

BIBLICAL AND ANCIENT EXTRA-BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES ON DEATH

The relationship between death and the Fall creates some intriguing points of discussion and study.

The issue of whether or not death occurred before the entrance of sin on Earth presents many fascinating facets, all of which have potentially significant theological implications for Seventh-day Adventists. Was there death on Earth before the Fall? Was death part of God's original plan for creation before sin entered the world, or was it introduced as a punishment for wickedness after the Fall? Was animal death included in the death sentence at the Fall, or did animals die before the Fall?

Does the Bible Recognize Death Prior to the Fall?

One of the ideas we occasionally hear that would supposedly solve the tension between the Bible's short Earth history and the deep time that conventional science demands is that there were perhaps two cre-

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ations of life. It is suggested that the initial one occurred millions or billions of years ago and accounts for the bulk of the geologic column and the fossil record it contains. In view of the evidence of predation and death (including mass mortality layers and the like) in this fossil record, some add the idea that perhaps God permitted Satan to rule over the Earth during this period. Then this Earth was somehow destroyed, and there was a second creation. This second creation is supposedly the one we find recorded in Scripture, wherein the Earth was created in six days in the more recent past and the current biota, including humans (which appear at the very top of the geologic column), came at about this time.

Concerning the so-called first creation, it is difficult to accept an idea for which there is not a scrap of evidence in Scripture. There is simply no positive biblical support for such a suggestion.

A Perfect, Completed Creation

Of course, this lack of any reference to an earlier creation has provided an open field wherein speculation can and has run without restraint. Though the Bible provides no knowledge of a "precreation creation," nuances in the Hebrew text appear to preclude it.

Jacques Doukhan argues that each stage of the Creation is unam-

biguously characterized as good. Moreover, both Genesis 1 and 2 teach that perfect peace reigned, not just between the human couple, but also between humans and the animal kingdom. The end of the creative process is characterized by a word generally translated as "finished" or "completed" (2:1, 2, NIV). Doukhan argues that this word conveys more than the mere chronological idea of "end." It also implies the quantitative idea that nothing is missing and there is nothing to add, confirming that death and all the evil that will strike later have not yet (an important concept in Hebrew) affected the world.

Doukhan then goes on to argue: "At the same time, the biblical text does not allow for speculation or supposition of a precreation in which death and destruction would already have been involved. It clearly indicates that the 'heavens and earth' which are presented in Genesis 2a (the conclusion of the creation story) are the same as those in Genesis 1:1 (the introduction of the creation story)."¹ Doukhan concludes, "The event of creation (Genesis 1:1 to 2:4a) witnesses to, and is told as, a complete and total event which admits neither the possibility of a prework in a distant past (gap-theory) nor a postwork in the future (evolution)."²

Doukhan's argument becomes even more potent if one accepts

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Richard Davidson's analysis of Genesis 1. Davidson's work is significant because he argues that the phrase "in the beginning" in verse 1 points back to the "ultimate" beginning of the universe, not simply the beginning of this Earth. Davidson supports Sailhammer's linguistic argument that Genesis 1:1 refers to this initial creation of the universe and that it is separate from the creation found in the rest of Genesis 1, which would have happened more recently. (Though this can support an old Earth but young life argument, the time between the beginning of the universe and the Earth itself was not the focus or even a concern of an ancient Hebrew.) Combining Doukhan and Davidson's analyses, the Hebrew writer is arguing that God's creative activity throughout the universe was not completed until this Earth, itself, was created. If this analysis is correct, it not only precludes an earthly precreation with its subsequent death, but also denies that death occurred anywhere in God's entire

created universe prior to the Fall. Nevertheless, even if one rejects Davidson's argument, Doukhan's argument alone maintains that the Hebrew text denies any precreation or death before the Fall.

