

THE DOCTRINE OF “SOUL-SLEEPING”

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Views of the human condition during the intermediate state differ as to whether it is a conscious existence. Conscious existence means that between death and the general resurrection, we experience the rewards and punishments later to be publicly declared at the great white throne judgment. Unconsciousness during that time has two possibilities: “soul sleeping” or non-existence. The second option means that when we die, we cease to exist objectively until God “recreates” us out of his memory, an event simultaneous with, or the same as, resurrection. For all practical purposes, soul sleeping amounts to the same thing though, strictly speaking, we do objectively exist. The following considerations go into evaluating the concept of “soul sleeping.”

I. Arguments for Soul-Sleeping

A. Death is called “sleep” and resurrection is called “awaking.”

The New Testament has many examples of sleep used figuratively as at least a euphemism for death (the asterisk means κοιμάομαι [*koimaomai*] appears in the original Greek text):

1. Matthew 27:52: “*Many bodies of the saints that had fallen asleep** were raised.”
2. John 11:1-44: “*Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep [κοιμάομαι], but I am going to awaken him. . . . Now Jesus had spoken about his death, but they thought he was talking about rest in the sense of sleep*” [ὕπνος, *hypnos*]. Then Jesus told them plainly, ‘*Lazarus has died*’” (11:11-14). Four terms for sleep occur with the resurrection of Lazarus recorded in John 11: ὕπνος (*hypnos*, 11:13), κοιμάομαι (11:11, 12), κοιμησις (*koimēsis*, 11:13; a one-use word), and ἐξυπνίζω (*exypnizō*, 11:11), but not καθεύδω (*katheudō*) or ἐξυπνος (*exypnos*).
3. Acts 7:60: “*When [Stephen] said that, he fell asleep**.”
4. Acts 13:36: “*David . . . fell asleep* and was laid to his fathers and saw corruption.*”
5. 1 Corinthians 15:6: “*Then Jesus appeared to more than 500 brothers at the same time, of whom the majority remain till now, but some fell asleep*.*”
6. 1 Corinthians 15:17-18: “*If Christ has not been raised . . . then they also that have fallen asleep* in Christ have perished.*”
7. 1 Corinthians 15:20: “*But now Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of them that slept*.*”
8. 1 Corinthians 15:51: “*We will not all sleep*, but we will all be changed.*”
9. 1 Thessalonians 4:13-15:
“*We would not have you ignorant, brothers, about those who are falling asleep*, that you not mourn like the rest who have no hope;*

because if we believe that Jesus died and resurrected, so also the ones that fell asleep in Christ in Jesus God will bring with him. . . . We that are living—left behind till the coming of the Lord—will certainly not precede the ones that have fallen asleep*.”*

10. 2 Peter 3:4: “*From the day the fathers fell asleep* everything continues from the beginning of creation.*”

11. 1 Corinthians 11:30: “*For that reason . . . and many sleep.*”

Ἐξυπνος [exypnos] and ὕπνος [hypnos] are not used in this idiomatic way for death. It is also questionable whether καθεύδω [katheudō] is so used. Depending on how we look at it, one possible exception appears in the account of Jesus’ resurrecting Jairus’ young daughter: “*She did not die; she’s sleeping*” (Matthew 9:24 = Mark 5:39 = Luke 8:52). Since Jesus contrasts death with sleep, he does not clearly call death “sleep”; yet she is said earlier to be dead (Matthew 9:18; Mark 5:35; Luke 8:49). The mourners “knew” she was dead (Luke 8:53; cp. John 11:4, 11, 14); and after Jesus “saved” her, the text says, “*her spirit returned*” (Luke 8:55), an expression probably based on her beginning to “breathe” again; so it is unlikely that she was really in a coma. Rather than say the term is used figuratively in this case, it seems better to say that the reality amounted to sleep because Jesus was about to resurrect her. A second possibility with καθεύδω occurs in the somewhat ambiguous statement, “*Awake, sleeper, and arise from the dead* (Ephesians 5:14).” Awaking from sleep and arising from the dead are two figures for the same thing.

On the other hand, twelve of the eighteen uses of κοιμάομαι (*koimaomai*) are figurative for death with another usage for spiritual deadness: “*For that reason many are weak and sick/sickly among you, and a considerable number are asleep/sleeping*” (1 Corinthians 11:30). In the New Testament all clear examples of sleep as a metaphor for death occur with κοιμάομαι.

In the Old Testament the imagery appears less frequently, being limited almost entirely to the expression “*slept with the fathers*,” and that occurring mainly in king lists.

