not to enter the Promised Land because of his self glorification than the glorification of God for his providence to his people Israel”(Num. 27, 12-15; Deut. 34, 4-8). Thus, from the scriptures we can evidently attest to the fact of a link between death and punishment from disobedience of God’s will. As Karl Rahner would say, “Death is part of man’s constitution subject to concupiscence, in darkness, weakness and obscurity regarding its actual nature, is a consequence of sin”¹⁶. As it pertains divine retribution due to sin, below is a brief discussion.

1.2.1.1. Retribution Theory

Divine Retribution refers to “God’s punishment or reward for evil or good done”¹⁷. The traditional answer for evil, suffering and death built on presumed justice of God is that, God brings suffering and death in man’s life as a consequence of his sin. Thus suffering and death in the Old Testament designate some sin in man. Though if we believe that God is love and God is all-powerful, then the source of pain cannot be in God; it must be in man. Man brings pain on himself because of his sin. God is holy and

¹⁶ KARL RAHNER, *Death In The Encyclopedia of Theology*, 329-333.

¹⁷ J. E. FALLON, *Retribution In The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 429.

so cannot tolerate sin in a man's life, and He cannot let any sin go unpunished.¹⁸ There is a cause and effect relationship between pain and sin. Every effect has a cause behind it; every trouble and pain has a sin behind it. According to this law of cause and effect, there is no pain without sin.

In the book of Job this is presented in the speeches of Job's three friends, Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar beginning from chapter 4 all the way to chapter 31. There are three cycles of the dialogue between these friends and Job. Eliphaz speaks and Job responds; Bildad speaks and Job responds; and Zophar speaks and Job responds. The same thing happens in the second cycle. In the third cycle, only Eliphaz and Bildad speak. Their basic argument is that there is no pain without sin in a person's life. God punishes sin, and God seemingly is punishing the person, and so Job must have sinned. Job must have committed some terrible sin; now finally God has caught up with his sin, and he is now suffering the full reward of his sin.¹⁹

1.2.1.2. Support from the Scriptures

The Scriptures seem to support this argument, and it is true that God does bring affliction as a result of a particular sin in a person's life. In the Old Testament, God clearly warned the people of Israel of the consequences of their sins. "If you obey Me, you will be blessed" (Deuteronomy 28:1-14). "But if you disobey Me, you will be punished" (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). Leviticus 26 also spells out the rewards of

¹⁸ P. CHARLES, *Wisdom many faces*, Minnesota, 94

¹⁹ P. CHARLES, *Wisdom many faces*, Minnesota, 1996,49

obedience and punishment for disobedience. In both Deuteronomy 28 and Leviticus 26, the list of punishments for disobedience is much longer than the list of rewards for obedience²⁰

There are also many individual examples in the Bible in which a person received punishment for a particular sin in his life. For example, God punished David for his sin of adultery with Bathsheba, and the child born of this relationship died (2 Samuel 12:15-20). In another case, David took a census against the will of God, and 70,000 of the people died by the plague that the Lord had sent as a punishment for David's sin (2 Samuel 24:1-17). Elisha's servant Gehzi, because of his greed, took presents from Naaman the Syrian and was struck with leprosy (2 Kings 5:19-27). King Uzziah was one of the good kings in Judah. He reigned in Jerusalem for 52 years and, "he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord." But after he became powerful, he became proud, and in his pride, he entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar. He did what only priests consecrated to burn incense could do. As a result, he had leprosy until the day of his death

So, it is clear from the Scripture that God does sometimes bring calamity in a person's or nation's life as a result of some particular sin. However, obviously this does not apply in every situation where a person is suffering. Because God does punish sin and sometimes brings calamity as a result of a particular sin in a person's life, this does not mean that whenever a person is in a difficulty or is suffering, it must be a result of his sin. Whenever we see suffering, we are tempted to apply the faulty logic of Job's

²⁰ B. W. ADERSON, *The living world of the Old Testament*, London, 1978. 7-8

friends: God brings suffering as a punishment for sin. The person is suffering, so he must have sinned and is being punished for his sin.²¹

1.2.1.3. Refutation of the Theory

As mentioned above the author-poet of the book cleverly uses the "friends" of Job to present again and again this traditional Israelite belief that God will not reject a blameless man, nor take the side of evildoers. There is momentary hope when a fourth man, Elihu, appears. But he also denounces Job (32:12), argues for order in the universe, and defends the justice and transcendence of God (34:10-27; 36:1-23). Elihu may depict a more caring and merciful God and certainly one who is powerful, majestic, and in control of the world (36:24-37); but his speeches do not vindicate Job nor do they totally refute the theory of retribution.²²

Job himself does not begin by refuting the theory, as theory. Rather he regrets his existence: "Let the day perish wherein I was born, and the night which said, 'A man-child is conceived'" (3:3). And later he asks that "it would please God to crush me, that he would let loose his hand and cut me off" (3:9). But as the arguments of the three friends grow stronger, Job can only protest more that he is innocent, that he is a "blameless and upright man." In doing this, Job is refuting the retribution theory, not by observation from afar, but from within his own experience.

²¹ B. W. ADERSON, *The living world of the Old Testament*, 1978, 7-8.

²² CAROL A. NEWSON, *The Book of Job, A Context of Moral Imagination*, Oxford, 2003, 200-203

His situation is so painful and bewildering that he not only pleads with God but also complains "in the bitterness of my soul" (7:11). Job is not reticent with God. He protests angrily: "If I sin, what do I do to thee, thou watcher of men? Why hast thou made me thy mark? Why had I become a burden to thee?" (7:20). Later he becomes even stronger. In the beginning of chapter 9, he blames God for anarchy in the world and goes so far as to accuse God, not of powerlessness in the face of chaos, but of capriciousness in the use of power. God is even accused of violence, oppression, and injustice (16:7-14; 19:1-13). Given Job's experience and extreme suffering, it is no wonder that he challenges retribution. His soliloquy in chapters 29-31 presents a summary of his defense. He has acted justly, has helped the poor widows, the blind, the lame, the wayfarer. He has not placed his trust in his wealth nor been false to God in any way. Truly the theory of retribution falls apart in Job's case.²³

So, our problem of suffering and death is not solved by the popular argument represented by Job's three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. It is too simplistic and does not apply to Job's and many other situations in our own experience. When a person, who has lived his whole life doing what is pleasing to God and has been a blessing to all the people around him, is overwhelmed by insurmountable suffering, we cannot help but wonder about God's justice system and ask Him "Why?"²⁴ Job's friends do not have the answer. They are convinced that troubles inevitably indicate a presence of sin. Whereas Job's question (and ours too) is: "He destroys both the blameless and the wicked" (9:22). Why?

