

A COMPARATIVE STUDY ON DOCTRINE OF IMMORTALITY OF SOUL IN OLD TESTAMENT AND NEW TESTAMENT

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Abstract

There is a perception going on about immortality of soul in Christianity. That is, some question agitating the mind of people, for example; what happens after death. Some claimed that when a man dies, he becomes unconscious and his soul 'sleeps.' Others claimed that the soul goes directly to heaven if the individual believed in Jesus Christ. Therefore, this paper aimed to examine the areas of disparity on the issue of immortality of the soul in Christianity and its implications. Also, to clarify the perception of people about the doctrine of immortality of the soul and evaluate it against the backdrop of what the Bible, both the Old and New Testament teach about it. The method employed was historical diachronic approach. The areas of disparity found out by this paper includes: what happens after death. Although most of the major religions of the world believe in the immortality of the soul, they believe that death is not the end of one's life; it is not annihilation, rather it is transition of life, among others. But, some scholars argue that there is no immortality of the soul. They believe that death is a period of absolute annihilation. Contrarily, others regard this as erroneous teachings. However, the following recommendations were made that there is need for the church to re-conceptualize their perception about the doctrine of immortality of the soul and evaluate it against the backdrop of what the Bible teaches concerning what happens after death. Immortality of the soul should be devoid of 'Necromancy'.

Keywords: Comparative, Doctrine, Immortality and Soul.

Introduction

Vocal among current views about immortality of soul is doctrine of 'souls sleep'. The teaching that physical death is cessation of all consciousness until the resurrection of the body is usually called the theory of "soul-sleep". (Hiram, 2019) Those who adhere to this theory tell us that 'no man has a soul' and that at death man passes entirely out of existence. If it were true that no man has a soul, there would be no soul that could sleep, therefore neither the word, 'soul' nor the word 'sleep' is truly descriptive of this teaching. The perception of Abrahamic faith religions hold the belief that how a person has conducted himself or herself while living on earth will greatly influence his or her soul's ultimate destiny after physical death. All the seeds that one has sown throughout his or her lifetime, good or bad will be harvested in the after-life. When an individual dies, according to many world religions, the soul is judged or evaluated, then sent to what is perceived as an eternal place (heaven or hell) (Landis, 1973).

However, some scholars argue that there is no immortality of the soul. This assertion is in line with the Jehovah's witnesses teaching propounded by two of their leaders, Charles Taze Russel and Judge J. F. Rutherford. They believe that no man has a soul and that death is a period of absolute annihilation. Whenever we use the term, "immortality of the soul", we actually mean just what the Bible teaches, that it is eternal, for soul never ceases to exist. But the question is; is every man's soul immortal which can never be annihilated? This paper

examined a comparative study on the doctrine of immortality of soul in Old and New Testaments teaching.

The Concept of Immortality of Soul in the Old Testament

The Old Testament represents man as created in the image of God, created for life and not for mortality. He is made for Communion with God, is but a little lower than the angels, and God has set eternity in his heart (Eccl. 3:11).

Landis (1973) opines that the ancient Jews, and the Patriarchs, had knowledge of the doctrine of immortality. The Jews believed in the existence of the spirit after death, which is evident from the credit they give to the art of 'necromancy'. Necromancy according to Hornsby, (1974) is “the art or practice of communicating by magic with the dead in order to learn about the future.”

But in Leviticus 19:31, God warned the Israelite:

“Do not turn to mediums or necromancers; do not seek them out, and so make yourselves unclean by them: I am the Lord your God”. (ESV)

This warning is also repeated in Leviticus 20:6

If a person turns to mediums and necromancers, whoring after them, I will set my face against that person and will cut him off from among his people.