12. “*Sleeping with the fathers*”: Deuteronomy 31:36; 2 Samuel 7:12; 1 Kings 1:21; 2:10; 11:21, 43; 14:20, 31; 15:8, 24; 16:6, 28; 22:40, 50; 2 Kings 8:24; 10:35; 13:9, 13; 14:16, 22, 29; 15:7, 22, 38; 16:20; 20:21; 21:18; 24:6; 2 Chronicles 9:31; 12:16; 14:1; 16:13; 21:1; 26:2, 23; 27:9; 28:27; 32:33; 33:20 (cp. Acts 13:36). The Hebrew term translated “sleep” in these cases is כַּפֵּר, “to lie down.” The Septuagint usually translates it κοιμάομαι.

13. Job 14:12, “*People lie down and do not arise; till the heavens no longer exist, they will not awake or be aroused from their sleep* [ἡψί/ὕπνός].”

14. Daniel 12:2 speaks of those who “*sleep* [*ῃψί/καθεύδω*] *in the dust of the earth.*”

15. Isaiah 26:19 is one place where “awakening” is a metaphor for resurrection: “*Awake and sing, you that live in the dust.*”

B. Various texts describe the condition of the dead as one in which a person has no sensory, mental, emotional, or physical activity.

1. Job **14:21**: “[A man’s] sons come to honor (him), and he does not know it; and they are brought low, but he does not perceive it of them.” That description might refer to a terminal, half-conscious suffering since the next verse speaks of his flesh as having pain.
2. Psalm **6:5**: “In death there is no remembrance of [God].”
3. Psalm **88:10-12**: “Will you show wonders to the dead? Will the deceased arise and praise you [Selah]? Will your lovingkindness be declared in the grave, or your faithfulness in Destruction/Abaddon [see Job **26:6**]? Will your wonders be known in the dark, and your righteousness in the land of forgetfulness? ”
4. Psalm **115:17**: “The dead do not praise Yahweh, neither do any that go down into silence. ”
5. Psalm **146:4**: “His breath goes out; he returns to the earth; in that very day his thoughts perish. ”
6. Ecclesiastes **9:5-6, 10**: “The dead do not know anything . . . for the memory of them is forgotten. As well their love as their hatred and their envy perished long ago . . . There is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol where you are going.”

II. Responses to Arguments for Soul-Sleeping

A. “Sleep” is satisfactorily understood as a euphemism for death. It is an apt picture, because when people are asleep, they look like they do when they are dead. Their eyes are shut, they are lying down, breathing is shallow and not noticeable, they do not respond to their surroundings, they are not accomplishing anything, they are not aware of what is happening and do not remember it after they wake up. Waking up is comparable to resurrection if the figure carries through. This is surely a case of “phenomenological language,” that is, wording suggested by the way things appear more than by the way they are. If “sleep” is a figurative expression for death, we allegorize the comparison between sleep and death when we carry their similarity to the extent assumed in soul-sleeping.

B. Many passages speak of the dead as doing and experiencing the very things that passages cited above say do not occur with the dead.

1. Revelation **6:9-11**: John saw the souls of martyrs under the altar, and they were asking how long it would be before their blood would be avenged on those still living on the earth. They were given white robes and told to rest a while till their fellow servants had undergone their own martyrdom.

2. Luke **16:19-31**: The Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus pictures Abraham, the rich man, and Lazarus as consciously existing. Lazarus was experiencing good things while the rich man was in torment, concerned that his five brothers should end up where he was. Conversation takes place between the participants. (Some interpreters have suggested that this text is not a parable but an actual situation, because it is not called a parable, and it stands alone as a story with named participants.)

3. Isaiah 14:9-11 pictures the previous dead talking to those who have just died and joined them.

4. Jesus preached to the dead perhaps between the time of his death and resurrection (1 Peter 3:18-22; 4:6; cp. Ephesians 4:9?).

The texts that speak of no activity or sound are all in highly poetic texts, which increases the likelihood of figurative, hence, phenomenological, language. Furthermore, the contexts of those statements were written when people were experiencing despair, which increases the likelihood that they were speaking affectively more than cognitively. We could also suppose that speaking actors were planted in the texts so the writer could use them to express his ideas, but we cannot explain 1 Peter 3:18-22; 4:6 this way.

C. Several texts speak as if a person goes directly from his earthly condition into the presence of God.

1. In Philippians 1:21-24 Paul considered it gain to die, because he could go to be with Christ, which would be far better. Passing into non-existence or unconsciousness might relieve him of his present sufferings, but it would not give him a better existence than normal conscious living.

2. 2 Corinthians 5:1-10 contrasts living in the body and living in the building God gives when this “earthly tabernacle” dissolves. The alternatives are being at home in the body and being present with the Lord. People should aim to be well-pleasing to God when they are absent from the body as well as when they are still alive. Being well-pleasing would seem to require conscious existence and real behavior.

3. Ecclesiastes 12:7 says, “*The dust returns to the earth where it was, and spirit returns to the God who gave it.*” (Contrast 3:19-22; cp. Luke 23:46; Acts 7:59.)

