

Awake in Sheol:

*How the Ancient Near Eastern Worldview and
Jewish Tradition Shaped New Testament Perspectives on Soul Sleep*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the doctrine of soul sleep in light of the ancient Near Eastern worldview, early Jewish beliefs, and New Testament theology. By employing a contextual reading of Scripture through the principles of *prima scriptura* and *tota scriptura*, it examines whether the Bible supports the notion of unconsciousness after death. Evidence from the Old Testament, including references to Sheol, interaction with the dead, and burial practices, suggests a belief in conscious existence beyond the grave. This is further reinforced by the prohibitions against necromancy, which presuppose the accessibility and awareness of the human dead. Early Jewish thought and writings from the Second Temple period align with this perspective, portraying the afterlife as a realm of activity rather than dormancy. The paper also highlights how these views influenced early Church Fathers, who largely rejected the concept of soul sleep in favor of a conscious intermediate state. Ultimately, this study argues that the biblical and historical evidence, viewed through the lens of the ancient Near Eastern mindset, supports a conscious afterlife that laid the foundation for New Testament teachings on life after death.

I. INTRODUCTION

The doctrine of soul sleep posits that the soul enters a state of unconsciousness after death, remaining dormant until the resurrection at the end of time. This view, while held by certain Christian traditions, has been a subject of theological debate for centuries. Proponents of soul sleep often cite passages in Scripture that use the metaphor of “*sleep*” to describe death, interpreting these as evidence of unconsciousness. However, this interpretation raises critical questions when compared to the broader biblical narrative and the cultural context in which the Scriptures were written.

This paper seeks to evaluate the validity of the doctrine of soul sleep through a comprehensive examination of Old Testament passages and their ancient Near Eastern context employing contextual reading¹ of Scripture. Through the principle of *Prima Scriptura*² and by analyzing burial practices, prohibitions against necromancy, and descriptions of Sheol, the afterlife, and interactions with the dead, this study will demonstrate whether the biblical text supports a conscious or unconscious state after death. Furthermore, it will explore how ancient Near Eastern beliefs about the afterlife shaped the worldview of Israel and set the theological foundation for New Testament perspectives. Ultimately, this paper argues for a coherent understanding of the afterlife grounded in *prima scriptura* and *tota scriptura*, engaging the whole of Scripture within its historical and cultural context.

¹ D. Gene Williams Jr., *Contextual Reading vs. Plain Reading: An Apologetic Framework Rooted in Ancient Contexts and Prima Scriptura*, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://trinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html>.

² D. Gene Williams Jr., *A Comparative Analysis of the Three Methods of Scripture: Sola Scriptura, Prima Scriptura, and Sacra Scriptura et Traditio*, accessed December 8, 2024, <https://trinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html>.

II. ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXT

The ancient Near Eastern worldview provides critical insight into the cultural and theological backdrop of the Old Testament, especially regarding beliefs about the afterlife. In this cultural milieu, the idea of a conscious existence after death was not only prevalent but deeply integrated into the practices and beliefs of various civilizations.

Common Beliefs in the Afterlife

The concept of an active, conscious afterlife was ubiquitous across ancient Near Eastern societies. In Mesopotamian culture, for example, the afterlife was seen as a shadowy realm where the dead continued to exist, interacting with one another and, occasionally, with the living. Similarly, Egyptian beliefs emphasized the continuation of life after death, with elaborate preparations made for the deceased to thrive in the afterlife. In both contexts, the dead were thought to possess agency and awareness, underscoring a belief in the persistence of consciousness beyond physical death.³

This shared worldview is evident in ancient texts and artifacts, such as the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, which provides instructions for navigating the afterlife, and Mesopotamian accounts like the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, where the dead retain memories and identities. Such portrayals stand in stark contrast to the concept of soul sleep, as they depict an ongoing, dynamic existence after death.⁴

³ Marc Van De Mieroop, *A History of the Ancient Near East ca. 3000-323 BC*, 2nd ed. (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007), 187–190.