The "Not Yet" of Creation

Doukhan offers additional arguments on why death did not exist before the Fall. One of these deals with the Hebrew word *terem*, which conveys the concept of "not yet." The entire Eden story is clearly written from the perspective of a writer who has already experienced the effects of death and suffering and therefore describes the events of Genesis 2 as a "not yet" situation. Doukhan adds other textual elements that support the idea that Genesis 2 does indeed serve as a prologue for Genesis 3. Though some are explicit, many more are implicit. For example, the dust from which man is made anticipates the dust to which he will return after the Fall; the assignment of Adam and Eve to keep the garden anticipates their

being forced out, whereupon the cherubim are entrusted to keep the garden.

It could be added that the "not yetedness" of thorns and thistles (and grain plants for bread that humans are to cultivate) occur only after the Fall. Prior to this, humans are tasked to cultivate the garden that God planted, and rain does not appear as a source of agricultural water until the Flood.

Doukhan shows that the not-yet concept is also displayed in a play on

words between *arom* (naked, as it pertains to the humans) and *arom* (cunning, as it pertains to the serpent). The former points to the latter to indicate the tragedy that will be later initiated through the association between the serpent and human beings, which has not yet occurred. Taken together, these all point to a great divide in Earth's history—a time before sin and death, and a time after. Sin and death do not occur until Genesis 3, when Adam and Eve disobey God.



Was Death Part of the Original Creation?

In many respects, the ancient peoples of the Near East were obsessed with the topic of death, as is evident in their elaborate burial rituals and in many of their writings. However, there is not much in ancient literature on the origin of death.

The closest such story, perhaps, is from the Epic of Gilgamesh, and is commonly referred to as “Gilgamesh and the Magic Plant.” The essence of the story is that after the death of his dear friend and companion Enkidu, with whom he had shared many adventures, a distraught Gilgamesh sets off in search of eternal life. Gilgamesh learns that the long-lived hero of the Flood, Utnapishtim, knows the secret of avoiding death. Gilgamesh seeks out Utnapishtim and learns from him that before the flood, continued eating of a certain plant would forestall death.

Gilgamesh asks Utnapishtim for the location of the plant and learns that it is now at the bottom of the sea, submerged there during the great flood. Determined to retrieve the plant, Gilgamesh obtains a boat and rows out to the middle of the sea. When he arrives over the spot where the plant is submerged, he takes a great breath, dives down into the depths, finds the plant, and retrieves it. He rows back to shore, where, exhausted from his ordeal, he falls into a deep sleep. While he is

sleeping, a snake slithers along the shore, sees the plant, and eats it. When Gilgamesh wakes up, he finds his plant gone! He spies a snake skin nearby and realizes that the snake has deprived him of eternal life!

Various scholars have contemplated what this story might have meant to the ancients. Some have suggested it was intended to answer the question, Why do snakes shed their skin? They apparently understood this as a way the snake rejuvenated itself. Others note that there were strong traditions among ancient Mesopotamians that the antediluvians had incredibly long life spans. Gilgamesh and the Magic Plant answers why this is so.

Others have pointed out, however, that Gilgamesh begins his quest for the magic plant after the death of his dear friend Enkidu, and that the story, perhaps, was intended to answer the question, Why do people die, or conversely, why don't they live forever? The answer seems to be that death had its origins when humankind lost access to the magic plant—that we were deprived of eternal life because a nasty snake stole it from us.

The imagery and parallels invite comparisons with the biblical account. According to contemporary critical scholarship, the most authoritative work is probably Lloyd R. Bailey's *Biblical Perspectives on Death*. Bailey's approach reflects the

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typical historical-critical perspective prevalent at the time of his study. He posits that the Bible's views on death changed through time as first ancient Israel and then the Christian Church reacted to specific historical circumstances around them.