Moses fully enacted laws directly against the art of necromancy. It was fully entertained in Saul's time. In the days of King Saul, he expelled the mediums and necromancers from the land of Israel but he was later forced to look for them when he could not hear from God owing to his disobedience. He went to Endor to inquire of a medium what would be the outcome of the war between Israel and Philistine (1Sam. 28:3-10). This implies that immortality of the soul is not absent in the Old Testament for the fact that the Jews believed that the spirit of the dead can be summoned back to the present sphere of existence.

The doctrine of the immortality of the soul in the Old Testament is implied in its doctrine of Sheol, (Berkhof, 1958). The Old Testament teaches that the dead descend into Sheol. The belief of the ancient Hebrews on this subject, therefore, was that the spirit at death is received into Sheol, which is represented as a large subterranean abode. This spacious dwelling place for the departed is sometimes described as dark, sorrowful, and inactive place. In Job 10:21-22, we read;

Before I go to the place of no return, to the land of gloom and deep shadow, to the land of deepest night, of utter darkness and disorder, where even the light is like darkness.

Psalm 6:5 reads, No one remembers you when he is dead. Who praises you from the grave? Again, the place for the departed is described as full of activity in Isaiah 14:9

Landis (1973) opines that the truth of immortality of the soul in the Old Testament is apparent from the often occurring phrase translated “being gathered to his fathers,” or “to his people” or more correctly, entering into their habitation.

Gen. 25:8; Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age; an old man full of years and he was gathered to his people.

Gen. 35:28 - 29; Isaac lived a hundred and eighty years. Then he breathed his last and died and was gathered to his people, old and full of years. And his sons Esau and Jacob buried him.

Numbers 20:24a; Aaron will be gathered to his people.

“Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and was gathered to his people”. What then is this gathering? It cannot refer to the body, for while his body was buried in the cave of Macpelah, in Canaan, his fathers were buried afar off; in Haran, in Mesopotamia, and the rest of his ancestors far off in Chaldea. This gathering therefore relates not to the body but to the soul. However, it was during the intertestamental period that the Old Testament scholars believe in the immortality of the soul, this was affirmed by Maccabees.

The Concept of Immortality of the Soul in the New Testament

Purkiser (1977) sees man as being mortal as to his physical constitution, but immortal in personal spirit identity. Furthermore, that the ability of the self to exist in a disembodied state is everywhere assumed in the New Testament. Bonnell (1959) opines, the Christian's idea of immortality is somehow related to Plato's idea in his *Phaedo*. Plato based his argument for immortality on such considerations as the uniqueness of man, and finds in his moral endowments and constitution the demand for immortality. He stresses the fact that man is a mortal being. He is subject to the constraint of moral law. The roots of man's life reach out into the unseen and the eternal. He is impelled by duty. Therefore, his true being belongs more to the laws and life of eternity than to time. Bonnell (1959), opines that Christian thinkers are fully in agreement with this aspect of Plato's argument about man.

Landis (1973), presupposes that all the passages in the New Testament which speak of the present existence of a hell for the wicked man imply the doctrine of the soul's uninterrupted immortality, for it is not to be supposed that hell should be created, and exist for thousands and myriads of the years without an object. The present existence of hell is affirmed in every way by which such an idea can be conveyed as in Mark 9:43:

If your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off. It is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go into hell, where the fire never goes out.

Jude 13: ...To whom is reserved the blackness of darkness forever. The same idea of a present hell is conveyed also by metaphorical language, for example: set on fire of hell (James 3:6).

In view of these texts, one is tempted to ask: “is hell now in existence? If yes, what is its use?” There is no much difficulty in admitting that wicked men should, before the Day of Judgment suffer its torments. Chukwuedo (2015) is of the opinion that every text, therefore, which announces the present existence of hell, is a proof that annihilation theory is false and immortality of the soul true. All the texts which speak of the present existence of heaven, (the region of the blessed), in like manner prove the annihilation theory false.