⁴ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2006), 92–96.

Burial Practices

Burial customs in the ancient Near East reflect a belief in a conscious afterlife. Tombs often contained items for use in the next life, such as food, tools, and treasures. Egyptian tombs included models of servants and provisions, while Mesopotamian burial sites featured offerings of food and drink. Similarly, Israelite practices, such as the inclusion of grave goods and references to being “gathered to one’s people,” align with the belief in continued awareness beyond death. These traditions reinforce the cultural expectation of a conscious existence after death.⁵ For instance:

- Egyptian tombs frequently contained items to assist the deceased in their journey through the afterlife, including amulets, provisions, and even models of servants to perform tasks on their behalf.
- Mesopotamian burial sites often included offerings of food and drink, reflecting the belief that the dead would require sustenance.⁶

These practices reveal a consistent expectation that the deceased would retain awareness and the ability to utilize such provisions. The influence of these burial customs is also evident in Israelite practices, where individuals were buried with items and references to being “gathered to their fathers” indicated a relational existence after death. Such traditions align more closely with a conscious afterlife than with the notion of unconscious soul sleep.⁷

⁵ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 92–96.

⁶ Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions: An Archaeological and Biblical Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 189.

⁷ *Ibid.*.

The ancient Near Eastern worldview deeply influenced Israelite culture, as seen in their burial practices and descriptions of Sheol. This shared cultural context provides a lens through which Old Testament passages addressing the afterlife can be better understood.

III. OLD TESTAMENT EVIDENCE AGAINST SOUL SLEEP

The Old Testament provides multiple lines of evidence that challenge the notion of soul sleep, presenting instead a consistent picture of conscious existence after death. Key themes and passages illustrate the expectation of interaction among the dead, prohibitions against necromancy, and cultural practices that affirm an active afterlife.

Phrases like “*Gathered to One’s People*”

The Old Testament frequently uses phrases such as “*gathered to one’s people*” to describe death, as seen in Jacob’s instructions to his sons in Genesis 49:29-33.⁸ This language implies a relational interaction among the dead, portraying death as a transition into a communal afterlife. The phrase is incompatible with the idea of unconsciousness, as it presupposes awareness of and connection with one’s ancestors.⁹

Isaiah 14:9-11

Isaiah 14 depicts Sheol as a realm where the dead recognize and interact with new arrivals. In verses 9-11, the kings of the earth converse with the newly deceased, mocking them by saying, “*You too have become as weak as we are!*” This portrayal of Sheol

⁸ The Holy Bible, *English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2001), Genesis 49: 29-33.

⁹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50, Word Biblical Commentary 2* (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 476–478.

includes dialogue and relational dynamics, directly opposing the concept of an unconscious state.¹⁰

Prohibitions Against Contacting the Dead

Deuteronomy 18:10-11 explicitly forbids consulting the dead. This prohibition assumes that the dead are aware and capable of interaction. If the dead were entirely unconscious, such commands would be unnecessary, as God does not forbid impossible actions.¹¹ These prohibitions also distinguish between human spirits (the dead) and non-human spirits (angels or demons), highlighting a biblical worldview that includes an active, conscious afterlife.¹²

First Samuel 28 (Saul and the Witch of Endor)

In the account of Saul consulting the witch of Endor, Samuel's spirit is disturbed, not awakened. Samuel says, "*Why have you disturbed me?*" rather than "*Why have you awakened me?*" This vocabulary choice underscores the notion of continued consciousness in the afterlife. The narrative presents Samuel as aware of events on earth, further affirming the belief in an active afterlife.¹³

Second Samuel 12 (David and the Child)

Another poignant expression of postmortem consciousness appears in 2 Samuel 12:23, where David, mourning the death of his infant son, says, "*But now he is dead. Why*

¹⁰ John N. Oswalt, *The Book of Isaiah, Chapters 1–39*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 326–328.

¹¹ Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 175–176.

¹² *Ibid.*, 175.

