

Ecclesiastes 9:5-10 and the State of the Dead

BLOGCAST

J.K. McKee editor, Messianic Apologetics messianicapologetics.net 09 July, 2019

Is it not true that Ecclesiastes 9:5 says that “the dead know nothing”? Why are there people in today’s Messianic movement who believe that when they die they will go to Paradise or Heaven, when Ecclesiastes is clear that they will be unconscious?

This section of the Book of Ecclesiastes is probably the most frequently quoted Scripture by psychopannychists toward people who believe in an intermediate afterlife prior to the resurrection. Ecclesiastes 9:5b says “the dead do not know anything” (NASU) or “the dead know nothing” (RSV/NIV). *Sometimes this is screamed at people who are grieving the recent loss of a loved one.* While Qohelet is not screaming this at his audience, we need to once again understand his intention for making this remark, and seeing whether or not it really does support psychopannychy.

Qohelet is tempered by wisdom, as he says “I have taken all this to my heart and explain it that righteous men, wise men, and their deeds are in the hand of God....It is the same for all. There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice” (Ecclesiastes 9:1-2, NASU). The power of death is something that will affect each and every person, as “there is one fate for all men” (Ecclesiastes 9:3, NASU). Qohelet’s emphasis here is what happens to evil people, and while “insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they go to the dead” (Ecclesiastes 9:3b, NASU). You almost see a chance for possible repentance in his claim, “whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion” (Ecclesiastes 9:4, NASU). One might be weaker *and righteous* before God while living, as opposed to having died strong but with *no hope of restitution before Him*. What follows are some more words from Qohelet that have been strongly debated among interpreters:

“For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 9:5-6, NASU).

Psychopannychists will take the short clause “the dead know nothing” (RSV/NIV) and then claim that anyone who believes in an afterlife—in either Heaven or Hell—between the time of death and resurrection is in severe error for believing so. Yet this is not the context of Qohelet’s

words. Qohelet is speaking on how the dead cannot participate “in all that is done under the sun,” *tachat ha’shamesh*, things done on Planet Earth.¹

Those who believe in psychopannychy often base their doctrine on half-verses such as Ecclesiastes 9:5b, which say “the dead do not know anything” (NASU). Yet this is not definitive evidence of no intermediate post-mortem afterlife, as the verse *continues* describing human life on Earth, and how the dead do not know of any of these Earth-bound things: “their memory is forgotten. Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 9:5c-6, NIV). Ecclesiastes 9:5-6 does not say anything about the condition of dead persons or where they are, but instead lists specific things that they cannot do precisely because they are dead.

The things Qohelet lists such as love, hate, and zeal are things that these people had time to participate in on Earth or “under the sun,” but cannot participate in beyond the veil of death, hence not “knowing” about them. Once a person is dead, his or her fate is sealed before the Almighty, and no chance of restitution remains. A life of these specific worldly experiences is over. (Consider how one of the greatest gifts that God has given to the human race, the pleasures of marital sexual intercourse, can no longer be partaken of once a person dies.)

And so what is one to do while living that life “under the sun”? Is it a life of no value according to Qohelet? No. He says, “Go *then*, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works” (Ecclesiastes 9:7, NASU). Now is the time to live a life pleasing to God, where one can enjoy future blessings—and not condemnation—from Him! Qohelet says to “Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with *all* your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going” (Ecclesiastes 9:9-10, NASU). Life on Earth, in spite of its imperfections, indeed has its rewards that God wants people to take advantage of—especially those who are living a life of obedience to Him. These are things, though, which are no longer available after death.

Ecclesiastes 9:10 says that the joys God has created to be experienced on this Earth cannot be enjoyed when a deceased person goes to Sheol. While versions like the NIV render this as “for in the grave where you are going...,” this more accurately means, “for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom” (TNIV). A deceased person joins the *refaim* or shades in Sheol, an extra-dimensional holding place for the consciousness, and is not completely what he was on Planet Earth. Ecclesiastes 9:5-10 and Qohelet’s assertion “the dead know nothing” presents no problems for those of us who believe in an intermediate disembodied afterlife, if we can see how he substantiates what knowing nothing about *really involves*.²

¹ The clause *tachat ha’shamesh* appears throughout the Book of Ecclesiastes, forcing any responsible reader to see that Qohelet’s vantage point is life as experienced on Earth: Ecclesiastes 1:3, 9, 14; 2:11, 17ff, 22; 3:16; 4:1, 3, 7, 15; 5:12, 17; 6:1, 12; 8:9, 15, 17; 9:3, 6, 9, 11, 13; 10:5.

² For a further discussion, consult the entry for the Book of Ecclesiastes in *A Survey of the Tanach for the Practical Messianic*, and the article “The Message of Ecclesiastes” by J.K. McKee.