Quest Journals
Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science
Volume 9 ~ Issue 4 (2021)pp: 73-85
ISSN(Online):2321-9467
www.questjournals.org

Research Paper

Judeo-Christian Representations of Life, Death, and the Afterlife

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***ABSTRACT**: The Judaic and Christian Scriptures address humanity's greatest questions: What is the meaning of life? What is death? Is there an afterlife? Biblical interpretation (or hermeneutics) seeks to explain what the Hebrew Bible and New Testament teach on these subjects. This essay has two sections featuring two distinct interpretative methodologies. The first section briefly explores ways the ancient Judaic and Christian texts conceptualized life, death, and resurrection. The second section employs iconographic and contextual analysis to demonstrate selective ways artists symbolized these concepts, through creative representations of the dance of death, the tree of life, the Jewish menorah, and the Christian cross. Combining textual and visual analysis helps elucidate the Judeo-Christian faith's complex answers to history's most fundamental and enduring questions.*

***KEYWORDS**:Dance of Death, Judeo-Christian, Menorah, Sheol, Tree of Life*

Received 29 Mar, 2021; Revised: 10 Apr, 2021; Accepted 12 Apr, 2021 © The author(s) 2021. Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

Throughout human history, people have pondered the same fundamental questions. What is the purpose of life? What happens when we die? Is there an afterlife and, if so, what will it be like? Philosophers, theologians, and others have offered countless answers to these questions. This essay discusses Judeo-Christian perspectives and begins with the *Hebrew Bible* (תַּנַ"ךְ, or *Tanakh*), the ancient collection of Judaic Scriptures. Traditionally, the Hebrew Bible is divided into three sections, the *Torah* (תּוֹרָה, or "Law"), the *Nevi'im* (נְבִיאִים, or "Prophets"), and the *Ketuvim* (כְּתוּבִים, or "Writings"). The Christian Old Testament is roughly equivalent to the Hebrew Bible.

The book of Ecclesiastes (or "the preacher") is one of the Hebrew Bible's "Books of Wisdom." It is an extended, systematic investigation into the meaning of life. Scholars believe Solomon, a famously discerning philosopher and king of Israel, wrote Ecclesiastes. Solomon sensed his approaching death and he paused to reflect on his many experiences "under the sun," while living in the physical world. He realized that much of what he had done was, "'Meaningless! Meaningless! Utterly meaningless!'" (Ecclesiastes 1:2 NIV). Striving for personal accomplishments had proven futile, because the fruits of Solomon's labors had only brought him fleeting pleasure. His pursuit of *mere* human wisdom had been equally futile, because human wisdom could not explain God's eternal plan or the purpose of his existence. Solomon's conclusion was that the best course is to accept the life we are given and our limitations, strive to act prudently, and, in all things, "fear God and keep his commandments" (Ecclesiastes 12:13). When we die, Solomon wrote, "the dust [עָפָר] returns to the ground it came from, and [our] spirit returns to God who gave it" (Ecclesiastes 12:7; see Psalm 104:29). Without God's animating spirit, the body reverts to its basic physical elements and eventually dissolves into dust [1: 724] (see also Genesis 3:19).

The Bible was written almost entirely in two languages. The New Testament authors wrote in Greek and the authors of Hebrew Bible, of course, wrote in Hebrew (though original portions of Daniel and Ezra were Aramaic). The root word meaning "to die" (**מוּת**) occurs more than a thousand times in the Hebrew Bible [2: 395]. Sixty-four times the Old Testament Scriptures use the term **שְׁאוֹל**, which is transliterated as *Sheol,* either as a "poetic synonym of the place of the dead" or to denote the grave [3: 3]. King James VI and I (1566-1625) commissioned an English-language translation of the Bible, which was published in 1611, the "King James Version" (KJV). The translators interpreted Sheol in four distinct ways: as "hell" (31 times), "the grave" (29 times), "the pit" (3 times), and once as "the depth." However, recent English translations have not translated Sheol as "hell." The New American Standard Bible (1971) and The New Revised Standard Version (1989) opted to retain Sheol in all sixty-four instances in which it appeared in the Hebrew Bible. The New International

Version (1978) used either "death," "grave," or "depth" in each instance the King James Version translated Sheol as "hell."

When the term Sheol (**שְׁאוֹל**) appears in the Hebrew Bible, the context usually indicates it is a lyrical reference to the grave, the place where dead bodies are interred, the "ground," the "dust," or the "earth" [3: 586], such as the ancient Jewish Cemetery in Jerusalem (fig. 1). The following passages serve as examples. "The Lord puts to death and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and brings up" (1 Samuel 2:6 NASB). "Will [my hope] go down with me to Sheol? Shall we together go down into the dust?" (Job 17:16). "You will be brought down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit" (Isaiah 14:15 NASB). The connotations of these Scriptures is that the soulless bodies of the dead return to the grave, to Sheol, the metaphorical antithesis of life, the place where the lifeless body decays [3: 589-591].

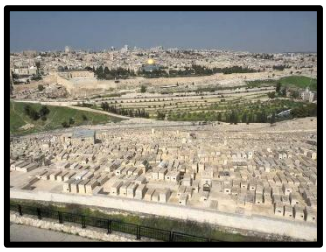

Figure 1.
Bodies have been interred at the Jewish Cemetery in Jerusalem,
on the Mount of Olives, since ca. 1000 B.C.