¹³ Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 168–170.

should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me.” This statement has often been interpreted as more than an acknowledgment of shared mortality; it expresses David’s hope of reunion in the afterlife. If the dead were entirely unconscious, the statement would carry little emotional comfort. Instead, David’s words reflect a relational continuity beyond death, aligning with the broader biblical theme of being “gathered to one’s people” and further challenging the concept of soul sleep.

Funerary Offerings

The practice of offering provisions for the dead was common in ancient Israel, as evidenced in passages like Deuteronomy 26:14, which prohibits such offerings, and Psalm 106:28, which references sacrifices to the dead. These practices align with archaeological evidence from Israelite burial sites, which reveal items intended for use by the deceased in the afterlife. Such customs indicate a belief in consciousness beyond death, as unconscious souls would have no need for these offerings.¹⁴

Cultural Indicators

Cultural practices further illustrate a belief in an active afterlife. Jeremiah 16:5 refers to banquets with the dead, a practice reflecting the expectation of relational and social activity after death. These funerary rituals, mirrored in broader ancient Near Eastern traditions, support the idea of an engaged, conscious existence in the afterlife.¹⁵

¹⁴ Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 232.

¹⁵ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 148.

The Old Testament offers foundational insights into the nature of the afterlife, emphasizing consciousness and relational dynamics in Sheol. Building on these themes, the New Testament provides additional clarity, portraying a more developed understanding of the intermediate state and eternal destiny.¹⁶

IV. NEW TESTAMENT SUPPORT FOR AN ACTIVE AFTERLIFE

The New Testament further emphasizes the concept of conscious existence after death, reinforcing themes found in the Old Testament and offering additional clarity on the nature of the afterlife.

Luke 16:19-31: The Rich Man and Lazarus

The parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) serves as a theological masterpiece, offering insights into divine justice, human accountability, and the sufficiency of Scripture. When viewed through the lens of the **Integrated Hypostatic Union Model (IHUM)** and Jesus Christ’s eternal perspective as articulated in B-Theory and the Eternal Now, the parable’s deeper dimensions emerge. It demonstrates not only the reality of a conscious afterlife but also the way Jesus, in His dual natures, uniquely communicates eternal truths. Even if this parable is illustrative rather than literal, it raises an important question: *Why would Jesus use a scenario that relies on conscious interaction in the afterlife if His audience assumed soul sleep?* If soul sleep were an accepted belief, the parable’s central imagery would make little sense to His listeners,

¹⁶ D. Gene Williams Jr., *The Intermediate State: Sanctification through Fire and Salvation from Judgment*, accessed December 31, 2024, <https://trinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html>.

undermining its effectiveness. This strongly suggests that Jesus' audience, shaped by Jewish and ancient Near Eastern understandings, believed in a conscious afterlife.

- **Exaggeration as a Teaching Tool**

Jesus employs hyperbolic contrasts between the rich man's opulence and Lazarus' destitution to emphasize spiritual truths. These exaggerated conditions are not meant as literal descriptions but instead draw attention to eternal consequences: the rich man, neglectful of God's Word and others' needs, faces torment, while Lazarus, embodying dependence on God, is exalted.

The rich man's conscious experience of suffering and relational engagement with Abraham and Lazarus undermines the concept of soul sleep and affirms the immediacy of divine justice.

- **Jesus' Dual Natures in IHUM**

The Integrated Hypostatic Union Model (IHUM) posits the seamless unity of Jesus' divine and human natures, enabling Him to operate fully within time and space while simultaneously possessing divine attributes, such as omniscience.¹⁷ This theological framework deepens our understanding of Jesus' teaching in this parable.

From His Divine Nature: As fully divine, Jesus possesses access to the eternal now, where all moments—past, present, and future—exist simultaneously. This perspective allows Him to describe eternal realities with precision, including

¹⁷ D. Gene Williams Jr., *Integrated Hypostatic Union Model: Jesus' Dual Natures and the Eternal Now*, accessed December 23, 2024, <https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html>.

Abraham's prophetic assertion that even a resurrection would not convince those hardened against God's Word (Luke 16:31).