Landis (1973) in his argument of immortality of the soul discusses Matthew 10:28;

and fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul; rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

These words of our Lord he repeated on another occasion, as follows:

And I say unto you, my friends, be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more than they can do. But I forewarn you whom ye shall fear, fear him, which after he hath killeth, hath power to cast into hell; Yea, I say unto you, fear him. (Luke 12:4, 5).

To Landis, this is clear announcement of the separability of the soul from the body, and of the fact that the death of the body does not involve the extinction of the soul.

Berkhof (1958) classified the passages that contain the doctrine of the immortality of the soul into the following: -

1. To the survival of the soul a continued existence of both the righteous and the wicked is clearly taught. That the souls of believers survive, appears from such passages as Matt. 10:28; Luke 23:43; John 11:25f; 14:3; II Cor. 5:1; and several other passages make it quite clear that the same can be said of the souls of the wicked; Matt. 11:21, 24; Rom. 2: 5 -11; II Cor. 5:10.
2. To the resurrection by which the body is also made to share in the future existence: For believers, the resurrection means the redemption of the body and entrance into the perfect life in communion with God, the full blessedness of immortality. This resurrection is taught in Luke 20:35, 36; John 5:25-29; I Cor. 15; I Thess. 4:16; Phil. 3:21, and other passages. For the wicked, the resurrection will also mean a renewed and continued existence of the body, but this can hardly be called life. Scripture calls it eternal death.
3. To the blessed life of believers in communion with God: there are numerous passages in the New Testament which stress the fact that the immortality of believers is not a bare endless existence, but a rapturous life of bliss in communion with God and with Jesus Christ, the full fruition of the life that is implanted in the soul while still on earth. This is clearly emphasized in such passages as Matt. 13: 43; 25: 34; Rom. 2:7, 10, 1Cor. 15:49; Phil. 3: 21; 11 Tim. 4:8; Rev. 21:4; 22: 34 (p.676).

We can conclude on this point that the Bible teaches that the soul does not go into extinction at death. If the soul is not annihilated as argued by some scholars like Landis (1973) it then means it is immortal. Moreover, The Christians belief that the soul of the righteous goes to heaven after death, while the soul of the wicked goes to hell, they would be there till the day of judgement and after the final judgement the soul of the righteous goes to eternal life, while the soul of the wicked goes to eternal damnation i.e. hell fire or eternal death.

Current View of Christian Scholars on the Immortality of Soul

Discussion among Christian scholars currently was predominantly epistemological. All Christians scholars believe and understand immortality of soul as a final resurrection to everlasting life. The majority have held that immortality also includes continuing existence of the soul or person between death and resurrection. Almost every detail of this general confession and its biblical basis has been disputed by some non-Christians. (Cooper, 2003) Especially the Jehovah witness scholars, for example; Charles Taze Russel and Judge J. F. Rutherford. They believe that no man has a soul and that death is a period of absolute annihilation.

However, the Hebrew Bible does not present the human soul (*nepes*) or spirit (*ruah*) as an immortal substance, and for the most part it envisions the dead as ghosts in *sheol*, the dark, sleepy underworld. (Cooper, 2003). Nevertheless it expresses hope beyond death (Psalm 23 & 49:15) and eventually asserts physical resurrection (Isaiah 26:19; Dan.12:2).

Comparative Analysis of Immortality of Soul in Old and New Testaments

Based on the various arguments put forward in this paper, generally speaking the Bible teaches that the soul does not die and is not annihilated at death. In the Old Testament, the story of creation in Genesis Chapter 2 points to the duality of man. God breathed into man the breath of life and he became a living soul. We believe that God cannot die and as to this, His spirit breathed into man at creation cannot die and this makes the soul or spirit immortal. Ecclesiastes 12:7 is also in support of Genesis 2:

“Then shall the dust return to the earth as it was: and the spirit shall return unto God who gave it” (Ecclesiastes 12:7).