The theological implications of properly defining Sheol are immense. For Judeo-Christian adherents, the character of Sheol determines whether, at the death of the body, the soul continues to exist in a conscious state, or conversely, it ceases to exist, at least temporarily [4:603-605; 5]. There are two opposing camps. One contends for the immortality of the soul, which at death continues in some undefined form in the *realm of Sheol*[6]. The other camp holds the "conditional view," "according to which the soul cannot exist [*consciously*] in any form apart from the body, for it represents the whole man" [3: 603]. Robert Morey, speaking for the first view, argued the bodiless soul lives on in an *underworld*. "While the Old Testament consistently refers to the body as going to the grave, it always refers to the soul or spirit of man as going to Sheol" [6:72]. Eriks Galenieks, speaking for the opposing camp, argued that thorough biblical exegetical investigation, "clearly demonstrates that the term Sheol not only is synonymous with the grave in its general sense, but also has nothing to do with the so-called underworld, where the spirits or souls of the dead would continue their miserable existence in a disembodied state" [3:612]. It is important to note, however, this debate involves the existence of a nebulous underworld, not whether the Hebrew Bible teaches of the resurrection of the dead.

The Hebrew Bible, *deuterocanonical* books, and Talmudic rabbis each indicated death is not the end of the story, and people should expect a resurrection (Isaiah 26:19; 2 Maccabees 7:14; Sanhedrin 90b). Perhaps the clearest expression came from the Jewish prophet Daniel, who lived as an exile in Babylonia during the sixth century B.C. Daniel received a great prophetic vision containing *eschatological* information about the apocalyptic end of the earth. Daniel wrote that, far in the future, there would be "a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. [At that time] everyone whose name is found written in the book will be delivered. Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt" (Daniel 12:1-2). The Hebrew Bible contains several similar prophesies. The prophet Isaiah proclaimed, the "dead will live … their bodies will rise—let those who dwell in the dust wake up and shout for joy" (Isaiah 26:19). Job said, "In the end [my redeemer] will stand on the earth. And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God" (Job 19:25-26). God told the prophet Ezekiel, "You, my people, will know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves and bring you up from them. I will put my Spirit in you and you will live" (Ezekiel 37:13-14).

The *Talmud* (a Hebrew word meaning "study" or "learning") is a record of rabbinic teachings from the first through the sixth centuries [7]. The Talmud explains in detail how to follow the Torah's commandments and offers interpretation of the entire Hebrew Bible. The *Mishnah* (meaning "study by repetition") is an authoritative rabbinic exegesis of the oral tradition of Jewish law and Judaism. It forms the first part of the Talmud. According to the teachings of the Mishnah Sanhedrin 10, "All Israel has a share in the world-to-come, as it is said, and your nation, all of them righteous, shall inherit the land. They are the shoot of my planting, the work of my hands, so that [I] shall be glorified [Isaiah 60:21]. And these [are the ones] who have no share in the world-to-come: the one who says that the resurrection of the dead is not [derived] from the Torah, and [the one who says] the Torah is not from the heavens, and the *apikoros*. Rabbi Akiva says, also the one who reads from the heretical books, and the one who whispers over a wound and says, 'all of the ailments that I have put over

Egypt, I shall not put over you for I am the Lord who heals you' [Exodus 15:26]. Abba Shaul says: Also the one who recites the divine name as it is spelled out" (Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1) [see also 8].

The medieval Sephardi scholar of the Torah, Maimonides (1138-1204), or Rambam, wrote a treatise on tractate Sanhedrin 10, which included his "thirteen principles of faith" [9: 402-423]. Some consider the thirteen principles fundamental beliefs of Orthodox Judaism. In the final two, Maimonides affirmed his "complete faith in the coming of the Messiah" and his "complete faith that there will be a resurrection of the dead at the time that will be pleasing before the Creator."

The New Testament Scriptures often address the topic of death, and those "who sleep in the dust" (Daniel 12:2). In the Gospel of John, Jesus spoke in terms closely echoing Daniel's Old Testament prophesy. Jesus said, "The Father raises the dead and gives them life … [A] time is coming when all who are in their graves [Greek μνημεῖον, or *mnēmeion*] will hear his voice and come out—those who have done what is good will rise to live, and those who have done what is evil will rise to be condemned" (John 5:21, 28-29). A little bit later, Jesus also said, "I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die" (John 11:25-26). Jesus taught that he was the fulfillment of Hebrew prophesies of the coming Messiah and of the resurrection; he taught that his own resurrection would prove he was the Messiah (Matthew 20:18-19; John 2:18-22, 4:25-26).

According to the Gospel books, after Jesus was crucified and died, as evening was approaching before the Sabbath, "there came a rich man from Arimathea, named Joseph," who was a *disciple* (or student) of Jesus (Matthew 27:57). Joseph was a "prominent member of the Jewish Council [the Sanhedrin]" that had condemned Jesus to death (Mark 15:43), though he "had not consented to their decision and action" (Luke 23:51). Joseph went to Pilate, the Roman official who had officially pronounced the sentence of death, and asked for Jesus' body, and Pilate consented (Matthew 27:58). Joseph and another member of the Sanhedrin and disciple of Jesus, named Nicodemus, took the body. They "wrapped it in a clean linen cloth," with "a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds … in accordance with Jewish burial customs," and they "placed it in [Joseph's] own new tomb that he had cut out of the rock. [Joseph] rolled a big stone in front of the entrance to the tomb and went away" (Matthew 27:58-60; John 19:39-40). The Gospel of John says Jesus' body was laid in a new tomb that was located in a garden near the place where Jesus was crucified (John 19:41-42).

A leading authority on the archaeology of ancient Palestine, Jodi Magness, believes the Gospel accounts accurately describe how the Jews of ancient Jerusalem buried their dead. Only wealthier residents of Jerusalem, like Joseph of Arimathea, could afford to purchase rock-cut tombs. Such tombs were "artificially hewn, underground caves" cut into "bedrock slopes," and … nearly always outside the walls of the city. Bodies were typically covered in aromatics and "wrapped in a shroud," before being placed in a tomb [10: 1].