From His Human Nature: As fully human, Jesus uses relatable narrative forms, such as parables, to communicate these eternal truths to His audience. The rhetorical contrast between the rich man and Lazarus conveys the urgency of repentance and underscores the dangers of neglecting the needs of others.

- **The Eternal Now and B-Theory**

The framework of **B-Theory of Time** and the Eternal Now suggests that all moments in time are equally present to God. Jesus, as the eternal Son, perceives these moments simultaneously and integrates them into His teachings. This divine attribute enriches the parable in two significant ways.¹⁸

The first is it gives Jesus a genuine insight into eternal realities. The rich man's dialogue with Abraham and his recognition of Lazarus may not be a mere hypothetical construct but rather a real glimpse into the spiritual realm, as perceived by Jesus through His divine omniscience. This reinforces the biblical portrayal of a conscious afterlife.

The second way it enriches our understanding of this parable is through foreshadowing of future events. Jesus' statement that even a resurrection will not convince the hardened (Luke 16:31) anticipates the real-life resurrection of Lazarus in John 11. Despite this miraculous event, many religious leaders respond

¹⁸ D. Gene Williams Jr., *B-Theory of Time: A Defense of God's Eternal Now in Christian Theology*, accessed December 28, 2024, <https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html>.

not with repentance but with hostility, plotting to kill both Lazarus and Jesus (John 11:53; 12:10–11). This fulfillment demonstrates the interconnectedness of Jesus’ teachings and actions, as informed by His divine foreknowledge.

Theological Implications

The parable also speaks to the sufficiency of Scripture for salvation. By emphasizing the futility of relying on miraculous signs, Jesus underscores that repentance must be grounded in God’s revealed Word.

Viewed through IHUM and the Eternal Now, this teaching reflects the depth of Jesus’ omniscient insight and His ability to contextualize eternal truths for His audience. The parable’s depiction of conscious interaction, relational accountability, and eternal consequences firmly rejects the notion of soul sleep and affirms the immediacy of divine justice.

Conclusion

Through the lens of IHUM, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus demonstrates Jesus’ mastery in integrating His divine and human natures to communicate eternal truths. By presenting a conscious afterlife, it challenges the concept of soul sleep and highlights the urgency of repentance, the sufficiency of Scripture, and the consistency of God’s justice across time. The parable’s prophetic anticipation of Lazarus’ resurrection further validates Jesus’ teachings, demonstrating the theological richness of His dual natures and eternal perspective.¹⁹

¹⁹ Richard Bauckham, *The Fate of the Dead: Studies on the Jewish and Christian Apocalypses* (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 86–89.

The Transfiguration (Matthew 17:1–8)

The Transfiguration provides a fascinating insight into Jesus' divine nature and His ability to transcend temporal boundaries, while also raising significant questions about the state of the dead. In this event, Jesus is transfigured before Peter, James, and John, while Moses and Elijah appear and converse with Him. Traditionally, this passage has been used to support the consciousness of the dead. However, when viewed through the framework of B-Theory of Time, another possibility arises: Jesus is interacting with Moses and Elijah in their own historical moments, collapsing time to bring their presence into the disciples' present.

Moses and Elijah are portrayed as alive and aware, actively engaging in conversation with Jesus about His impending death and resurrection (Luke 9:31). This depiction challenges the idea of a dormant or unconscious existence between death and resurrection. Their presence could be understood in two ways: either as conscious participants in the intermediate state, or as figures alive in their own temporal contexts brought into the present moment through Jesus' divine omnitemporality. Both interpretations emphasize their active involvement in God's redemptive plan.²⁰

While the possibility of Jesus collapsing time aligns with His divine nature and the Eternal Now,²¹ it does not directly address the state of the dead in general. Instead, it highlights Jesus' unique ability to engage with all points in time simultaneously. The

²⁰ . T. France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007), 642–644.