²³ P. CHARLES, *Wisdom many faces*, 69

²⁴ P. CHARLES, *Wisdom many faces*, 91

The Book of Ecclesiastes also challenges the theory of retribution. The logic of retribution fails to explain prosperity and adversity: "In the day of prosperity be joyful, and in the day of adversity consider God has made the one as well as the other, so that man may not find out anything that will be after him" (Qo:7:14). According to Qoheleth, "there are righteous men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked men to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous" (8:14).²⁵ So while "he does not altogether deny the principle of retribution, he cannot disclaim its inadequacy".²⁶

1.2.2. Death as separation from God

Impudence or opposition to the creator through sin as we have seen, leads to death as punishment. In the creation story, Adam and Eve were created and placed in a paradise where they were directly in contact with God. Following their sin of disobedience, they excommunicated themselves from being in communion with God. They lacked that original innocence and henceforth became aware of that nakedness, that characterises every being that is separated from God. The story of the original sin as described in Genesis is an "alienation or existential separation from God and rejection of God in self appropriation"²⁷. In rejecting God, they lost the intimacy with God hence division between man and creator. For before sin, they actually had joyful communion with God. "No sooner is sin committed than man and his wife felt

²⁵ P. Charles, *Wisdom many faces*, 18

²⁶ William P. Brown, *Character in Crisis*, Cambridge, Eardmans Publishers, 1996, 130

²⁷ ANTHONY T. PADOVANO, *Original Sin and Christian Anthropology*, 5.

distressed and hid themselves from God among the trees of the Garden. Their expulsion from paradise, decreed by the Lord, will simply sanction the distance they have already taken from him of their own accord”²⁸. Death as a metaphor for anything which leads a person away from God, could be referred to as a human refusal, resistance, shutting oneself and self-hardening from self-giving that the creator, expects from human beings.

To die then, is the lack of this communion with God through sin, one is said to be separated from the creator. “The Old Testament contains enumerations of sins which entail a direct separation from God. It includes ritual offences and quite a number of sins against one’s neighbour.”²⁹ Not doing the will of God, one is deliberately in opposition to God. One tries to overthrow God in an attempt to usurp his throne. God has no place in one’s life. As the serpent told Eve, that they will be like God, and thus, wanting to be like God committed sin which bears the consequence of death. As one tries to overthrow God and take his position (self-deification).

1.2.3. Death as Separation from the People of God

When one is separated from God one lacks communion also with other people and actually acts sinfully to others without fear of God. As Herbert tells us that, the fall did not alter man’s physical characteristics but rather his relations with God and his

²⁸ NICHOLAS FOGLIACCO, *The God of All Consolation*, 22.

²⁹ PIET SCHOONENBERG, *Man and Sin*, 26.

fellow man.”³⁰ God created Adam and Eve and He blessed them to live in harmony and fill the earth. But when sin entered into the world, not only did one face death as a punishment, but also as a real division from God and from the people.

In Genesis 2, 23-24, “this is it, Adam exclaimed, she is part of my own bone and flesh, her name is woman because she was taken out of a man. This explains why a man leaves his father and mother and is joined to his wife in such a way that the two become one.” From this text, it is clear that, after seeing different animals, man appreciated the woman as God’s gift and part of his own self and the two became one. Adam’s exclamation is that of approval and acceptance of Eve, meaning that, there was no substantial difference between the two, each saw the other as part and completion of the self, but the contrast enters with sin, which is well evidenced in the dialogue between the first parents and God. “.... You have eaten from the tree of which I had forbidden you to eat! The man replied, “The woman whom you put here with me gave me fruit from the tree, and so I ate it..... “. The Lord asked the woman, “why did you do such a thing?” The woman replied, “the serpent tricked me into it, so I ate it” (Genesis 3, 11-13). Looking at this, we can certainly say that, the sin was the beginning of division among the first parents. Each one of them was dead in sin but not realizing his/her reality of death was ready to defend his/her lifelessness. Adam in fear of death, stood to blame God because of putting the woman in his presence, after sin he sees Eve not as the other half as it was the case just after creation. Adam in his accusation to God is saying; “if you did not put this woman with me I could not have sinned” and likewise

³⁰ HERBERT HAAG, *Is original sin in Scripture*, 85.

the woman puts her blame to the God saying, “if the serpent was not there, I could not have eaten the fruit”. As per the dialogue one could say that, God is to blame for the original sin but the opposite is true that is, first parent are to blame for their sin for they had instructions before they committed that disobedience.

Sins committed towards others have their origin from the original sin which brought about; selfishness, extra-accusations and egoism in order to defend one’s lifelessness. No one is ready to move out of self (love) for fear of death.

As the spectrum of sin broadens, the drama of Cain and Abel enfolds which testifies the real division through, hatred, fear, competition and rivalry and hence killing. Cain suggests to go out in the field with his brother Abel with the evil intention of killing him. After completion of his mission that is, to shed his brother’s blood, he deceives himself of feeling secure. Though from his action he incurred a curse to live in the wilderness and in a state of even more insecurity.

When one breaks his union with God, he also loses his life with him. Among other things that separate us from God are, lack of observance of ritual purity, as it is in Genesis 17: 14 and Numbers 9:13, that is, if one “does not observe some ritual commandments and lack of celebration of pasch then that person is to be cut off from his people and face the consequences of sin” ³¹

If one is separated from God and the people of God, he/she lives a miserable life, life of loneliness, life of self destruction, stagnation and spiritual retardation. One lives a less human life, which is the road towards the gates of Hades. One’s life

³¹ PIET SCHOONENBERG, *Man and Sin*, 26.

becomes in a contradiction with the will of God. It is a life of “painful, motionless, powerless, darkness, where one lives in a forgotten state.”³² This actually is the state of life for those who live separated from God, and from the people of God.