Figure 2.
Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem.

Figure 3.
The burial shelf and marble covering.

For nearly two millennia, Christians have venerated a site under the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem's Old City as the tomb of Jesus Christ (fig. 2) [11]. Representatives of the Roman emperor Constantine (ca. 272-337) identified the site approximately three hundred years after the crucifixion. All that remains today of the ancient grave is a burial bed, or shelf, carved into the wall of a limestone cave (fig. 3). In 2016, for the first time in centuries, researchers uncovered layers of protective marble cladding and revealed the burial bed and the remains of the cave wall [12].

Archaeologists have analyzed thousands of burial chambers dating to Jerusalem's biblical era with designs that are similar to the tomb under the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Prosperous individuals, such as Joseph of Arimathea, often purchased tombs with several rock-cut niches to hold the bodies of their family members. The Scriptures say Jesus "suffered [his crucifixion] outside the city gate" and Joseph and Nicodemus interred his body in a nearby tomb (Hebrews 13:12; John 19:41-42). Ancient Jewish customs did not permit burial within Jerusalem's city walls. In biblical times, the location of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre was outside the city walls, but since then Jerusalem has expanded greatly and the church now sits within the city. Modern archaeologists examining the area surrounding the Church of the Holy Sepulchre found other rock-cut tombs, confirming the area was "a Jewish cemetery" in the time of Jesus [12].

During the third century, the Roman emperor Hadrian (76-138) built a pagan temple over the site to demonstrate Rome's cultural and religious authority and to frustrate early Christians' efforts to pay tribute to Jesus' grave. Constantine was reputedly Rome's first Christian emperor [13]. According to Eusebius, the third century Bishop of Caesarea (265-339), Constantine's representatives removed Hadrian's temple and exposed a cave and a rock-cut burial chamber [14]. They sheared off the top of the cave, exposing its interior, and they built a church enclosing the burial chamber. According to Dan Bahat, Jerusalem's former official archaeologist, there is no other site that "can lay a claim nearly as weighty [as the Holy Sepulchre Church to being the location of Jesus' burial], and we really have no reason to reject the authenticity of the site" [12].

By most standards, Jesus' earthly life was relatively brief; he died when he was around the age of thirty-three [15: 113-129]. The Hebrew patriarch Moses is credited with writing the ninetieth psalm, which says, "Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures" (Psalm 90:10). Within the great span of time, human life passes quickly. The fleeting nature of human existence consumed the attention of many authors of the Hebrew Scriptures. Moses prayed that the Lord, who is "from everlasting to everlasting," would teach men and women "to number our days," to appreciate the brevity of our lives, so "we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:2, 12). The great warrior and king of ancient Israel, David confessed that, in spite of his accomplishments, he was a "mere mortal," his life was "like a breath," his days were "like a fleeting shadow" (Psalm 144:3-4; see also Job 7:7). Toward the end of his life, Solomon, the author of Ecclesiastes, finally acknowledged God is eternal and sovereign, but people are subject to forces over which we have little control. God appointed "a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: a time to be born and a time to die" (Ecclesiastes 3:1-2).

The New Testament authors also emphasized the brevity of life. James, the brother of Jesus and a leader of the church in Jerusalem, warned that we should not count on our worldly plans or on realizing potential future opportunities. "[Y]ou do not even know what will happen tomorrow. What is your life? You are a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes" (James 4:14). Likewise, the Apostle Peter, reiterating the words of the Hebrew prophet Isaiah, wrote, "All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall" (1 Peter 1:24; Isaiah 40:6-8). When Jesus delivered his Sermon on the Mount, an encapsulation of his teachings, he reminded his listeners that even the finest earthly treasures would eventually be lost and, therefore, we should store up (spiritual) "treasures in heaven, "where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:19-21). James wrote that those whose faith perseveres through their brief earthly life will be "blessed" with "the crown of life that the Lord has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12).

II. SYMBOLS OF LIFE, DEATH, AND THE AFTERLIFE

The remainder of this essay will examine selective artistic symbols of the Judeo-Christian concepts of life, death, and the afterlife, namely the iconography of 1) the dance of death; 2) the tree of life; and 3) a hybrid menorah-cross symbol. The imagery represents fundamental values and doctrine of the Judeo-Christian faith and illustrates connections linking the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament on fundamental topics.

The Judeo-Christian faith is *monotheistic*; both Judaism and Christianity hold that there is only one God. Conversely, the ancient *polytheistic* religions of the ancient Near East, Africa, and Europe asserted there were multiple gods. Ancient polytheistic pantheons often included a special god or goddess associated with dying, death, or the underworld, such as Anubis, of Egypt, or Demeter, Thantos, and Hades, of Greece. According to the Bible, God is in charge of life and death, rather than any other deity. However, the Bible does record instances when God sent divine beings on missions of death. On one such occasion the "angel of the Lord" delivered a deadly plague and on another the "angel of the Lord" put to death thousands of Assyrian warriors (2 Samuel 24:15-16; Isaiah 37:36). The book of Exodus says the Lord sent "his destroyer" to strike down the "firstborn of Egypt" to free the Israelites from enslavement (Exodus 12:23, 29), an event commemorated on the Jewish holiday of Passover (or *Pesach*). The Lord's destroyer spared the Israelite families who followed the commandment to sacrifice a *Passover lamb* and smear its blood around the doorframes of their homes (fig. 4).