²¹ D. Gene Williams Jr., *B-Theory of Time: A Defense of God's Eternal Now in Christian Theology*, accessed December 28, 2024, <https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html>.

argument against soul sleep rests more firmly on other passages, such as Luke 16:19–31, where the dead are depicted as fully aware in the afterlife, and 1 Samuel 28, where Samuel appears conscious and aware of earthly events. These passages provide explicit evidence that challenges the concept of unconsciousness after death.

The Transfiguration, therefore, offers a glimpse into Jesus’ divine nature and the Eternal Now while also presenting a potential example of consciousness after death. It enriches the understanding of how God’s redemptive plan transcends time and invites further reflection on the continuity of life in the intermediate state.²² This event does not definitively resolve the debate over soul sleep but contributes to the broader framework of biblical theology, affirming both the immediacy of God’s purposes and the potential for a conscious existence beyond death.

V. LOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Beyond scriptural evidence, the concept of a conscious afterlife aligns with theological logic and the coherence of biblical commandments.

Interaction with the Dead

The Old Testament prohibits necromancy, presupposing that the dead are aware and can be contacted.²³ These prohibitions distinguish between human spirits (the dead) and non-human spirits (angels or demons). The specificity of the commands reinforces the notion that human spirits retain awareness in the afterlife.

²² D. Gene Williams Jr., *The Intermediate State: Sanctification through Fire and Salvation from Judgment*, accessed December 31, 2024, <https://trinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/insights-and-studies.html>.

²³ Jeffrey H. Tigay, Deuteronomy, 175–176.

God's Commandments and Absurdity

A key theological argument against soul sleep lies in the nature of God's laws. God does not prohibit actions that are impossible. For instance, the ban on consulting the dead (Deuteronomy 18:10-11) would be meaningless if the dead were entirely unconscious.²⁴

Symbolism of Sleep

The Bible often uses "*sleep*" as a metaphor for physical death, reflecting the appearance of the body at rest. This metaphor does not necessarily imply unconsciousness. For instance, phrases like "*slept with the fathers*" primarily refer to death and burial rather than the state of the soul.²⁵ When examined in the broader biblical narrative, the metaphor of sleep aligns with the concept of consciousness after death, as seen in passages like 1 Samuel 28 and Luke 16.²⁶

Context is crucial when interpreting phrases like "*slept with the fathers.*" These expressions primarily refer to death and burial, not the state of the soul. When examined in light of the broader biblical narrative, the metaphorical use of sleep complements, rather than contradicts, the idea of an active afterlife.²⁷

The metaphorical use of sleep in Scripture underscores the nuanced biblical understanding of death. While physical death is likened to rest, the broader narrative consistently affirms the soul's consciousness and relational capacity beyond the grave.

²⁴ John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought*, 114–115.

²⁵ N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope*, 155–156.

²⁶ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, 476–478.

²⁷ Robert P. Gordon, *I & II Samuel*, 168–170.

This understanding not only challenges the concept of soul sleep but also lays a foundation for significant theological implications regarding Christian eschatology, moral accountability, and the hope of eternal life.

Broader Theological Implications

The belief in a conscious afterlife has profound implications for Christian theology and practice. For one, it underscores the importance of the eschatological hope central to the Christian faith. A conscious intermediate state highlights the immediacy of being in the presence of Christ upon death, as reflected in passages like Philippians 1:23 and 2 Corinthians 5:8. This immediacy affirms the assurance of eternal life, offering comfort to believers facing death and loss.

Furthermore, the awareness of departed souls has historically shaped Christian practices such as prayers for the dead. While not universally embraced within Protestant traditions, the idea of an active afterlife has roots in early Christianity, where prayers and commemorations were offered for the deceased as acts of love and remembrance. This practice reflects an acknowledgment of the continuing spiritual presence of the departed and their relational connection with the living.

Lastly, the rejection of soul sleep elevates the significance of human accountability and the moral urgency of living faithfully. The concept of a conscious existence after death reinforces the reality of divine judgment and the continuity of the soul's experience beyond physical death. This theological perspective motivates believers to pursue righteousness, knowing that their eternal destiny is intimately connected to their earthly lives. These implications collectively enrich the Christian understanding of death,

resurrection, and eternal life, offering hope and purpose rooted in a holistic view of the biblical narrative.