1.2.4. Priestly Sanction over the dead

Priests were not only religious leaders but also were civil leaders, meaning that not only were they executing priestly duties but also had civic duties to execute in the society. Priestly functions were diversified, they “gave oracles, instructions in law, offered sacrifices. They were indispensable mediators for entrance into the sphere of the divine, custodians of the sacred traditions of cult and of knowledge of God, and also they were custodians of their historical traditions and took part in writing those traditions”³³.

As mediators, teachers and custodians of sacred traditions of cult and knowledge of God, priests were to live an unstained life, so that they could perform their duties effectively. Before offering any sacrifice for the people, they were obliged to offer sacrifices for themselves in order to be cleansed before cleansing the society. Priests were to live according to the statutes of Yahweh lest they die (be cut off from God and his people). They were not to eat or even touch anything that would defile them, hence hindering their execution of their sacred duties, for doing so would have not only

³² JOHN L. MCKENZIE, *Sheol* in the Dictionary of the Bible, 801.

³³ JOHN MCKENZIE, *Sheol* in the Dictionary of the Bible, 690-691

defiled them but also bring death upon them and God's wrath upon the community. Like sin to the other human being, touching dead for a priest would "draw him the wrath and displeasure of God."³⁴ Moses said to Aaron and his sons Eleazar and Ithamar: "do not bare your heads or tear your garments, lest you bring not only death on yourselves, but God's wrath also on the whole community" (Leviticus 10:6)". Pertaining the command of Holiness, the priests were to be holy in accord to Yahweh's expectation "For I, the Lord, am you God; and you shall make and keep yourselves holy, because I am holy. You shall not make yourselves unclean...." (Leviticus 11, 44).

The priests as any other person were sanctioned from touching the dead bodies, though for them the sanction was more emphasised. This was in line with God's command to Moses. "The Lord God said to Moses, speak to Aaron sons' the priests and tell them; none of you shall make himself unclean for any dead person among his people" (Leviticus 21, 1). "For the Jews, any contact with the dead, preparing and moving the corpse, rendered them unclean, although it was permitted for the people to contract such uncleanliness with good reason, such was not the case for the priests, and impurity was ordinarily incompatible with their lofty office"³⁵ The priests not only were sanctioned over the dead but also they were to fear the dead, that is, be afraid of the consequences of touching the dead corpses. For to touch a corpse was not only taking part in death but also setting oneself against God.

³⁴ HERBERT HAAG, *Is Original Sin in Scripture*, 89.

³⁵ RAYMOND E. BROWN, -JOSEPH A. FITZMYER, -ROLAND E. MURPHY, *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, 74.

1.3. The Historical Development of the Concept of Death in Old Testament

1.3.1. Pre-exilic Concept of Death

The idea of death in the Old Testament developed over a long period of time. Each period or stage of development had some difference or rather a more enriched understanding than before. Taking the pre-exilic time, we look at the idea of death from Exodus to the period before the Babylonian captivity, which was around 587 BC. During the early history of Israel death referred to the disintegration of the whole person. As already observed the concept of death and afterlife is not original with the Old Testament. It is a borrowed idea from the Ancient Near Eastern people. "There is very little evidence that Israel held out hope for an afterlife before a quite late time in the post-exilic age".³⁶

Before the exile period, death was a separation from God and people. This meant that, going to the grave was the total alienation from every thing. "Death is a place of emptiness where no memory of God exists and no praise is sung" (Ps 6:6, Is 38:18). The place of death is named Hades, which meant a place of ordeal, stillness, darkness and total helplessness where the spirit of a person lies after the grave has taken the body"³⁷. Following this concept of a place of death, Israel could not conceive of a holy servant of God, Elijah would die and go down to Hades, that's why it is written and believed that Elijah never died but was taken up to heavens. As the scripture says,

³⁶ LAWRENCE BOADT, *Reading The Old Testament; An Introduction*, 1984, 250.

³⁷ LAWRENCE BOADT, *Reading The Old Testament; An Introduction*, 250-251.

“.... a flaming chariot and flaming horses came between them and Elijah went up to heaven in a whirlwind” 2Kig 2:11.

1.3.2. The Exilic period and the concept of death

During the exile while the concept of death was upheld as physical termination or alienation, there has been development of the concept of death as separation from God while still living. This separation was brought about by sin that is, doing one's will other than the will of God. Death here refers to the hiding away from God and hence, punishment not only by physical death but also through ailments and being taken captives so that, Israel may recognize the will of their Lord and creator. This punishment of being taken captives is meant for Israel to come back to God. There was also some trace of the hope of future restoration during the exilic period.

After atoning for their sins, they were definitively restored back to the original communion with lord. Hence experience the glory of God like those days when they knew no misfortune. Any evil that befell Israel was termed as punishment for their evil ways. Catastrophes like disease/sickness, was for Israel a clear sign to show that one was separated from God and his people. Example of separated people includes the sick who could not take part in communal activities and even public worship, these were the lifeless who were excluded from the community.

During exilic period apart from relying on Yahweh, there seem to be traces of human intervention, that is, prophets were to announce the word (will) of God in which following His will meant the restoration to the flock of the beloved of God. The concept

of death during the exile period to some extent was not only physical but also spiritual alienation from God and his Promises. Still there was no well developed concept of the afterlife.

1.3.3. The Concept of Death in Post-Exilic and Inter-Testamental Period.

After the Exilic period and toward the end of Old Testament, there was “belief in the re-union of soul and body through resurrection of the Individual which represents a development in Jewish theology.”³⁸ Death is not viewed as the end of all existence but rather end of earthly life. This total separation “is considered the greatest evil that could befall somebody. While premature and unhappy death as a punishment for sin is presented as a misfortune, a divine retribution for wrong doing.”³⁹ The sinners and the just were to have a different fate after death. Therefore, as the book of Wisdom 3:1-6 argues, the souls of the just are with God, meaning that there is a promise of immortality and death is not the end of life. So, the suffering in the world does not mean one is sinful or will lose life after death. “Just as physical death is the antithesis of physical life, so too spiritual death of the soul is considered as the antithesis of spiritual of life, consisting of the love and friendship of God”.⁴⁰

In few centuries just before Christian era there was strong belief in resurrection (2Mac 7:9-11,14,23), and “that spiritual death of soul could be overcome by spiritual

³⁸ JOHN E. STEINMUELLER, –KATHRYN S., *Death in the Catholic Biblical Encyclopaedia*, 266.