The Christian *apologist* and philosopher, Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165) suggested that smearing doorframes with blood on the original day of Passover, and on Pesach commemorations, directly referenced "the death of the Redeemer, 'because the Greek word to smear, χρίεσθαι, and the word Christ are the same.' [S]mearing is only another term for anointing, and Christ means anointed, and is the Greek synonym of the Hebrew [term] Messiah (or *mâshiah*)" [16: 127]. The New Testament authors identified the Passover lamb as a prophetic type for Jesus Christ and his sacrifice on the cross (Luke 22:7-23) [see 28: 40-41]. The Apostle Paul even called Christ as "our Passover lamb" (1 Corinthians 5:7) [see also 17]. The Northern Renaissance painting master, Jan van Eyck (ca. 1390-1441) symbolized Christ as a lamb standing on an altar, his sacrificial blood flowing from his breast into a golden chalice (fig. 5).

Figure 4.
A doorframe smeared with
blood or paint during Pesach.

Figure 5.
Jan van Eyck, *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*,
Ghent Altarpiece, ca. 1430.
Public Domain.

During post-biblical times, within Jewish theological literature and folklore, the concept of an allegorical *Angel of Death* emerged, "conceived as an amalgam of forms and concepts which had their biblical associations with death, cruelty, and wretchedness" [18]. The Angel of Death was prominent in medieval *dances of death*, which were performed throughout Europe by wandering troupes of entertainers. Dance of death performances often accompanied festive events, such as weddings or *Purim* meals, and they served as a form of *memento mori* (a reminder of the inevitable end of life). The death angel danced grotesquely, theatrically skipping about "with [stereotyped] sinners (mostly misers) of all classes and professions" [18] (figs. 9-11). Within the joyous settings of weddings and feasts, death's personification "stressed the vanity of mortal and perishable values and contrasted them to everlasting and immortal merits and piety" [18]. A passage from the deuterocanonical book of Sirach, also known as the book of Ecclesiasticus (ca. 200 B.C.), might be read on such occasions: "In all you do, remember the end of your life, and then you will never sin" (Sirach 7:38).

In France, the dance of death was known as *ladanse macabre* (roughly, "horrible dance"). Some historians believe "macabre" may have derived from a loose transliteration of the Latin phrase *Chorea Machabæorum*, or "dance of the Maccabees" [19]. The deuterocanonical book, 2 Maccabees described the brutal martyrdom of a Jewish mother and her seven sons during a second century B.C. Judean revolt against the ruthless Seleucid king, Antiochus Epiphanes (216-164) (2 Maccabees 7). This martyrdom narrative became a popular cultural motif, for instance in medieval devotional *books of hours* (fig. 6). French medieval playwrights apparently incorporated elements of the infamous story into *ladanse macabre* choreography. An ornately decorated golden reliquary housed in Cologne, Germany's St. Andreas Church contains the relics of the Maccabee sons, their seven skulls (figs 7-8).

Figure 6.
Maccabee Martyrs, illumination,
Swabia, Germany, ca. 1100.
Public Domain.

Figure 7.
The Maccabee Shrine, ca. 1520,
San Andreas Church,
Cologne, Germany.

Figure 8.
Detail of fig. 7, showing
the martyrdom.

Polish Cistercian monk and artist, Franciszek Lekszycki (1600-1668) painted a version of the danse macabre for the Monastery of the Bernardine Fathers, in Krakow, Poland [20] (figs. 9-11). Lekszycki depicted nine women, in various manners of dress representing every social class, and nine skeletons performing a *round*, a type of folk dance in which participants form a large circle and rotate. In the corners surrounding the dancing women (fig. 9), Lekszycki painted scenes of the sin of Adam and Eve, Christ's Crucifixion, and his Ascension to heaven, which remind viewers of the Christian cycle of death, redemption, and salvation. In surrounding vignettes, skeletons dance with the spectrum of male religious and social types, from the Roman Catholic Pope down to a common beggar (fig. 11). Death dances with every person.

Figure 9.
Franciszek Lekszycki,
Danse Macabre, ca. 1670.
Public Domain.

Figure 10.
Detail of Lekszycki's
Danse Macabre.

Figure 11.
Death with a pauper.

The Hebrew Bible portrays the grave as a great leveler, a place awaiting both the wicked and the righteous, both the mighty and the humble. The psalmist noted, "How fleeting is my life," then asked rhetorically, "Who can live and not see death, or who can escape the power of the grave?" (Psalm 89:47-48). The New Testament teaches that unless a person lives until Jesus' return, every woman and man is destined to die (1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Hebrews 9:27), it is just a matter of when. Biblical prophets described *the end times* and the role death will play. Late in the first century, the Apostle John received a "revelation of Jesus Christ [intended] to show to His bond-servants the things which must soon take place" (Revelation 1:1). The English word "revelation" comes from the Latin *revelare* ("to reveal"), which, in turn, comes from the original Greek Ἀποκάλυψις (meaning "a [divine] disclosure of truth"). John wrote in highly symbolic, apocalyptic language concerning the conclusion of human history during earth's end times. Perhaps John's most memorable prophetic utterance involved his description of "the four horsemen of the Apocalypse."

"I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer. … And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword. … And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, 'A measure of wheat for a penny, and three measures of barley for a penny; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.' … And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth"(Revelation 6:1-8 KJV).

Six hundred years before John wrote the book of Revelation, the Old Testament prophet Zechariah wrote about his own, related vision. An "angel of the Lord" appeared to Zechariah and showed him one of God's heavenly servants, who traveled throughout the earth, riding red, white, and brown horses (Zechariah 1:8-17) [see also 21: 90-91]. In contrast, four distinct riders appear in John's vision, each seemingly representing a distinct feature of a coming apocalypse (the final destruction of the world): Conquest, War, Famine, and Death [22: 214-230]. Lutheran biblical scholar, Richard C. H. Lenski, and others, have suggested the rider of the white horse may be Christ, and his Conquest represents the triumph of the gospel [22: 221]. There is no need to speculate concerning the rider of the pale horse, though; John identified him as Death, who is accompanied by Hell, the equivalent of Sheol (or the grave). Death, with the help of violence (War) and starvation (Famine), destroys humanity, and Hell devours the remains. The color of Death's horse is "pale," in Greek χλωρός, or *khlōros*[23: 140], the unhealthy ashen, yellowish brown associated with cadavers or the skin of people nearing their demise. Once the Four Horsemen finish their awful missions, all that will remain will be the resurrection, the final judgment, and an eternal home for the saved in a "Holy City," where there is "no more death," and where the river of life flows by the restored Tree of Life (Revelation 20:11-15; 21:2-4; 22:1-2).