Bailey acknowledges that ancient Israel's “canonical” understanding of death is found in the Genesis creation accounts. He suggests, however, that behind chapters 2-3 there may be two earlier folk explanations of human mortality. The first, according to Bailey, concerns a “protohuman” couple in primeval time warned by their creator not to partake of the fruit from the tree of knowledge. If they did, they “would surely die.” Bailey explains that according to this particular folk story, “death would be an intrusion into the Creator's design, a curse under which humans were of necessity placed, a manifestation of their fallen state.”³

The second folk story Bailey detects is that humans were intended to be mortal—to die—from the very beginning. His evidence for this is the verses that show that humans share a common essence with the animal kingdom. Since he assumes that animals died from the beginning, so must humans have died. He also assumes that in this folk story, humans were always forbidden access to the tree of life. Unfortunately, he asserts, only a fragment of this second explanation is preserved in the Bible, including only a part of the following verse: “The Lord God said, . . . lest [humankind] put forth his hand, and take also of the tree of life, and eat, and live for ever” (Gen. 3:22, KJV). Bailey bemoans the fact that at this point the text breaks off, leaving us without the ending of this second story. Nevertheless, this verse fragment shows, according to Bailey, that God never intended to make

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humans mortal from the beginning, and that this verse fragment was later merged into the first story.

Bailey argues that the idea of death as punishment does not appear in the rest of the Old Testament and, thus, explanation number 2 provides the basic perspective of the rest of the Old Testament. The idea that death was divine punishment did not emerge, he says, until the intertestamental period and, especially, the New Testament period.

In a more recent study on death in the Bible, Kent Harold Richards acknowledges that there seems to be little preoccupation with the origin of death in the Old Testament, that is, few texts directly address this issue, Genesis 3 being the major exception. In contrast with Bailey, however, Richards notes that “the understanding of death as part of some original plan is far less compatible with the wide range of texts.” That is to say, death was not a built-in part of God’s original creation

according to the Bible.

Rather, Richards argues, the most obvious explanation for the origin of death is as a punishment for disobeying God. Whereas Bailey fails to identify any Old Testament texts, apart from Genesis 3, that support the idea that death was the result of divine punishment, Richards identifies numerous others, e.g., “Behold, all souls are Mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is Mine; the soul who sins shall die” (Eze. 18:4, NKJV). Other such texts include Psalm 37:9, 10, 20, 34; 68:2; Isaiah 40:24; Malachi 4:1; and John 3:16. Though these latter don’t refer to the original death sentence, they emanate from that judgment and were indeed part of the ancient Israelite understanding.

Is the Death of Animals a Moral Issue?

How could a loving God allow millions of years of death and suffering in the animal kingdom prior

to the creation of humankind? This seems especially incongruent with the description given of our Creator as a God who assures us of His love by reminding us that He does not forget even a sparrow (Luke 12:6) and that He feeds the ravens (vs. 24). Therefore we should not worry about whether He will care for us, for are we not “of more value than many sparrows” (vs. 7, NKJV)?

It is often suggested that the Bible is concerned only with human death (Rom. 5:12), that the death of animals is not a moral problem. This argument seems to be contradicted by Romans 8:19–23: “The earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the first-fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body” (NKJV).

Advocates of the idea that death reigned in nature for millions of years prior to the appearance of humankind have given considerable attention to this passage. This is because the common reading of the text sug-

gests that nature was directly affected by the Fall. Since this interpretation contradicts the model that holds that death existed in nature for millions of years prior to the seven-day Creation (and hence the Fall), there have been several attempts to reinterpret the passage.

The focus of attention has been on the word *ktisis*, “creation.” Opponents of the traditional view argue that it can be translated as “creature” (which is true) and that “creature” is the intended meaning here. Moreover, they argue that the creature referred to is not the sub-human creation, but rather is a non-Christian human. They differ on who these individuals are, but the prominent suggestions are either Gentiles or Jews.

There are several problems with this alternate interpretation. For one thing, this translation seems to go against the majority of commentators and translators.

For another, for the “creature” interpretation to work, interpreters must deny that the author intended to personify nature. To accomplish this, they simply assert that early Christians did not personify “creation.” However, there is considerable evidence that *ktisis* was indeed personified and represented as a woman in both the Greek and early Christian world. Indeed, several mosaic floors illustrate the personification of *ktisis*. Moreover, the refer-

ence in Romans 8 to the pains of childbirth reinforces the idea that the early Christians did indeed adapt the Greek personification of nature, and that is how *ktisis* is being used here.