³⁹ JOHN E. STEINMUELLER, –KATHRYN S., *Death in the Catholic Biblical Encyclopaedia*, 267.

⁴⁰ JOHN E. STEINMUELLER, –KATHRYN S., *Death in the Catholic Biblical Encyclopaedia*, 267.

resurrection, repentance and conversion from sin and that physical death would be vanquished by the resurrection of the body.”⁴¹

⁴¹ JOHN .E. STEINMUELLER, –KATHRYN S., *Death in the Catholic Biblical Encyclopaedia*, 267.

1.4. Conclusion

The concept of death in the Ancient Near Eastern cultures varied from one group to another. The interaction among the groups had great influence on each other's understanding of the reality of death. Death was an inevitable course for human beings according to Egyptians, Phoenicians and Mesopotamians. For the Egyptians there was a belief of afterlife which was worked out as one lived. Egyptians' afterlife was very pleasant but the living were to participate in making that afterlife pleasant for their dead friends and relatives by providing for their needs. While Phoenicians believed in the afterlife, their afterlife was joyless and vegetative. Afterlife existence was pleasant or unpleasant depending on the body one animated in the next world, like Egyptians the dead depended on the living for provisions in the next world's existence. For the Mesopotamians immortality could not be achieved and death consequently was due to human error. Afterlife was common reality to all but the kind of existence depended on the state one lived before death. After death, the lesser in the society lived a kind of shadowy existence while the heroes, kings and emperors were immortalized. Some of those who died were said to be good to the living while others were said to be dangerous to the living thus the living had to placate them. Generally death was a necessary evil and all were to face it.

In the Old Testament, death was a reality that had original sin as its basis. In the early history of the Old Testament the idea of death was coiled around the physical alienation from God, his people and the world. To show how evil death was, there was a

strong emphasis against touching the dead bodies, worse still was the emphasis made against priests touching the dead bodies. For to do so was setting oneself against God and participating in death, hence this was in opposition to their call for holiness and in constant communion with God.

Before Israelites were taken captives and during the exilic period the idea of death as total disintegration of the whole person was still upheld. The common Old Testament biblical expression of death is “going down to sheol”, a pit of destruction where one goes to gather with his fathers. It is a dark world where nobody wished to go and that, whoever died had been condemned for ever to the world of no return because of sins. For this reason Israelites could not perceive of a holy servant like Elijah breathe his last and go down to Hades.

The idea of death in the post-exilic and the inter-testamental period meant more than just physical death. Illness, catastrophes and other natural disasters were said to be divine retribution because of sin. It is during this period when there arose some hope of afterlife existence.

“Since the violence of death was such a terrible evil, man naturally connected its origin with primeval transgression and consequent punishment”⁴² It is also important to remember that, physical death was the culmination of all penalties due sin. While there are some traces of spiritualised concept of death and hope of afterlife existence in the Old Testament, it is rather not very clearly grounded.

⁴²H. KOSTER, *Death* in The New Catholic Encyclopedia, 685.

CHAPTER TWO

THE NEW TESTAMENT CONCEPT OF DEATH

2. Introduction

In this chapter we shall notice how the trade of thought changes from death as separation to death as liberation. The idea of death is more spiritualised than we have seen in the Old Testament. Spiritual death will be looked in to as the manifestation of the spiritual separation from the communion with God as caused by sin. This spiritualised concept of death is coiled around the Christ Jesus event of incarnation, death and resurrection.

The discussion has two major divisions and in the first part we shall see Jesus' Transformative action of the notion of death from physical separation to death as a means of redemption. The second part will venture to present liberating mystery of death which will bring out ideas like, death as a sacrifice of love, the peak of salvific event arrived with the death of Christ and through death Jesus enters his glory.

2.1. Jesus Transforms Death

As the humble son of the Father, Jesus enters life to transform it giving it a new meaning. In us and with us all human spheres are re-created a new from birth to the final reality when the soul separates from body. As Kelly says, when one dies is said to be, "In a bondage or a captivity, a slave, wandering astray, in debt, living according to flesh (Pauline sense of creaturely weakness), sick, in darkness and subject to futility. This shows the Mortality of sinful man, a dweller in the shadow of death and in fact dead in sin."⁴³ Though the usage of language can lead to narrow mindedness in looking at the concept of death as applying to only physical alienation, but deeper reflection will lead to a conclusion that, death is the "total alienation as it afflicts Man's entire person. Salvation, then, must mean a transformation of man's mortal condition, a changing of death into life."⁴⁴ God in his plan wants human race to live joyfully in peace. Sin and its consequences remain, but the outlook is what God changes. This requires the human will to change the attitude towards death. This way, "the very nature of death must be changed, so that it leads to God and life, rather than away from him to everlasting ruin."⁴⁵ Death is to be seen as part of human life process to eternity and not otherwise.

In effect to this transformation, we need to look at the death of Jesus. "Jesus the Son of God through obedience to his father took human flesh" Rom 3:3, which was "subject to suffering, temptation and death. Because of Malice, Ignorance and selfishness of Jesus' contemporary, Death was imposed on him, which he truly and

⁴³P.J. KELLY, *Death* in the McGraw hill, New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 689.

⁴⁴P.J. KELLY, *Death* in the McGraw hill, New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 689.

⁴⁵ P.J. KELLY, *Death* in the McGraw hill, New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 689.

willingly accepted. Death, whose inner nature has been filled with disobedience and rejection, was now in Christ suffused by love and submissions; it became a sacrificial act, manifesting in the highest fashion his total self – giving and surrender.”⁴⁶ Thus, Christ’s death on the cross was the apex of the transformative action of the concept of death. Bruce tells us that, “Christ’s death on the cross is his enthronement over the kingdom of grace which replaces the kingdom of sin and death.” ⁴⁷

This “Death has been swallowed up, and in Christ it no longer means simply man’s rebellion against God; but rather a sign of the presence of God’s saving love in the world.”⁴⁸ This is true to those who accept Christ, for they no longer belong to the kingdom of death but have life in Christ through their self emptying. “The kingdom of sin and death can have no power over those in Christ unless one accepts it.”⁴⁹

The dead no longer dwell simply in the shadow of death, but the light of life shines upon them. For within the human race, when one of its members who has triumphed over death and sin, there exists the efficacious and imperishable source of eternal life. Death is no longer separation but means to life in Christ, for if one has to deny himself for the sake of the kingdom he is considered dead but living in Christ. As David tells us, “you must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶P.J. KELLY, *death* in the McGraw hill, New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 689.