VI. COUNTERARGUMENTS AND RESPONSES

Ecclesiastes 9:5: “*The dead know nothing.*”

This verse is often cited to support the idea of soul sleep, but its context likely refers to the physical inability of the dead to influence earthly events rather than their state of consciousness in Sheol. The writer of Ecclesiastes often focuses on the limitations of human life “*under the sun,*” emphasizing that death ends one’s involvement in worldly affairs, not necessarily awareness in the afterlife.²⁸

Daniel 12:2: “*Many who sleep in the dust shall awake.*”

This passage describes bodily resurrection rather than soul sleep. The term “*sleep*” is metaphorical, reflecting the appearance of the body in death. The awakening points to the resurrection, when the body is restored, not to a cessation of soul consciousness. Such metaphors align with broader biblical usage, which often describes death as sleep without implying unconsciousness.²⁹

While passages like Ecclesiastes 9:5 and Daniel 12:2 have been used to support soul sleep, early Jewish writings and the teachings of the Church Fathers provide a broader interpretive framework, consistently affirming the consciousness of the dead.

²⁸ Tremper Longman III, *The Book of Ecclesiastes* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 230.

²⁹ John J. Collins, *Daniel: A Commentary on the Book of Daniel* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 392.

VII. EARLY CHURCH FATHERS AND EARLY JEWISH THOUGHTS ON THE AFTERLIFE

Early Jewish Beliefs

Beliefs about the afterlife in early Jewish thought and among the early Church Fathers overwhelmingly affirm the consciousness of the soul after death, rejecting the notion of soul sleep. These perspectives are rooted in both the cultural context of the ancient Near East and the theological reflections of the early Christian community.

During the Second Temple period, Jewish literature such as *1 Enoch* and the *Book of Jubilees* offers vivid depictions of the afterlife as a place of conscious activity.³⁰ These texts describe distinct realms for the righteous and the wicked, including the “Abode of the Dead” in *1 Enoch*, which features areas of torment and peace. This understanding mirrors themes later expanded in the New Testament. In Jewish thought, Sheol was not perceived as a place of unconsciousness but rather a shadowy realm where the dead retained awareness while awaiting the final judgment.³¹ Influenced by ancient Near Eastern beliefs, these ideas shaped Israelite burial practices and theological reflections, reinforcing the view of a conscious intermediate state.

Rabbinic Judaism continued to build on these ideas, portraying the soul’s journey through the afterlife in terms of Gehenna and Gan Eden. Early rabbinic writings also explore debates over the immediacy of judgment versus a waiting period before the resurrection, revealing diverse perspectives within early Jewish eschatology. However,

³⁰ George W. E. Nickelsburg, *1 Enoch: A Commentary on the Book of 1 Enoch* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 276–278.

³¹ Richard S. Hess, *Israelite Religions*, 217–220.

the common thread remained an expectation of the soul's awareness and activity after death.³²

The early Church Fathers similarly upheld the belief in a conscious afterlife. Clement of Rome, writing in the 1st century, referred to martyrs as already enjoying the presence of God, implying immediate awareness after death. Justin Martyr, in the 2nd century, affirmed the soul's ongoing consciousness, viewing it as awaiting final judgment.³³ Tertullian, writing in the 2nd and 3rd centuries, explicitly rejected the concept of soul sleep, arguing that souls were judged immediately after death and resided in a temporary state of bliss or suffering in anticipation of the resurrection.³⁴

Critiques of soul sleep by later theologians further solidified the conscious afterlife as the dominant view in early Christianity. Origen, in the 3rd century, asserted the immortality and activity of the soul, explicitly denying any dormancy after death. Augustine of Hippo, writing in the 4th and 5th centuries, strongly opposed soul sleep, emphasizing the immediacy of the soul's encounter with God or separation from Him after death. These Church Fathers also distinguished between the intermediate state and the final judgment, with the former offering a foretaste of the soul's eternal destiny and the latter reuniting the body and soul at the resurrection.