4. Genesis 5:24 says, “*Enoch walked with God, and he was not because God took him.*” In 2 Kings 2:11 “*Elijah went up by a whirlwind to heaven.*” These two cases that we call translations make us wonder how likely it would be for God to take Enoch and Elijah up early into non-existence or unconsciousness.

5. Luke 23:43: On the day Jesus died, one of the “malefactors” crucified beside him asked Jesus to remember him when the Jesus came into his kingdom. The Lord responded with the well-known statement, “*Today you will be with me in Paradise.*” As it stands, the statement makes it virtually impossible that at death we enter a state of unconsciousness—or non-existence—until the general resurrection.

Using Luke 23:43, however, must consider the possibility that *today* modifies *say* rather than *be*. In the original Greek manuscripts, the absence of punctuation leaves a reader to decide where to insert commas and quotation marks to indicate the beginning of a quotation. If *today* modifies *say*, this text falls out of the discussion about soul-sleeping. (Is Paradise different from heaven, because Jesus would be with the thief today in Paradise; yet he tells Mary Magdalene he has not yet ascended to the Father?)

a. Ἄμήν σοι λέγω, σήμερον μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἔσῃ ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ. “*Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.*”

b. Ἄμήν σοι λέγω σήμερον, Μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἔσῃ ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ. “*Truly I tell you today, you will be with me in paradise.*” (“*I tell you right now, you will be with me in Paradise.*”)

The question is whether Greek usage typically puts σήμερον (“*today*”) in the format required by the less traditional understanding, *i.e.*, on the front of the clause rather than after the previous verb. The following texts relate to the question: Matthew 6:11, 30;

(11:23); **16:3; 21:28; 27:8, 19; 28:15;** **Mark 14:30; Luke 2:11; 4:21; 5:26; 12:28; 13:32, 33; 19:5, 9; 22:34; 23:43; 24:21; Acts 4:9, 13:33; (19:40); 20:26; 22:3; 24:21; 26:2, 29; 27:33; (Romans 11:8; 2 Corinthians 3:14, 15); Hebrews 1:5; 3:7, 13, (15; 4:7²); 5:5; (13:8); James 4:13.** The references without parentheses relate to this question. Parenthesized references are deemed irrelevant because they use σήμερον in a prepositional phrase or are otherwise unlike the Luke 23:43 text.

As the “Addendum” shows at the end of this study, it appears from the placement of σήμερον relative to the verb that we cannot disprove that *today* modifies *say*, although we find no example of “*I say to you today*” as a kind of idiom for “*I tell you*.” Σήμερον generally appears near the front of the sentence, although it can appear after the verb—as the alternative translation requires in Luke 23:43. The more important question is why Jesus would add *today* to *say*. Even if the statement would make a tolerable redundancy, we still wonder why a speaker would think that “*saying today*” would be significant enough to add *today* on top of the standard expression “*I say to you/I tell you*.”

Bruce Metzger notes that the Curetonian Syriac version puts “*today*” with the preceding rather than the succeeding verb in Luke 23:43: *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: A Companion Volume to the United Bible Societies’ Greek New Testament* 3rd ed, 1971, pp. 181-82.

D. Scripture provides two cases of “translation” from this life. It would not seem natural to see Elijah and Enoch translated to unconscious existence any more than to see Jesus as ascending to unconscious existence. In the case of Enoch, the record says, “*he walked with God*,” which sounds like it might apply to after his translation.

E. In some accounts the dead return to earth.

1. Saul had the spirit medium at Endor call up Samuel (1 Samuel 28:7-28). Scripture forbade people with “familiar spirits” from consulting the dead (Leviticus 19:31; Deuteronomy 18:10; cp. 1 Samuel 15:23; 27:3). Nevertheless, there were spiritists who claimed to contact the dead even as they do today. Saul had her call up Samuel to find out about his prospects in the battle against the Philistines. He and Samuel carried on a conversation in the process.

2. During the transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus in a glorified condition visible to Peter, James, and John; and they talked about the upcoming death of Jesus (Matthew 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36). Would God have called them back into existence or back into a conscious condition just to carry on this conversation?

3. In his account of Jesus’ death, Matthew 27:52-53 adds a unique note that “*the tombs opened up and many bodies of the saints that had fallen asleep were raised; and, coming out of the tombs after his resurrection, they entered the holy city and appeared to many.*”

4. Jesus’ post-resurrection appearances also belong with this evidence, even though his case could have been different from what happens to typical mortals.

In these cases, people could have come back from an unconscious state, but that is not as likely in light of what they did during their appearances.