⁴⁷ HERBERT HAAG, *Is original sin in Scripture*, 100.

⁴⁸P.J. KELLY, *death* in the McGraw hill, New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 689.

⁴⁹HERBERT HAAG, *Is original sin in Scripture*, 100.

⁵⁰ DAVID WATSON, *Called and Committed: World Changing Discipleship*, 182.

2.2. Mystery of Death: The Liberation Concept

In the New Testament, the dominant theme is not just death but life through Christ. As Koster would say, “death and resurrection of Christ brings salvation for all men and ensures man’s resurrection”⁵¹, it is a life giving death in Christ. Through his death, Christ destroyed the power of death and sin, the empire of evil and darkness. This is not to deny the reality of physical death but it is rather a natural phenomenon not just a punishment or rather the manifestation of sin. Thus, in Christ death has no power over us. As “divine revelation makes known to us that death in general and the particular death of each individual fall within the plan of God’s ordering wisdom and his self giving love”⁵² For Christ’s death is a self-emptying death for the sake of love of others. Death then in Christ is this self emptying, that is, “the death of our old self to sin through the cross of Christ.”⁵³

2.2.1. *Death as Sacrifice of Love*

After the breaking of communion between humanity and God, human beings became natural enemies to each other and the environment. Christ enters therefore to destroy this compartment of lifelessness. So that, from Christ human beings may have life and learn to give life to others. The crucified Lord who is our role model and whom

⁵¹ H. KOSTER, *Death*, In McGraw-hill The New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 1967, 686.

⁵² J. H. WRIGHT, *Death* In McGraw-hill The New Catholic Encyclopaedia 688.

⁵³ DAVID WATSON, *Called and Committed: World-Changing Discipleship*, 183.

we identify ourselves with, calls us to “die with him to the old world of self and sin.”⁵⁴ This is the real death in order to have life. “The unique love of the Father was made manifest to us in Jesus Christ, not so much in spoken words as in deeds: the small, discreet, daily marvels narrated in the Gospel, but above all, the final consummation on the cross.”⁵⁵ Christ in his death breaks the walls of selfishness, hatred, deprivation and all evils so that all may learn to open the flow of life to others and all receive from others.

“For this reason he is mediator of new covenant since a death has taken place for deliverance from transgressions under the first covenant, those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance”(Hebrews 9:15). Sacrifices in the Old Testament were offered by the priests for their self cleansing and cleansing of the community, but now Christ through obedience to his father and love for the humanity accepts to die to set humanity free from chains of sin. In that sense “we are freed from the authority of sin and Satan over our lives”⁵⁶

Christ transforms the idea of death from “total alienation spiritually and physically to salvation (liberation), through transformation of man’s mortal condition, a changing of death into life.”⁵⁷ Consequently death becomes a sacrifice of love and hence impacts our lives to die for others. When a person enters the life of grace in Christ, that person is open and can give himself for the sake of others as Christ did. For Christ, through love and obedience to his Father, became a sacrifice. Therefore

⁵⁴ DAVID WATSON, *Called and Committed: World-Changing Discipleship*, 182.

⁵⁵ PETER FRANSEN, *Divine Grace and Man*, New York 1962, 54.

⁵⁶ DAVID WATSON, *Called and Committed: World-Changing Discipleship*, 183.

⁵⁷ H. KOSTER, *Death* in *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 689.

manifesting his total self-giving and surrender, because of love for all human beings and for their salvation. He laid an example for all, to do so in his memory and for the salvation of all.

2.2.2. Salvation Merited Through Death of Christ

“The historicity of salvation includes three assertions; The salvific act of God is directed toward the course of human events so that salvation begins in time through the actual happening wrought by God in mankind; salvific act begun in time is completed within historic process of human activity and third the saving act of God as performed in time, has past, present and future realizations.”⁵⁸ Looking at history, man lost his grace and communion with God through death in sin. Thus, God in his mercy and compassion enters human history in order to show the way to eternity.

Human beings continue to choose sin over the divine order. The faithful remnants are the ones to become heirs of the new kingdom. Through “Christ’s suffering and death, he satisfies men’s sins, by his life and death he merited salvation for all, by his sacrifice he renders to the father the homage men refused their creator and because men are to be incorporated in him as their new Adam, all men die to sin and rise to the new life of Grace.”⁵⁹

The death and resurrection of Jesus became the climax in the mystery of salvation and in establishing of the new kingdom. It is the altruistic self-giving for the

⁵⁸ E.L. PETERMAN, *Salvation History* In McGraw Hill, The New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 999.

⁵⁹ E.L. PETERMAN, *salvation history* In McGraw Hill, The New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 995.

love and mercy of human beings. This is the true selflessness and the greatest example of breaking the compartments of lifelessness to the reality of life in itself. As the letter to the Hebrews tells us; “for this reason he is mediator of a new covenant; since a death has taken place for deliverance from transgressions under the first covenant, those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance” Heb: 9.15. For the sake of all, Christ enters death in order to redeem human beings while the fundamental task for the humanity is to accept the call to get redeemed through Christ. The first letter of Peter; says, “He himself bore our sins in his body upon the cross, so that, free from sin, we might live for righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed” I Pt; 2:24.

It is through the death and resurrection of Christ Jesus that humanity has been won back to the original grace and communion with God. Through the mystery of Christ, God adopts human beings as his children.

2.2.3. Christ enters his glory through death

Death in the Old Testament was conceived of as the worst catastrophe that human being could experience. It was feared as the worst and last enemy of human beings. In the New Testament we find Jesus choosing bitter path of death as criminal on the cross for the remission of sins of mankind. “Christ’s death on the cross is his enthronement over the kingdom of grace”⁶⁰. It is through death that humanity enters the life of glory with Christ.

⁶⁰ HERBERT HAAG, *Is Original Sin in Scripture*, 100.

God in his plan and love of human kind sent his Son to redeem humanity. Christ assumes human body and enters human life in order to show humanity the way to the Father. Christ humbles himself taking our humanity with himself in order to enable us participate in his glory. As Watson says, “he makes us like God, full of power, authority and glory, overflowing with spiritual gifts, reaching down to the weak and lifting them up.”⁶¹ In His choice of the death on the cross he reveals the glory of the father as loving and compassionate.