There are, however, indications within Scripture in addition to Romans 8 that indicate that the death of animals is a moral problem and that their death—indeed, their present behavior as manifested in the predator/prey relationship—is tied directly to the acts of humankind, especially the human disobedience that led to the Fall. Insights into this issue come from two studies—the one by Doukhan and another by Tikva Frymer-Kensky, an Israeli scholar.

Frymer-Kensky's study into the cause of the Flood provides valuable insights into human/animal behavior prior to the Flood. According to Frymer-Kensky, Genesis states explicitly that God decided to destroy the world because of the wickedness of humankind (Gen. 6:5). Although this traditionally has been understood to mean that God destroyed the world as a punishment for humanity's sins, this understanding of the passage entails serious theological problems, such as the propriety of God's destroying all life on Earth because of the sins of humankind. She is arguing that rather than the sins of human beings, it was the shedding of blood—the Flood was

not so much punishment as a cleansing act.

Frymer-Kensky goes on, however, to answer this dilemma by noting that, according to the Book of Genesis, the God caused the Flood because of the world's *hΩāmās*. This word may sound familiar because its Arabic cognate is essentially the same as the name for a current militant Palestinian terrorist group. It is usually translated into English as "violence," but as Frymer-Kensky points out, the term is very complex, with a wide range of meanings that render normal lexical analysis insufficient. Rather, she employs a semantic analysis to grasp more fully the nature of this evil that was so great that it necessitated the Flood. Semantic analysis includes a close examination of the context of the word, not only of the biblical text, but also of its extra-biblical parallels, such as the Atrahasis Epic.

Frymer-Kensky points out that in both the Atrahasis Epic and Genesis 1–11, solutions are proposed to deal with the problem of humankind and to prevent these problems from reoccurring. Since the problems are perceived as quite different in each of these primeval histories, however, the solutions are likewise different. In Atrahasis, the problem is overpopulation, and the solution involves ways of inhibiting human reproduction. In Genesis, the problem is *hΩāmās* and the solution in-

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What, precisely, is *hΩāmās*? Frymer-Kensky shows that the answer to the problem is in the solution. In the case of Genesis 1–11, the solution is provided in the laws that God established in God's covenant with Noah immediately after the Flood.

According to Genesis 9, God issued three commandments to Noah and his sons immediately after the Flood: (1) He commanded humans to be fruitful, to increase, multiply, and swarm over the Earth; (2) He announced that although humans may eat meat, they must not eat animals alive (or eat the blood, which is tantamount to the same thing [Gen. 9:4]); and (3) He declared that no one, neither beasts nor humans, can kill a human being without forfeiting their own life (Gen. 9:5, 6, NKJV).

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the world. The world had descended into an environment of wanton mayhem, indiscriminate killing, wherein humans were killing humans, humans were killing animals (and eating them alive), and animals were killing humans (and, no doubt, eating them). Though the text does not specifically address this, animals were no doubt killing and eating other animals.

Frymer-Kensky's emphasis is on how blood shed through violent acts pollutes and how the Flood cleansed the Earth from the pollution of *hΩāmās*—the blood spilled through acts of violence. However, it is significant that this act of *hΩāmās* was not perpetrated solely by humankind—rather, it was also perpetrated by the animal kingdom. It is the actions of humans and beasts that call forth the judgment of the Flood—not simply that of humanity alone. Neither is acting in the manner ordained to them by God at the time of their initial creation. What was this manner?

God attempts to reduce the aggressiveness of the animal kingdom toward humankind by proclaiming: “The fear of you and the terror of you shall be on every beast of the earth and on every bird of the sky; with everything that creeps on the ground, and all the fish of the sea” (Gen. 9:2, NASB).