Figure 12.
Albrecht Dürer, *The Four Horsemen*, 1498.
Public Domain.

Figure 13
Detail of fig. 12.

The German Renaissance painter and printmaker, Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) created a series of fifteen woodcuts illustrating John's visions. *The Four Horsemen*, of 1498, is the most famous image from Dürer's series (fig. 12). Death, and the horse he rides, are dreadful and emaciated (fig. 13). Though they vigorously accomplish their task, their eyes are vacant and lifeless. Death ravages the populace with a menacing pitchfork as his horse tramples over an aristocratic woman and a high-ranking Roman Catholic official, wearing a bishop's miter and crown (Dürer sympathized with the German Reformation's populist ideals). Hell, a gape-mouthed monster in the lower left corner, prepares to devour the bishop and wealthy woman. Death awaits everyone.

The first chapters of the Hebrew Bible describe how God created the heavens, the earth, and all living things, including the first man and woman. The description of God's creation of the first man, Adam, is quite concise: "Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). According to this passage, human beings owe their existence to the creator's "breath of life." The Lord God placed Adam and the first woman, Eve, in an idyllic natural environment, called the *Garden of Eden*, an earthly paradise that supplied all of their needs. In the garden, "the Lord God made all kinds of trees grow out of the ground—trees that were pleasing to the eye and good for food. In the middle of the garden were the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil" (Genesis 2:9). The Lord told Adam and Eve they could eat from any of the trees, with one exception; they could not have the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If they chose to defy this restriction, the Lord said, "You will certainly die" (Genesis 2:17). In spite of this warning, the Scriptures say, a serpent tempted Adam and Eve with fruit from the tree of knowledge and they ate it, breaking the divine commandment and the first covenant between God and humankind. The Lord God then declared to the heavenly host, "The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil. He must not be allowed to reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat, and live forever" (Genesis 3:22). The Lord expelled Adam and Eve from their idyllic garden home and sent *Cherubim* (angelic figures) to keep them from the tree of life. Adam and Eve then lived lives of sorrow and, because they no longer had access to the tree of life, they eventually died (Genesis 3:16-17). It is crucial to note that the Bible never says Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of life, but if they had done so, they may have lived forever.

According to Torah scholar Rabbi Dovid Rosenfeld, before Adam and Eve ate of the tree of knowledge they lack an awareness of evil (which the serpent embodied). "In both body and spirit," Adam and Eve were originally "perfect." When they tasted the forbidden fruit, though, "evil inclination" entered their beings and thereafter they struggled with a "confused mixture of good and evil." "As great as man's spirit might strive to be, [after the fall] his body would never be fully free of its earthiness, the mark of the Serpent. It was now fated that only through death — through the decay and destruction of our bodies — and the ultimate rebirth of the Resurrection — would man again attain both spiritual and bodily perfection," and renewed access to the tree of life [24]. For followers of Judaism, the Torah constitutes a type of tree of life (see Proverbs 3:18, 4:22), for Christians, the tree of life awaits as a reward in heaven.

The tree of life, and its promise of immortality, is among the most ancient and widely distributed symbols of Judeo-Christian art and literature [25; 26: 326]. In 1928 members of a Jewish *Kibbutz*, a collective community, uncovered a sixth century synagogue near the modern city of Beit She'an, Israel, which contained Byzantine-era mosaics. One panel shows the Torah Shrine (or *aron ha-Kodesh*, symbolic of the Ark of the Covenant), flanked by two menorot candelabras and guarded by two symbolic lions (fig. 14). Above one of the lions, is a small tree with a bird perched in one of its flowering branches (fig. 15). This was a common icon shown in medieval Hebrew Bibles. According to art historian ZofiaAmeisenowa, "the tree with the bird on top is nothing but the Messianic Tree of Life in the midst of the future," as-yet unbuilt Third Temple of Jerusalem [26: 344; 27]. The Old Testament prophet Ezekiel had a vision of an enormous temple that has never been built (Ezekiel 40-48). Perhaps the temple Ezekiel described will literally exist in the future or perhaps Ezekiel spoke figuratively, of a coming time when God and humanity will live in perfect harmony. Ezekiel described seeing a river flowing from the "threshold of the temple," feeding trees of all kinds, whose "leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail" (Ezekiel 47:1, 12; see Revelation 22:2).

Figure 14.
Mosaic, Beth Alpha Synagogue,
Beit She'an, Israel, ca. 550.

Figure 15.
Detail of figure 14.

Although humankind lost access to the tree of life in the Garden of Eden, the tree continued to grow. It is mentioned four times in the book of Proverbs (Proverbs 3:18; 11:30; 13:12; 15:4). In these passages, the tree of life is compared to: 1) God's law and commandments; 2) the "fruit of righteousness"; and 3) the fulfillment of godly desires. For those living under the Law of Moses this may have offered hope. However, this hope existed in the context of "a fallen condition, and the certainty of a speedy return for the body to the dust of death," therefore, this hope necessitated "the expectation of a future state of being, and of a resurrection from the dead" [28: 242].