“He humbled himself becoming obedient to death even death on a cross and because of this God greatly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name....”Phil 2:8-9. His glorification was achieved through the obedience, to his Father to die a death reserved particularly by law for criminals. On the cross, Christ was hanged in a company of two criminals, one of those hanged with Him on the cross remarked, “And indeed, we have been condemned justly, for the sentence we received corresponds to our crimes, but this man has done nothing criminal” (Lk; 23,41). This testifies to his free will to enter that cruel suffering and death as means and path to his glorification, otherwise he had all the aptitude to resist.

The letter to the Hebrews tells us that, we do see Jesus “crowned with glory and honour because he suffered death, he who for a little while was made lower than the angels, that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone”Heb; 2: 9. Jesus became to exalt us to partake in his glory. Christ’s death signifies freedom from fear of

⁶¹ DAVID WATSON, *Called and Committed: World-Changing Discipleship*, 192.

death, in destroying the power of sin, cleansing of the infirmities and the eternal mediation for human beings as they struggle on the earth.

2.3. Conclusion

The trade of the understanding the concept of death in the New Testament is transformed through the death of Christ. Death is no more a separation but a means through which one enters the divine life. In the New Testament or rather post Christ era, one needs not to die physically to be termed alienated. Physical death is in the nature of human being as understood and it is rather a culmination of the life of grace on earth and the entry to the life of glory.

The mysterious part of death is in the fact that, it is a sacrifice of love, means of entry to glory with Christ, a means through which human beings got their salvation and in which we learn from Christ's humility to die for the salvation of others. It is the ultimate self-giving that can only be reached by those who have accepted the Christ to break their walls of selfishness. Death is no more separation but rather means to liberation.

CHAPTER THREE

UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF DEATH TODAY

3. Introduction

Humanity's self-assertion and realisation is through its union with Christ. Loss of that union leads to lack of meaning of humanity and life itself. The self-realization in belonging to the kingdom of death is this Lack of union with Christ. Today's understanding of the concept of death and afterlife is drawn from Christ's event of suffering, death and resurrection.

The third chapter explores the study in three parts; in the first part we shall survey the spiritualised concept of death. In this part we will study the aloofness from God, warping of harmony among the people of God, ecological dimension of death and inner decline as dimensions of today's understanding of the concept of death.

In the second part we will go through to discover how positively we can comprehend the concept of death. Here we shall seek to ascertain the naturalness of the phenomenon of death, how through death we enter immortality and a life of constant communion with God.

The third part of the chapter will strive to discover what death means to a Christian and the application of the concept in our lives. Therefore, in this part we shall look at the death of a Christian as; fulfilment of life of grace, as manifestation of the last sacrament and the doorway to eternity.

3.1. A Spiritualised Concept of Death

In the New Testament the concept of death is more developed in spiritual understanding than in the Old Testament. Like the Old Testament, death is linked to sin but unlike the Old Testament, death in the New Testament is not just physical alienation but rather a spiritual alienation. Today's comprehension of the concept of death is drawn from the New Testament and hence applied spiritually in our lives.

3.1.1. *Separation from God*

Death as total alienation from this worldly life in the Old Testament was punishment for sin, especially when one died prematurely, that is, dying when one is young or through illness. In the New Testament, one need not die the physical death for him/her to be said is separated from God. When one commits Sin, "already has put oneself far from God by choosing sin for God."⁶² "Sin begins its devastation by separating the human being from God."⁶³ The inner peace and joy that Christ has won for us becomes distorted. There is loss of freedom, for freedom entails doing well to each other for the glory of the kingdom established by Christ Jesus. As the Gospel of Mathew says "...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you"(Mt 5:44). One is free to love and do good to others even to the enemies. Lack of this spiritual freedom creates apprehension in the individual. This apprehension is the result of tearing up of affable relationship with God and the ecclesial community. This creates

⁶² PIET SCHÖONENBERG, *Man and Sin*, 20.

⁶³ NICHOLAS FOGLIACCO *The God of Consolation*, 22.

within the individual a sense of defense and hence tries to justify one's evil action. This defense can mean physical, social, economic and spiritual estrangement from each other, no matter what means is used to reach this estrangement as one's goal.

3.1.2. Destruction of the Harmony with the People of God

Sin is the key behind all evils; thus, we unmistakably see the divisible effect of Sin, which is the main cause of destruction in families, societies and world at large. "Before the eviction from the paradise, the perfect balance that existed in the original couple was upset by suspicion and Adam started blaming his wife (Gen 3:12. Other evils includes, the murder of Abel in the hands of Cain (Gen 4:1-16), the flood (Gen 6-8) the story of the tower of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), all these vices evidence the disharmony brought about by sin."⁶⁴ Any evil that is committed against a fellow human being originates from the spirit of selfishness and lack of love for the others. "Sin is the opposite of love and excludes love."⁶⁵

3.1.3. Ecological Dimension of Death

Human Sin is the cause of the disharmony between man and environment as Genesis 3:17-19 gives some substantial evidence. Although man was given the obligation to be a steward of the natural order, he turned to be a monster, exploiter of

⁶⁴ NICHOLAS FOGLIACCO, *The God of Consolation*, 22.

⁶⁵ PIET SCHOONENBERG, *Man and Sin*, 70.

the natural environment. "The natural environment perceives man and woman as its enemies, and refuses to cooperate with them."⁶⁶

Every other creature or living plant and animal is only exploited by human beings for their selfish ends. Human beings have become great enemies to the environment other than being stewards as per the original plan of God. Following the example of Christ Jesus, human beings are to, "shun and transform those things in the world which lead to self-centeredness and thing-centeredness and which lead to death"⁶⁷, this is in order to remain faithful stewards of the others creatures.

3.1.4. Inner Decline

Death as transgression in the New Testament refers to the interior decline of a sinner. For when one sins, one is living in contradiction with oneself and becomes uncomfortable especially when realizing the reality of severance from others. Though aware of ones evils, when confronted by evil desires, one feels helpless and cannot control oneself from doing evil.