Jacques Doukhan describes both the relationship of humans and animals, and the nature of their behavior as they were ordained by God during Creation week. He points out that the Hebrew verb *radah* (to have dominion), which is used to express humanity’s special relationship to the animal kingdom, “is a term which belongs to the language of the suzerain-vassal covenant without any suggestion of abuse or cruelty. In the parallel text of Gen 2, man’s relationship to nature is also described in the positive terms of covenant. Man gives names to the animals and not only indicates thereby the establishment of a covenant between him and them, but also declares his lordship over them. That death and suffering are not part of this relationship is clearly suggested in Genesis 1, where man’s dominion over the animals is directly associated with the question of food source. The food provided, both for man and animal, is to be that produced from plants, not animals (cf. Gen 1: 28–30). In Gen 2 the same peaceful harmony lies in the

fact that animals are designed to provide companionship for man, even if neither complete nor adequate (Gen 2:18).⁴

This is quite the opposite of how the Bible describes the antediluvian world—a world in which the animal kingdom is in rebellion, and the peaceful relationship between humans and beasts, and beast with beast has broken down—not only were humans killing one another, but animals were killing humans as well.

In essence, *hΩāmās* represents the complete breakdown of the covenant that God had established between humankind and the animal kingdom in Genesis 1:28–30. Rather than the peaceful, non-predatory world where humans rule over the animals benevolently, and the only food sources for both are plants, *hΩāmās* signals a planet in rebellion in which humans no longer rule and the animals no longer submit. Both are now locked into a mutually aggressive relationship of kill or be killed, and the mouths of both are stained with the blood of

one another.

This is not to say that the violence did not include humans killing each other (murder); it certainly included that, but the bloodshed went well beyond that, extending into the animal kingdom itself. It also includes the emergence of a carnivorous appetite—a taste for blood—on the part of both humans and beasts. Hence we can understand the stern new prohibitions that God places upon both humans and beasts after the Flood subsides.

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require the life of man. Whoever sheds man’s blood, by man his blood shall be shed, for in the image of God. He made man” (vss. 5, 6, NASB). As Frymer-Kensky points out, these latter commands are to reduce the possibility that *hΩāmās*—the polluting of the planet by the indiscriminate and wanton shedding of blood—will again appear on the Earth.

The significance of this Old Testament understanding of *hΩāmās* from the time of Noah did not simply fade away in later biblical times. Indeed, it continued to be embedded within later Old Testament laws and, according to Frymer-Kensky, was still significant during the time of the New Testament church—they were seen as Pre-Jewish and, hence, universal.

It is important to note that these prohibitions delivered to Noah did not restore the Earth to its pre-Fall state. The benevolent lordship and peaceful relationship between humans and beasts described in Genesis 1:28–30 no longer existed—the covenant was broken. The strife and competition that emerged between humans and the former subjects of their kingdom continues, although animals now fear humankind. The food source for both humans and beasts was no longer restricted to plants; both now ate flesh, although humans were prohibited from eating the blood. And the killing of humans

by both other humans and animals was explicitly prohibited and to be punished by death. These latter restrictions were intended to reduce the negative impact of the Fall on nature by restricting in the strongest possible way (through capital punishment) the savagery of *hΩāmās*.

The emergence of *hΩāmās* introduces a new element that appears in the post-Fall world that was not part of the original creation. The repeated pictures throughout the Old Testament of a New Earth must be seen within the context of *hΩāmās*. The new world order is a world in which humanity no longer strives with nature. Rather, the peaceful coexistence that pertained to the edenic world is seen as restored. It is not just coincidence that these utopian descriptions are linked to yearnings for deliverance from a strife-torn world. Thus, we read passages such as Isaiah 11:6–9: “The wolf also shall dwell with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze; their young ones shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play by the cobra’s hole, and the weaned child shall put his hand in the viper’s den. They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain, for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the

Lord as the waters cover the sea” (NKJV).

Two “Problem” Texts (Isaiah 65:20; Psalms. 104)

Some suggest that Isaiah 65:20 indicates that the ancient Hebrews believed there would be death in the New Earth: “No longer will there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his days; for the youth will die at the age of one hundred and the one who does not reach the age of one hundred shall be thought accursed” (NASB).