³² David Rankin, *Tertullian and the Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 114.

³³ Augustine of Hippo, *The City of God*, trans. Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 1984), 525–530.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

Both early Jewish and Christian traditions consistently reject the idea of unconsciousness after death. Instead, they affirm a conscious afterlife in alignment with the Old Testament evidence of interaction among the dead, New Testament descriptions of the afterlife, and the cultural and theological expectations of the ancient world. The perspectives of the early Church Fathers and Jewish thought provide a compelling historical and theological case against soul sleep, reinforcing the biblical narrative of relational and moral accountability in the afterlife.

Here's the revised text adjusted for integration into your **Soul Sleep** paper, keeping its relevance to the consciousness of the dead and intermediate state:

VIII. THE GREAT WHITE THRONE JUDGMENT AND THE MILLENNIAL BELIEVERS

Understanding the Great White Throne Judgment

The Great White Throne Judgment (*Revelation 20:11–15*) is traditionally seen as the final judgment for all humanity after the millennial reign of Christ. Scripture describes this event as involving the resurrection of “the dead, great and small,” who are judged according to their deeds. Importantly, the text specifies that those whose names are not found in the Book of Life are cast into the lake of fire, while others, whose names are recorded, presumably enter eternal life. This suggests that the Great White Throne Judgment is not solely for the lost but includes all who have not yet been resurrected or judged prior to this event.

The Unique Case of Millennial Believers

Believers who die during the millennial reign of Christ are in a distinct category within the eschatological framework. Unlike those who participate in the first

resurrection (*Revelation 20:4–6*), they are not transformed into glorified bodies at Christ’s return. Instead, they die mortal deaths during a period where sin and death, though limited, still exist (*Isaiah 65:20*). This raises the question: What happens to these believers between their death and the Great White Throne Judgment?

- **Intermediate State of Millennial Believers**

- Following the pattern established for pre-millennial believers, it is likely that millennial believers also enter a conscious intermediate state upon death. However, they do not join the pre-millennial righteous in Paradise because Christ had emptied Paradise during His three days in Hades and after His resurrection, bringing the pre-millennial righteous directly into God’s presence (*Ephesians 4:8–10*).³⁵ Instead, millennial believers occupy a distinct intermediate state awaiting their resurrection and final judgment.
- *Luke 16:22* and *Revelation 6:9–11* suggest that the righteous dead remain aware and active in some capacity, challenging the concept of soul sleep and offering continuity for the experience of the millennial righteous.³⁶

- **Their Resurrection and Judgment**

- Millennial believers are resurrected at the Great White Throne Judgment as part of the “rest of the dead” who did not take part in the first

³⁵ *Ephesians 4:8–10* discusses Christ’s descent into Hades and His leading of the captives to God’s presence, emptying Paradise of the pre-millennial righteous.

³⁶ *Luke 16:22* and *Revelation 6:9–11* describe the conscious activity of the righteous dead, supporting the view of an active intermediate state.

resurrection (*Revelation 20:5*). Their deeds are evaluated, and their names, found in the Book of Life, secure their entry into eternal life.³⁷

- *2 Corinthians 5:10* emphasizes that all believers must appear before Christ's judgment seat to account for their deeds, good or bad. This principle likely extends to millennial believers, whose glorification occurs at the Great White Throne Judgment.³⁸

Purpose of the Great White Throne Judgment for the Righteous

While often associated with condemnation, the Great White Throne Judgment also serves as a moment of final sanctification and vindication for the righteous. For millennial believers:

- Their judgment confirms their salvation, as their names are found in the Book of Life.
- Their deeds are evaluated, possibly determining rewards (*1 Corinthians 3:11–15*), while their glorified bodies are granted as the final step of their sanctification.³⁹

- **Integration into the Larger Eschatological Framework**

The Great White Throne Judgment underscores God's justice and mercy, ensuring that all humanity—regardless of the era in which they lived—

³⁷ Revelation 20:5 refers to the resurrection of those not part of the first resurrection, including millennial believers.