Because of this spiritual blindness, one falls into, "self-sufficiency, self-affirmation and self-glorification that can be found only in a mind blinded by pride".⁶⁸ God loses meaning in sinners' lives, when they reach this stage of false self-glorification, self-deification; lack of belief in God and loss of sense of sin. Selfishness, exploitation, corruption, killing, deprivation, fear, are the ruling principles of those who

⁶⁶ NICHOLAS FOGLIACCO, *The God of Consolation*, 22.

⁶⁷ ROBERT KARRIS, *Flesh, Spirit and Body in Paul, In the Bible Today*, 1974, 1450.

⁶⁸ NICHOLAS FOGLIACCO, *The God of Consolation*, 24.

are spiritually dead or rather those who have inner spiritual decline. Consequently, one in the state of inner decline is said to be spiritually dead and hence belonging to the kingdom of death unless one resurrects with Christ from death in sin. All evils against other Beings generate from sin in which we out-rightly reject God's grace at work in our lives.

3.2. Death Positively Understood.

Looking at the death of Christ Jesus, it is true to say that, He (Christ) has become the pioneer of physical death as a natural process of human life to the life of glory. It was only through the suffering and death of Christ Jesus that our redemption was achieved and that Christ entered his glory through this bitter path in obedience. "Viewed in this way death as a natural phenomenon not only manifests man's affinity with the material universe, but also illuminates his essential relationship with God."⁶⁹ The concept of death took a substantial about turn, other than being the way of division to means of liberation and the way to eternity.

3.2.1 Death as Natural Phenomena

Scientifically speaking everything that is, is subject to a beginning and an end. As a thing begins, it has youthful strength but as long as it stays, then, its vitality fluctuates and hence diminishes totally or re-germinates a new. Dealing with humans, it

⁶⁹ J. H. WRIGHT, *Death* In the McGraw-hill The New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 688.

is very important to remember that our bodies are subject to laws of nature and, they have to grow and die at one time. Bearing this in mind, we need to make again a flashback to the creation story, where God breathed the life giving breath to man. At death, God who is the author of life, reclaims the breath of life as the psalmist says, "...when you take away their breath, they perish and return to the dust from which they were made" Psm, 104:29. In the reality of death, the dust returns to the earth as it once was, and the life breath returns to God who gave it.

Death as a natural process and by which every human being has to pass through to eternity. It is an eternal rest from one's labours and toils of life. The book of Revelation reminds us that, "... Blessed are the dead who die in the lord from now on. "Yes," "let them find rest from their labours, for their works accompany them, Rev 14:13.

The breath of life goes back to the author of life (God). At death Jesus and Stephen consecutively uttered these words; "...Lord receive my spirit" Luke 23: 46; Acts 7; 59. This gives certainty in the belief of the afterlife existence and that there is one who receives our souls after separating with the body. Therefore, death as separation of the soul and the body should be looked at as a completion of earthly life and the beginning or rather entry to the divine life where there is life without end.

3.2.2. *Immortalization and Constant Communion with God.*

From the beginning of creation, immortality was a state or rather a virtue reserved for God and even in the traditional religions, this is reserved for gods. Flashing back to the Old Testament, we trace the hope of immortality from the Maccabean soldiers who stood heroically for redemption of their enslaved faith. For, “from then on the present life counted for less than eternal life”⁷⁰ (2Macc; 7:9). The book of wisdom has similar echoes; “For if before men, indeed, they be punished, yet is their hope full of immortality” Ws 3:4.

Immortality can also be traced in Christ’s words, “whoever hears his word passes from death to life” (Jn 5:24), “whoever believes in him need fear of death no more: though he be dead, he shall live” (Jn 11; 25), and whoever keeps my word will not see death forever (Jn 8:15).⁷¹

Luke the evangelist gives us an account of Jesus confronted by Sadducees who not only were ignorant of life-after but also they did not belief in resurrection. Jesus tells them that, those who belief are to live immortal life unlike the non- believers who will eternally perish and remain mortal. -----“They can no longer die, for they are like angels; and they are the children of God because they are ones who will rise” Lk 20: 36.

The idea of deathlessness in Christ can be traced in the first letter to Corinthians as Paul instructs them that, “—when this which is corruptible must clothe itself with

⁷⁰ PIERRE GRELOT, *Death in the* XAVIER LEON-DUTOUR, A GEOFFREY CHAPMAN, Dictionary of Biblical Theology, London, 116.

⁷¹ PIERRE GRELOT, *Death in the* XAVIER LEON-DUTOUR, A GEOFFREY CHAPMAN, Dictionary of Biblical Theology, 116.

incorruptibility, and this which is mortal clothes itself with immortality, then, the word that is written shall come about; "Death is swallowed up in victory" 1Cor 15:53-54. Thus, we shall be immortal through the spirit of Christ that remains in us even after departure from this life.

In the sphere of immortality, Paul writes in the letter to Romans that; "eternal life is to those who seek glory, honour, and Immortality through perseverance in good works" Rom 2; 7. One has to work for this grace of immortality. The first letter of Peter also has echoes of the necessity of grace for the attainment of immortality; thus he gives thanks to God who through Christ we are brought and given the grace of "an Inheritance that is Imperishable, undefiled and unfading, kept in heaven for us" 1Pt 1:3-4. Christ through his death has restored our communion with God here on earth and in the life after, the grace of Immortality.

3.3. Death of a Disciple of Christ.

For Christians "death is not to be perceived as punishment for Sin. There is 'nothing in the Christian who is alive in Christ that falls under the condemning judgement of God' (Rom 8:1). Since death is natural to man".⁷² As redeemed people, we are to see death as a completion of earthly life and the entry to the life of Glory.

"For death now manifests also God's redemptive purpose and it becomes the occasion for the exercise of the divine life with an intensity and purity it would not

⁷² J.H. WRIGHT, *Death*, in the New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 689.

otherwise achieve”.⁷³ The change of the concept of death “Culminates the results of the whole supernatural and sacramental life of the Christian whereby during life he opened himself to the divine power that was at work throughout all of Christ’s life, death and resurrection and hence continues to operate in his glorious humanity.”⁷⁴

To die for a Christian is not a negative thing but positive as it is bonded with the sacrificial death of Christ as the climax of love for restoration of relationship and unity between human being and God. It also has some sense of fulfilment of life on earth, completion of sacramental life and the coming of the kingdom, it is rather a sacrificial victim (a martyr’s) death.