The New Testament authors also wrote of the tree of life within the context of attaining eternal life in heaven. The Apostle Paul wrote that although "sin entered the world through one man [Adam], and death [entered the world] through sin," God mercifully offered "justification" for sin through "the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ" (Romans 5:12, 15-16 NIV). In the final chapter of the prophetic book of Revelation, the Apostle John wrote of an angel showing him the restoration of the (spiritual) Garden of Eden, in the heavenly realms of a "New Jerusalem." "[T]he angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be any curse. The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. There will be no more night. They will not need the light of a lamp or the light of the sun, for the Lord God will give them light. And they will reign for ever and ever" (Revelation 22:1-5 NIV).

Scottish theologian, Patrick Fairbairn (1805-1874) proposed that God intended the earthly tree of life as a food source. "The fruit it yielded was the divinely appointed medium of maintaining in [Adam and Eve] the power of an endless life;" yet after they sinned they lost the right "to the possession of such a power" [28: 241]. God took the tree from the "middle" of the earthly paradise (Genesis 2:9), and placed it in the middle his heavenly paradise. There it is fed by the river of life, the fountainhead of immortality, and bears fruit "for the healing of the nations," after the resurrection. John prophesized, "To the one who is victorious, [the Spirit of God] will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God" (Revelation 2:7 NIV).

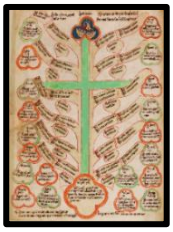

Figure 16.
"Tree of Life," ca. 1300.

Figure 17
Detail of fig. 16.

Figure 18
Detail of fig. 16.

Since the beginning of the Christian church, educators and artists have looked for effective ways to show the connections of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. During much of Europe's medieval period (ca. 500-1200), monks and members of the clergy received the most extensive educations, based mainly on rote memorization and methodical review of biblical and liturgical texts. In the later medieval period, education became more widely available and more analytical. New pedagogical methods developed, including the use of *mnemonicdevices*, aids to retaining and remembering information. Christian educators often used didactic diagrams to convey baseline information quickly and clearly. One example is a thirteenth century tree of life didactic diagram that was produced at the Cistercian abbey, in modern Kamp, Germany (fig. 16). It was based on a meditation manual entitled *Lignum vitae* (Latin for tree or "wood of life") written by Bonaventure (1221-1274), an Italian Franciscan theologian and philosopher [29]. The diagram used *typological exegesis* to show connections between prophesies in the Hebrew Bible and the people and events they foretold in the New Testament Gospels.

The Franciscans, a Roman Catholic mendicant order founded by Francis of Assisi (1181-1226), developed several elaborate, "mystical images and legends of and about Christ's cross," which they believed helped provide a closer spiritual understanding of the "lesson[s] of Christ's redeeming death" [30: 133]. The illustrated didactic diagram is a meditative image informed by Franciscan mysticism, which encourages reflection on the cross (a type of tree) and its earlier biblical connections. The cross has twelve branches, each one bearing a unique fruit representing a unique aspect of Christ's life, death, and/or resurrection. Beside each fruit is an accompanying prefiguring prophesy from the Hebrew Bible and brief commentaries framed in the margins. A trefoil insert on the extreme lower left, below the cross, contains words from Genesis 2 ("In the middle of the garden the tree of life") (fig. 17). A clover-shaped insert at the foot of the cross, contains words

from Revelation (The tree of life in heaven "yield[s] its fruit every month … for the healing of the nations") (fig. 18). The textual juxtaposition unites the beginning and end of the Bible, as does the cross at the center of the composition [see 46]. Like Bonaventure, Augustine (354-430) taught that the Hebrew Bible prefigured the gospel of Christ. Augustine was the bishop of Hippo, an immensely influential theologian, and one of the Latin Fathers of Roman Catholicism. Augustine wrote, "The Old Testament is the promise expressed in figures, while the New Testament is the promise understood in a spiritual way" [31: 245].

Although Judaism and Christianity share certain symbols, such as the tree of life, others have an exclusive association. The cross is the quintessential representation of Christianity and the menorah (מְנוֹרָה) is one of the oldest representations of Judaism. The original menorah (מְנוֹרָה, Hebrew for "lampstand" (illuminated the interior of the Tabernacle מִשְׁכָּן) ,or "dwelling pla ce") during the Israelites journey through the wilderness toward Canaan following centuries of Egyptian enslavement. According to the book of Exodus, God devised the menorah's design and he explained its form and construction to Moses on Mount Sinai (Exodus 25:31-40). The lampstand sat in the Tabernacle's central "Holy Place," near the Table of Showbread and Altar of Incense, outside of the "Holy of Holies" chamber that contained the Ark of the Covenant. The Lord commanded the priests to keep the menorah's lamps burning "from evening till morning [as] a lasting ordinance among the Israelites for the generations to come" (Exodus 27:20-21).

The Israelites carried the original menorah into the land of Canaan and it (presumably) stayed in the Tabernacle at Shiloh for 369 years (Zevachim118b), before being transferred first to the Temple of Solomon (ca. 959-587 B.C.), then to the Second Temple (construction beginning ca. 516 B.C.) in Jerusalem. Scholars disagree about the ultimate fate of the original menorah [32: 140-141]. Perhaps invading Babylonian armies destroyed it in the sixth century B.C. (Jeremiah 52:13), or perhaps it was taken by the Seleucid king Antiochus IV Epiphanes (216-164 B.C.), who sacked Jerusalem in 169 B.C. and desecrated the Temple. The Jewish priest, Judas Maccabeus (190-160 B.C.) created another menorah and placed in the Temple, but it was also lost, to the armies of Rome in A.D. 70 during the First Jewish-Roman War. Invading Vandal armies may have then taken it away during the fall of the Western Roman Empire. Whatever happened to the original lampstand and its copies, the menorah became an enduring symbol of Judaism (figs. 19-20).