³⁸ 2 Corinthians 5:10 highlights the necessity for all believers to appear before Christ's judgment seat to account for their deeds.

³⁹ 1 Corinthians 3:11–15 explains the evaluation of believers' deeds, determining rewards based on what remains after testing by fire.

stands accountable before Him. For millennial believers, this judgment provides a resolution to their unique position in redemptive history:

- They do not participate in the first resurrection but remain faithful during Christ's reign.
- Their judgment and glorification align with the eternal purposes of God, ensuring that they join the saints from all ages in eternal fellowship with Christ.⁴⁰

Conclusion

The Great White Throne Judgment is not merely a moment of condemnation but a comprehensive event that reconciles God's justice and mercy for all humanity. For millennial believers, it serves as the culmination of their sanctification, ensuring that their faithfulness during the millennium is rewarded with glorification and eternal life. This understanding harmonizes the eschatological framework, challenging the idea of soul sleep while highlighting the unity of God's redemptive plan across all eras.

IX. CONCLUSION

The doctrine of soul sleep finds no firm grounding in the scriptural, historical, or theological record. From the Old Testament depictions of Sheol as a realm of relational consciousness to the New Testament affirmations of immediate awareness after death, the Bible consistently portrays an active afterlife. Furthermore, early Jewish and Christian traditions, rooted in the ancient Near Eastern worldview, reject the notion of

⁴⁰ The Great White Throne Judgment unites the saints across all ages in eternal fellowship with Christ, ensuring their glorification and vindication.

unconsciousness after death, aligning instead with the broader biblical narrative of accountability, relational dynamics, and divine justice.

Rejecting soul sleep has profound implications for Christian living. It reinforces eschatological hope, reminding believers of the immediacy of their presence with Christ upon death (Philippians 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:8). This hope provides comfort in grief and inspires faithful living, as it assures Christians of the continuity of their relationship with God beyond the grave. Additionally, the conscious afterlife underscores the importance of moral accountability, as decisions made in this life resonate into eternity.

Interpreting Scripture within its ancient context safeguards against anachronistic doctrines like soul sleep. By considering the cultural and theological assumptions of the biblical authors, we honor the integrity of God's Word and avoid imposing modern perspectives on ancient texts. This approach, rooted in *prima Scriptura* and *tota Scriptura*, enables us to uncover the timeless truths of Scripture and apply them faithfully to contemporary faith and practice.

Ultimately, the rejection of soul sleep not only aligns with the witness of Scripture and tradition but also calls believers to live with an eternal perspective, confident in the promises of God and committed to His purposes both now and forever.

APPENDIX A: THE DIVIDE: ABRAHAM'S BOSOM AND HADES (LUKE 16:19-31)



Left Side (Desolation):

A barren, lifeless wasteland dominates this side, characterized by cracked, dry earth and jagged rock formations. The dark, stormy sky looms overhead, filled with ominous black clouds and streaks of lightning. A volcano erupts in the background, spewing fire and ash, emphasizing the harshness and despair of this realm. Sparse, skeletal trees stand as symbols of death and desolation. A cloaked figure stands alone on the barren terrain, evoking a sense of isolation and hopelessness.

Right Side (Paradise):

In stark contrast, the right side of the image is a vibrant, lush paradise. The landscape is filled with flourishing greenery, colorful flowers, and cascading waterfalls. A tranquil stream winds its way through the idyllic scenery, reflecting the bright, radiant sunlight. The sky is clear and blue, with soft clouds and birds soaring freely, symbolizing peace and freedom. The warm and inviting environment radiates life and joy, standing in opposition to the desolation on the other side.

The Gorge:

Between the two realms lies a deep, dramatic chasm, symbolizing the unbridgeable separation between desolation and paradise. The gorge is jagged and foreboding, with a glowing, ethereal blue stream running through its depths, adding a mystical element to the division.

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