The New Testament does not dispute this fact. New Testament which speaks of the present existence of a hell for the wicked man imply the doctrine of the soul's uninterrupted immortality, for it is not to be supposed that hell should be created, and exist for thousands and myriads of the years without an object. The belief that hell and heaven exist support the immortality of the soul.

Also, according to the word of Jesus Christ in Matthew 17:1-2

After six days Jesus took with him Peter, James and John the brother of James, and led them up a high mountain by themselves.

There he was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and his clothes became as white as the light. Just then there appeared before them Moses and Elijah, talking with Jesus.

Peter said to Jesus, Lord, it is good for us to be here. If you wish, I will put up three shelters--one for you, one for Moses and one for Elijah.

These verses of Scriptures proved that the soul of man continues to live on after death. It shows that the souls of Moses and Elijah were still very much effective and active after death. This shows that the body goes to sleep after death but soul goes to either heaven or hell.

Lastly Revelation 6:7, says:

When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.

They called out in a loud voice, how long, Sovereign Lord, holy and true, until you judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge our blood?

Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little longer, until the number of their fellow servants and brothers who were to be killed as they had been completed. Luke 6:7-11

Here, John was given a vision and he was allow to go to heaven and saw the souls of the people who had been murdered for their faith in Jesus Christ, they are awake and conscious of what is going on, they are with God asking and crying to God to judge the inhabitants of the earth and avenge their blood. This does not point to the fact that they are sleeping or unconscious. Then each of them was given a white robe, and they were told to

wait for other believers. The dead does not stop to exist in the ancestral world and it is not unconscious and oblivious of what goes on in heaven or hell. Therefore, the consciousness of the soul in Christianity is also inferred in the story of Lazarus and the Rich man in Luke 16:19-31. However, the concept of immortality of the soul leaves little or no room for arguments in both the Old and New Testament of the Bible. The concept of resurrection of the body as discussed in this paper is also one of the issues that formed the bedrock of Christianity about the immortality of the soul.

Conclusion

The soul of man continues to live on after death. This belief is held by Christianity and some other religious, such as; Islam, African Traditional religion, among others. The soul is not annihilated at death. The Scriptures describe a separation between soul and body after death, this is affirmed in Genesis 15:15, 25:8, 35:29, Matthew 17:1-2 and Luke 23:43

Jesus answered him, I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise.
Luke 23:43

Here, Jesus said as soon as you die and your body goes to sleep, your soul will be with me in paradise. Not your body will be with me in paradise, but you will be with me in paradise. For as soon as body dies it will return to the dust. Furthermore, the above passages proved to us that Christianity believes that the soul is not annihilated at death. This disproves the belief of the Jehovah's witnesses that the soul is annihilated at death.

The danger some fall into is identifying man merely with his body and ignoring the fact that he has a spiritual nature. Now the body is not the whole man. Therefore it cannot be concluded that the death of the body is the death of the whole man. This perception asserts that every man's soul is immortal and cannot be annihilated.

Recommendations for Better Performance.

Based on the assessment of the contributions and clarifications on the issue of immortality of the soul in Christianity, the following are recommended for better understanding.

1. There is need for the church to re-conceptualize their perception about the doctrine of immortality of the soul and evaluate it against the backdrop of what the Bible teaches about life after death.
2. Immortality of the soul should be devoid of 'Necromancy'. Necromancy is "the art or practice of communicating by magic with the dead in order to learn about the future." In Leviticus 19:31, God warns His children against Necromancy.
3. The Church needs to create more awareness through biblical teaching of the importance of the immortality of soul within her membership to enable them to be more conscious of where to spend their eternity (Heaven or hell). This will also help them to perform better in affecting their immediate community through their good behaviour. If more awareness is created, corruptions, killing, stealing, among others, will be reduced because of the fear of the second death.
4. The Church should give more attention to the training of the politicians within its membership, for them to know that we are all stewards on this planet earth and that

everything is not going to end here, but hereafter. If this is done, it might change our politicians for good.

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