Figure 19.
Tzippori Synagogue floor mosaic,
ca. 450, Sepphoris, Israel.

Figure 20.
Fresco with menorot, ca. 300,
Villa Torlonia (Jewish) Catacomb, Rome.

The first words God utters in the Bible are his words of creation "Let there be light" (Genesis 1:3). Jewish theologians contend the light emitted by the menorah's flames was intended to recall, "the creation of the universe in seven days, the center light representing the Sabbath" [33: 366-367; 34: 312-313]. Sabbath (שַׁבָּת , Hebrew for "rest" (was the seventh and final day of creation ,when God ended his work and rested .The Hebrew Bible says ,"God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it" (Genesis 2:2-3 KJV). One of the Ten Commandments is "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy" (Exodus 20:8).

The menorah provided light to the Holy Place, but it was more than a mere candelabrum. Because it was a gift from the Lord for use in the Jewish sanctuary, "it symbolized the Covenant between God and the Jewish people. Representing light, it was a symbol of Jewish spirituality and the unique mission of the Jewish people" [35]. The Law of Moses permitted only Levitical priests (כֹּהֲנִים ,or *kohanim*) to go into the Tabernacle's Holy Place to view and maintain God's symbol of creation, the menorah. The priests were mediators between God and the nation of Israel. As such, they received spiritual enlightenment from God's divine presence in the Holy Place, represented by the physical light of the menorah. The priests, in turn, enlightened the Israelites, who, in turn, were taught to enlighten the entire world, and serve "as a light to the nations" (Isaiah 42:6 NASB). In the Gospel of John, Jesus said he had a similar mission. He said, "I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life" (John 8:12 KJV).

With its central stem and upwardly curved branches, a menorah closely resembles a tree, a similarity that may be more than coincidental. Prominent American Rabbi, Avi Weiss (born 1944) has commented on this resemblance: "The menorah brings us back to the creation story … In the center of the Garden of Eden were the tree of knowledge and tree of life. The menorah looks like a tree. It is adorned with flowers, knobs and cups. The flowers represent the buds that spring forth fruit; the knobs are shaped like a round fruit; and the cups are

symbolic of vessels into which nectar is poured. (Menahot28a) As Eden was a society of peace, so the menorah sets the tone for what hopefully would be an experience of inner peace as we serve God in the sanctuary. Its lighting accentuates the powerful beauty of the tree"[36].

Trees are central to many key narratives of the Judeo-Christian faith. For instance, after the biblical flood Noah sent out a dove from the ark to see if dry land had emerged from the floodwaters. The dove returned with an olive branch, now a well-known symbol of peace, reconciliation, and renewal (Genesis 8:6-12). An ancient *Midrash* (מִדְרָשׁ, a form of Judaic biblical exegesis) proposes, "the gates of the Garden of Eden were opened for [Noah's] dove, and it brought [back its branch] from there" (BereishisRabah33:6) [see 37]. On Mount Sinai, God instructed Moses to adorn the original menorah with decorative branches and golden cups shaped like almond flowers, with buds and blossoms (Exodus 25:31-36). Perhaps God wanted the menorah to resemble a tree from Eden, perhaps the tree of life.

Matthew Sleeth is a "Christian environmentalist" and author of *Reforesting Faith: What Trees Teach Us About the Nature of God and His Love for Us*[38]. According to Sleeth, "Trees are mentioned in the Bible more than any living thing other than God and people," and every major biblical character is associated in some way with a tree [39]. Trees appear in the first chapter of Genesis (Genesis 1:11), in the first psalm (Psalm 1:3), in the first chapter of the Gospel of John (John 1:50), and in the last chapter of the New Testament (Revelation 22:14), and everywhere in-between. The book of Proverbs refers to God's laws and commandments as the "tree of life" (Proverbs 3:18). The Apostle Paul wrote that *Gentile* (or non-Jewish) Christians are akin to "wild olive shoots" grafted onto the "natural branches" of the Jewish faith (Romans 11:17-21). During his earthly ministry, Jesus prophesized, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself" (John 12:32-33). He said this to show how he would die, nailed to the wooden cross of Calvary. The menorah, which resembles a tree, became the symbol of Judaism and the cross, which was made of a tree, became the symbol of Christianity.

Archaeologists recently discovered an intriguing composite image as they were surveying and excavating the ruins of the ancient city of Laodicea, near modern Denizli, in southwestern Turkey. Among the ruins of the city's central *agora*, or marketplace, archaeologists found a broken column upon which ancient Laodiceans had etched four religious symbols: 1) a*lulav* (a palm branch); 2) a *shofar* (a ram's horn); 3) a menorah, and 4) a cross (figs. 22-23). The first three motifs often decorate synagogues (see figs. 14, 19). Lulav is associated with *Sukkot*, the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles, and the Shofar is heard during many Jewish commemorations, including *Rosh Hashanah* and *Yom Kippur*. What makes the Laodicean image intriguing is how it combines the menorah and the cross. The cross seems to grow upward from the menorah's central stem, suggesting Christianity has grown from Judaism.

Figure 21.
Ruins of the agora in Laodicea.

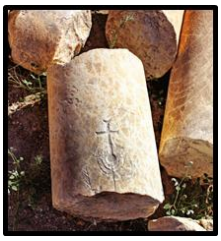

Figure 22.
The broken column.

Figure 23.
Enhanced detail.