3.3.1 Through Death Life of Grace is fulfilled.

The three theological virtues that is, faith, hope and charity are important to the Christian community. In life we live what we belief, in hope of the future afterlife existence with our creator and the manifestation of our faith and hope is seen in our action of good works (charity) towards others. These are the guidelines through which if well lived, one’s life is always in communion with God. For “Loss of God leaves the human being in a state of existential loneliness and emptiness that no creation can fill and thus, introducing the kingdom of death.”⁷⁵

⁷³ J.H. WRIGHT, *Death*, in the New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 690.

⁷⁴ J.H. WRIGHT, *Death*, in the New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 690.

⁷⁵ NICHOLAS FOGLIACCO, *The God of All Consolation*, 23.

Faith is for the present life and the guiding principle through which we place our trust in God for our future (eternal existence). It is in the same faith and hope that, an obligation to be in solidarity with others is placed in our hearts.

In faith, we orient ourselves towards a goal that lies beyond the visible confines of this mortal life. For the believer, approaching death is the veil that conceals the goal to which he has committed himself. For death is no longer a defeat, destruction or final estrangement from God, but rather the unveiling of the face of God”.⁷⁶

In our human response to love and self-giving for the sake of others, we actually enter in God and Him in us and; “we no longer live to ourselves but to God; and to him who for our sake died and rose again.”⁷⁷ The experience of death is just but a process that each must pass through to enter eternity and thus the life of grace in earthly life is fulfilled.

3.3.2. Death, the last sacrament

After creation, God blessed man to multiply and fill the earth. Due to sin, man estranged himself from the love and communion with God. The evil continued to thrive and God decided to choose a few who will be a sign to the rest, of how to do his will. In the Egyptian confinement, the chosen people tested a life of suffering which was for them a lesson of what would happen if they defied the will of God. The Exodus

⁷⁶ J.H. Wright, *Death*, in the New Catholic Encyclopedia, 690.

⁷⁷ J.H. WRIGHT, *Death* in the New Catholic Encyclopedia, 690.

experience prefigured God's redemptive plan in Christ. In Christ, all have been redeemed and the church continues this redemptive work in the sacraments.

The sacraments today we have in the church are meant to ensure this constant communion between human being and God. The first being Baptism, as the "supernatural rebirth, the passing from death to life by being buried and raised with Christ."⁷⁸ It marks the beginning of a journey whose end is realised through death. The second is Confirmation which perfect the Baptismal grace and in which the spirit of God with his gifts is at work in our lives. "In the end every Christian who dies in Christ gives his life for the faith, and the mission he was entrusted with at confirmation is thereby perfectly fulfilled."⁷⁹ The continual communion with God is ensured by the full participation in the Eucharistic celebrations. This is in the anticipation of full communion with God, which is realised after death.

Penance is that which ensures the return back (restoration) when we are lost in sin. That is, it ensures our constant and perfect union with God. While the Sacraments of state or rather vocation "produce an effect which is directly consummated in death. Still the commitment to God for a life of service in his church which these sacrament consecrate is brought to a close by Christian death and is succeeded by a still more universal concern for the whole communion of saints. On the anointing of the sick, death becomes the moment of final, triumphant rejection of Satan's power over men."⁸⁰ Death becomes the final victory after the last sacrament and thus, the soul of the faithful

⁷⁸ J.H. WRIGHT, *Death* In the New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 690.

⁷⁹ J.H. WRIGHT, *Death* In the New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 690.

⁸⁰ J.H. WRIGHT, *Death* In the New Catholic Encyclopaedia, 691.

3.4. CONCLUSION

In our exploration to understand the concept of death today has given us conviction to assert that, death in the spiritual sense is that alienation from the love of God which results in to the destruction of the harmony between humanity and God, disharmony with ecology, self and the inner spiritual stagnation.

Optimistic understanding of death opens our hearts following the death of Christ to affirm that, Christ is the pioneer of death hence it is a natural phenomenon to all living created beings. It is through death that we enter into the life of immortality and constant communion with our creator.

When one dies out side the communion with God or rather without the grace like in the Old Testament is condemned but unlike it, in the New Testament the individual is condemned to hell where malevolent souls live in everlasting scourging. If one dies in Christ the death one undergoes is the transitional death. That is, in that individual life of grace has been fulfilled, has gone through the life plan of God and has received the last sacrament and lastly as a natural phenomenon one has through death passed though the door to eternity.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

Death though a reality, it has remained a mystery especially to those who do not have the hope of resurrection. As we have seen in the Ancient Near Eastern cultures death was understood as a very unpleasant state and no one wished to enter that state. Thus, they ever looked for the reason for death and that which can bring immortality but unable to get, they spin tied the cause of death as human fault.

The origin of death is sin in the Old Testament and the understanding was coiled around the physical death. It was the worst deprivation a human being can experience and especially when one died at the young age or due to illness. In this view, physical death was the culmination of all consequences because of sin. Towards the end of Old Testament and Inter-Testamental period there was some traces of the hope of life after death for those who were righteous, though the idea was not elaborate as it is in the New Testament.

The understanding of death in the New Testament is drawn or rather inspired by the Christ's event of incarnation, suffering, death and resurrection. Death is understood and means to redemption for those who die in Christ but for those who die without this union with Christ it becomes means to eternal damnation. In the spiritual sense when one is living outside the union with Christ is said to be spiritually dead as we have seen. Thus, in the New Testament death in the both physical death and spiritual death are understood in the light of Christ Jesus.

In our exploration to understand the concept of death today, we have the certainty to assert that, spiritual death is when one alienates himself from the love of

God through sin, hence distorts the harmony with self and the other created beings. The remedy for this alienation is through the sacraments. It is through the self death that we resurrect together with Christ in a new life of grace.

Lastly it is important to point out that, of two things all men may be certain: that all men will die, and that the exact time of death will remain unknown. Our death is not something to be feared. In every Catholic Mass for deceased persons, we are reminded of the Christian view of death; Life is not taken away, it is changed. Death for those who die in God's friendship is a real birthday.

At the death of Lazarus in the gospel, his sister expressed her belief that at the end of the world all men will rise again, and soul and body will be re-united, when she spoke the words to Christ; "I know he will rise again in the resurrection, on the last day" (Jn. 11:24). This is our faith that in Christ we shall have eternal life, in view of the teaching and emphasis of the Catholic Church on the communion of saints, the resurrection of all on the last day, and eternal life after death.

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