As is often the case, the key to understanding this passage is context. The expressions in Isaiah 65 are not metaphorical; rather, they are idiomatic. That is, they are idioms that are familiar and appropriate to the historical circumstances that Israel found itself in when this passage was penned. What was that situation? Israel was facing annihilation from invading powers (due to their rebellion against God).

Idioms can contain literal elements with regard to the immediate historical context. For example, building houses and having others inhabit them, or planting a vineyard and having another reap the harvest was a very real concern in Iron Age Israel, which found itself constantly under attack from outside invaders. Premature death was also associated with warfare and siege conditions.

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The key is verse 23, which summarizes the preceding verses by proclaiming that God’s people will not labor in vain or bear children for calamity. The threats of the past—including very real threats that Israel was confronting, such as siege warfare—will not exist in the New Earth. Verse 20 is not saying that people won’t live forever in the New Earth; rather, it is saying they will not be subject to the ravages of conflict that characterized their present existence.

The anti-strife message of verses 19–22 is capped off in verse 25, where the wolf and the lamb will graze together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. This verse stands apart from 19–22 in that it is not describing the ravages of war; rather, it is simply describing a new world order that will not be characterized by strife. It is interesting that it does not say the Babylonian will get along with the Israelite—even though this

is certainly included. But the new world order extends to all aspects of God’s domain, including nature. The Lord says: “They will not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain” (Isa. 11:9, NASB).

By failing to view this passage in its historical context, critics miss the idiomatic characteristic of the verses. The point is not that we might or might not build houses in the New Earth, but that others won’t take them from us in battle. The point is not that we might or might not plant vineyards in the New Earth, but that others won’t deprive us of the fruits of our labors through conflict. And finally, the point does not concern the nature and/or length of life in the New Earth, but that the deadly conflict that typified Israel’s existence will no longer claim life.

In short, the nature and/or length of life in the New Earth is not the point of Isaiah 65—only that life won’t be lost through conflict. The

reference in verse 22b to the days of His people being like the lifetime of a tree can actually be viewed as a symbolic of eternal life. To argue that Isaiah 65 envisions death in the New Earth is not only incorrect, but is completely missing the point of the passage. Other passages, of course, are more explicit about eternal life (Isa. 25:8; Dan. 12:2, 3).

Regarding Psalm 104, there is no question that it is a Creation Psalm. Some suggest, however, that it teaches that death was a part of the original creation. The implication of this is that animal death is not tied to the Fall and could have, therefore, existed for possibly millions of years before the Fall, which then brought death to humans as well. This interpretation, however, erroneously assumes that Psalm 104 is describing the pristine creation—God’s creation as it was after the first week, but before the Fall. There is no doubt that Psalm 104 is a Creation Psalm, but its intent was not to describe the pristine, pre-Fall creation. Rather, its point is simply to give God credit for the creation as it was at the time of the psalmist.

There are several indicators that it is the psalmist’s contemporary world of creation that is being described: (1) the reference to the cedars of Lebanon [vs. 16], which would be important and of interest only to Israel during the Iron Age; (2) ships sailing on the seas [vs.

26]—ships were certainly not part of the original pristine creation, but were a major component of the economy of Iron Age Israel; (3) earthquakes and volcanoes [vs. 32] were typically instruments of God’s judgment in the post-Fall world, both of which were well known during the time of Israel, and the psalmist is giving credit to God for His power over His own creation here; (4) the writer’s appeal to God that sinners, who were unfortunately part of God’s creation as it was at the time the psalmist was writing, be consumed and the wicked be no more (vs. 35). This latter statement makes no sense in a pristine, pre-Fall world.

Within the context of these indicators that show it is the psalmist’s world that is being described and not the pristine, unfallen world, the references to “beasts of the forest [that] prowl about” (vs. 20, NASB) and “young lions” (vs. 10, KJV) make perfect sense. God’s creative acts penetrate the fallen world—He is still the Creator, even of this fallen world. □

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- ² *Ibid.*, pp. 16, 17.
- ³ Lloyd R. Bailey, Sr., *Biblical Perspectives on Death* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 38, 39.
- ⁴ Doukhan, *op cit.*, p. 16.