After closely examining the broken column, archaeologists concluded the cross was engraved into its surface years after the lulav, shofar, and menorah were engraved [40: 31], and they wondered why. The explanation may lie in the evolution of the first-century Christian church. The first Christians were in fact Jewish (Acts 2:5-41), and, at least initially, early Jewish-Christians continued to meet in synagogues [41: 709-710]. When the original Christian missionaries visited a new city, their practice was to teach the gospel in the local synagogue before evangelizing to Gentile residents (Acts 13:5; 14:1; 17:10). As the number of Gentile conversions grew, worship services moved from the synagogues into *house-churches* and then into independent buildings. The combination of Christian and Jewish symbols might indicate Laodicea's Christian church arose from converts from the city's synagogue.

The Apostle Paul and his associates helped establish the churches in Laodicea and nearby Colossae during Paul's third missionary journey of A.D. 53-57 (Acts 18:23). Around A.D. 60, Paul wrote a letter from Rome to the Laodicean and Colossian Christians (Colossians 4:16), to reiterate the preeminence of the gospel of Christ over human philosophies, to argue against various heretical teachings, and to encourage the fledgling congregations to maintain their doctrinal purity.

Laodicea was in the Roman province of *Phrygia Pacatiana*, along a major overland trade route linking Europe with the Near East. Trade revenue made Laodicea very wealthy, but the city's economy relied entirely

upon maintaining a good relationship with Rome, and with the Roman emperor. Around the year 81, the emperor Domitian (51-96) renewed the Imperial Cult, which identified members of the ruling family with divine authority [see 42]. Domitian assumed the titles "master and god" (*dominusetdeus*), and he implemented a policy of persecution against groups that did not fully participate in his cult. At first, this did not involve the Christians in Laodicea. According to biblical scholar, Mark Fairchild, "As part of the *PaxRomana* [the peace between the various nationalities within the Roman Empire], the staunchly monotheistic Jews in the cities of the Mediterranean world were exempt from the requirements of emperor worship. [Furthermore,] as long as Christianity was considered a sect within Judaism, the Christians in these cities were likewise exempt" [40: 39]. Over time, though, as more Gentiles converted and the percentage of Jewish-Christians decreased, Christians lost their "special status as Jewish monotheists" [43]. The Christian merchants in Laodicea faced a dilemma. They could either acquiesce to the Imperial Cult and preserve their source of income, or defy Domitian and maintain their faith. Apparently, some Laodiceans chose the first option 40: 39].

The Apostle John wrote the book of Revelation during the latter part of Domitian's reign (ca. 90-95), when the churches in Laodicea and surrounding communities were facing intense pressure to follow the demands of emperor worship. John received divine inspiration, hearing "a loud voice like a trumpet," which told him to send messages to the seven churches of Phrygia Pacatiana: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (Revelation 1:10-11). John gave the seven churches spiritual encouragement to remain faithful in the face of persecution and he gave spiritual warnings about the eternal costs of falling away. John had a special message for the church in Laodicea: "These are the words of the Amen … the ruler of God's creation. I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot. I wish you were either one or the other! So, because you are lukewarm—neither hot nor cold—I am about to spit you out of my mouth. You say, 'I am rich; I have acquired wealth and do not need a thing.' But you do not realize that you are wretched, pitiful, poor, blind and naked. I counsel you to buy from me gold refined in the fire, so you can become rich; and white clothes to wear, so you can cover your shameful nakedness; and salve to put on your eyes, so you can see. Those whom I love I rebuke and discipline. So be earnest and repent. Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me. To the one who is victorious, I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne" (Revelation 3:14-21).

The religious zeal of the Laodicean church had become "lukewarm," seemingly because of "the deceitfulness of wealth" and the desire for "treasures on earth" (Mark 4:19; Matthew 6:19). John's prophesy called on the Laodiceans to repent and seek "treasures in heaven," to seek divine gold and the white robes of angels (Acts 1:9-11; Revelation 7:9). Christ was still knocking on their door beckoning the Laodiceans to join him at the throne of God following the resurrection. Later, John described the coming judgment day: "I saw a great white throne and him who was seated on it. … And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened [including] the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books. … Anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:11-15).

Figure 24.
Ruins of a baptistery,
Laodicean church, ca. 350.

Figure 25.

Through compromise, the Christians of Phrygia Pacatiana survived Rome's Imperial Cult. They placated the Roman emperor by conceptualizing a distinction or dividing line separating religion and politics, and looked upon the cult of the emperor as nothing more than a form of political honor [see 44]. Perhaps they thought they were following Jesus' directive, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and [give] to God what is God's" (Mark 12:17). Indeed, the church flourished in Laodicea, particularly after the Roman emperor Constantine expressed his approval of Christianity [45]. Archaeologists have uncovered approximately twenty house churches, chapels, and church buildings in the city's ruins. The largest, dating from the beginning of the fourth century, covered an entire city block (45 x 42 meters), and contained a cross-shaped baptistery with a 2-meter-wide pool. The Apostle Paul wrote that Christians are "buried with [Christ] through baptism into death in

order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life" (Romans 6:4). Fittingly, the baptistery's walls were covered with engraved crosses, symbols of Christ's death and the Christian faith (fig. 25).

III. CONCLUSION

From beginning to end, the biblical Scriptures offer responses to history's great questions: How should we live? What happens when we die? Is there life after death? The Hebrew Scriptures begin with a description of God's creation of humankind in the Garden of Eden and provide a reason for why men and women die (Genesis 1-3). The New Testament Scriptures end with a splendid vision of "a new heaven and new earth" (Revelation 21:1), a beautiful eternal home that awaits after death and the resurrection, when Eden is restored. Artistic symbols are useful for conveying the essential meanings of complex religious concepts and doctrine. This essay has only briefly touched on a few creative symbols: the dance of death, the tree of life, the Jewish menorah, and the Christian cross. Still, even such a limited sampling helps explain the Judeo-Christian faith and humanity's connection with the divine.

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