ADDENDUM

- Matthew 6:11: Τὸ ἄρτον ἡμῶν τὸν ἐπιούσιον **δὸς** ἡμῖν σήμερον.
- 6:30: εἰ δὲ τὸν χόρτον τοῦ ἀγροῦ σήμερον **όντα** καὶ αὐτοὶ εἰς κλίβανον **βαλλόμενον** ὁ θεὸς οὗτως ἀμφιέννυσιν . . .
- 16:3: καὶ πρωΐ, Σήμερον χειμών, πυρράζει γὰρ στυγνάζων ὁ οὐρανός.
- 21:28: Τέκνον, Ὕπαγε σήμερον ἐργάζου ἐν τῷ ἀμπελῶνι.
- 27:8: διὸ **ἐκλήθη** ὁ ἀργὸς ἐκεῖνος Ἀγρὸς Αἴματος ἔως τῆς σήμερον.
- 27:19: πολλὰ γὰρ **ἔπαθον σήμερον** κατ’ ὅναρ δι’ αὐτόν.
- 28:15b: καὶ **διεφημίσθη** ὁ λόγος οὗτος παρὰ Ἰουδαίοις μέχρι τῆς σήμερον.
- Mark 14:30: Ἄμην λέγω σοι ὅτι σὺ σήμερον ταύτῃ τῇ νυκτὶ πρὶν ἡ δις ἀλέκτορα φωνῆσαι τρίς με **ἀπαρνήσῃ**.
- Luke 2:11: ὅτι **ἐτέχθη** ὑμῖν σήμερον σωτὴρ ὃς ἐστιν χριστὸς κύριος ἐν πόλει Δαυίδ.
- Luke 4:21: ἥρξατο δὲ λέγειν πρὸς αὐτοὺς ὅτι Σήμερον πεπλήρωται ἡ γραφὴ αὕτη ἐν τοῖς ὡσὶν ὑμῶν.
- 5:26: **Εἶδομεν παράδοξα σήμερον.**
- 12:28: εἰ δὲ ἐν ἀγρῷ τὸν χόρτον **όντα σήμερον** καὶ αὐτοὶ εἰς κλίβανον βαλλόμενον ὁ θεὸς οὗτως ἀμφιέζει.
- 13:32: Ἰδοὺ ἐκβάλλω δαιμόνια καὶ ιάσεις **ἀποτελῶ σήμερον** καὶ αὐτοὶ καὶ τῇ τρίτῃ τελειοῦμαι.
- 13:33: πλὴν δεῖ με σήμερον καὶ αὐτοὶ καὶ τῇ ἐχομένῃ **πορεύεσθαι**.
- 19:5: σήμερον γὰρ ἐν τῷ οἴκῳ σου **δεῖ** με μεῖναι.
- 19:9: Σήμερον σωτηρίᾳ τῷ οἴκῳ τούτῳ **ἔγενετο**.
- 22:34: Πέτρε, οὐ **φωνήσει σήμερον** ἀλέκτωρ ἔως τρίς με ἀπαρνήσῃ εἰδέναι.
- 22:61: Πρὶν ἀλέκτορα φωνῆσαι σήμερον ἀπαρνήσῃ με τρίς.
- Acts 4:9: εἰ ἡμεῖς σήμερον **ἀνακρινόμεθα** ἐπὶ εὐεργεσίᾳ . . .
- 20:26: διότι **μαρτύρομαι** ὑμῖν ἐν τῇ σήμερον ἡμέρᾳ ὅτι . . .
- 22:3: ζηλωτὴς ὑπάρχων τοῦ θεοῦ καθὼς πάντες ὑμεῖς **ἐστε σήμερον**
- 23:43: Ἄμην σοι λέγω, σήμερον μετ’ ἐμοῦ ἔστη ἐν τῷ παραδείσῳ.
- 24:21: Περὶ ἀναστάσεως νεκρῶν ἐγὼ **κρίνομαι σήμερον** ἐφ’ ὑμῶν.
- 26:2: ἥγημαι ἐμαυτὸν μακάριον ἐπὶ σοῦ μέλλων σήμερον ἀπολογεῖσθαι
- 26:29: Εὐξαίμην ἂν τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἐν ὀλίγῳ καὶ ἐν μεγάλῳ οὐ μόνον σὲ ἀλλὰ καὶ πάντες τοὺς **ἀκούοντάς** μου σήμερον γενέσθαι τοιούτους ὅποιος καὶ ἐγώ εἰμι.
- 27:33: Τεσσαρεσκαιδεκάτην σήμερον ἡμέραν **προσδοκῶντες** ἄστοι διατελεῖτε.
- Hebrews 1:5: ἐγὼ σήμερον γεγέννηκά σε (cp. 5:5; Acts 13:33).
- 3:7: Σήμερον ἐὰν τῆς φωνῆς αὐτοῦ **ἀκούσητε** (cp. 3:15; 4:7).
- James 4:13: Ἐγε νῦν οἱ λέγοντες, Σήμερον ἡ αὐτοὶ **πορευσόμεθα** εἰς τήνδε τὴν πόλιν