

Death as Sleep: The (Mis)use of a Biblical Metaphor¹

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There have been in Christianity three major views on the so-called state of the dead: the traditional view according to which the soul is immortal and leaves the body at death to receive its reward either in heaven or in hell; the annihilationist view that soul and body are inseparable and that at death both are extinguished; and the intermediate view known as soul sleep, whereby the soul remains dormant in a state of unconsciousness until the resurrection.² While the first view is currently held by most Christians, whether Catholic or Protestant, and the second is linked to the name of Charles Taze Russell and his followers,³ the third view is often associated, both in scholarly and popular literature, with the SDA Church.⁴ This is

¹ This paper was first presented at the Third International Bible Conference, held in Jerusalem in June 11-18, 2012, and organized by the Biblical Research Institute and the Adventist Theological Society. A shortened and edited version was published with the original title (“Death as Sleep: A Theological Metaphor?”) at *Reflections, The BRI Newsletter*, 48 (2014): 1-6.

² E.g., Millard J. Erickson, *Introducing Christian Doctrine* (2d ed.; ed. L. Arnold Hustad; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001), 371-382.

³ It is well known that Charles Taze Russell came to this understanding in the 1870s under the influence of George Storrs’s publications and especially the sermons of Jonas Wendell, an Advent Christian (not a SDA) preacher who was a remnant of the Millerite movement. On this see Frederic Zydek, *Charles Taze Russell: His Life and Times. The Man, the Millennium, and the Message* (2d ed.; N.p.: Winthrop, 2010), 28-29, 33, 42.

⁴ For William J. Whalen, the SDAs believe “man is mortal. Man does not have a soul; he is a soul. At death the soul enters a state of deep sleep or unconsciousness until the Second Coming, when those who have accepted Christ as their Savior will receive

PAROSCHI: DEATH AS SLEEP

rather surprising as this is not really what we believe, and we ourselves prefer to identify our position as conditional immortality, or simply conditionalism.⁵ Yet, the idea that we accept a kind of soul-hibernation concept between death and resurrection should not be so quickly dismissed as a gross misrepresentation of the facts.⁶ Instead, since death as sleep has

immortality. The wicked are resurrected one thousand years later at the close of the millennial reign of Christ and annihilated by fire together with Satan” (*Separated Brethren: A Review of Protestant, Anglican, Eastern Orthodox, and Other Religions in the United States* [rev. ed.; Huntington: Our Sunday Visitor, 2002], 141). Teresa & Arthur Beem refer to soul sleep as “the SDA doctrine that both body and soul sleep in the grave until Christ’s second coming (*It’s Okay Not to Be a Seventh-day Adventist: The Untold History of the Doctrine that Attempts to Repair the Temple Veil* [North Charleston, SC: BookSurge, 2008], 125). Similarly, Jerome J. McGann: “According to Adventist doctrine of soul sleep. . . death initiates the period during which the soul is placed in a state of ‘sleeping’ or suspension” (“The Religious Poetry of Christina Rossetti,” in *Canons*, ed. Robert von Hallberg [Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1984], 269). See also William C. Irvine, *Heresies Exposed* (4th ed.; Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1955), 162; Martin Gardner, *Urantia: The Great Cult Mystery* (Amherst, MA: Prometheus, 1995), 28, 232, 246; Paul K. Conkin, *American Originals: Homemade Varieties of Christianity* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), 61, 115, 117; Ronald Lawson, “The Persistence of Apocalypticism within a Denominationalizing Sect: The Apocalyptic Fringe Groups of Seventh-day Adventism,” in *Millennium, Messiahs, and Mayhem: Contemporary Apocalyptic Movements*, ed. Thomas Robbins & Susan J. Palmer (New York, NY: Routledge, 1997), 224; H. Hayne House, *Charts of Cults, Sects, and Religious Movements* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2000), 272; Harold Bloom, *Genius: A Mosaic of One Hundred Exemplary Creative Minds* (New York: Warner Books, 2002), 438; Memory Anderson, *Sacred Dying: Creating Rituals for Embracing the End of Life* (rev. & exp. ed.; New York, NY: Marlowe, 2003), 66-67; Roger E. Olson, *The Westminster Handbook to Evangelical Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2004), 171, 196; Dell deChant, “World Religions Made in the U.S.A.: Apocalyptic Communities—Seventh-day Adventists and Jehovah’s Witnesses,” in *World Religions in America*, ed. Jacob Neusner (4th ed.; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 2009), 239.

⁵ According to the SDA understanding, conditional immortality (or conditionalism) simply means that we do not possess innate, inherent immortality, but receive it only as a gift from God and through the condition of faith in Christ. This has to do with our understanding of the human being as a living soul, and not as possessing a soul as an entity separate from the body.

⁶ It must be acknowledged, however, that some of those who refer to our position as soul sleep also say that we believe in conditional immortality. See, e.g., Gardner, 232; deChant, 239. Clark H. Pinnock, himself a conditionalist, also recognizes that this is the position we hold (“The Conditional View,” in *Four Views on Hell*, ed. William Crockett [Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996], 135-166; esp. 161; cf. in the same book Pinnock’s “Response to William V. Crockett,” 85-86).

always played an important role in our anthropology, we perhaps should inquire whether our own presentation of the facts has not somehow fueled such an unfortunate misunderstanding. This paper is divided into two parts. The first investigates the origin and development of the sleep metaphor in SDA tradition, while the second tries to understand the recurrence and meaning of this metaphor in Scripture itself.

Death as Sleep in Adventism

The SDA Church inherited the belief in conditional immortality from the Millerite movement, particularly George Storrs, one of its most influential leaders in the late summer and early fall of 1844.⁷ It was around 1840 that Storrs, still a Methodist preacher, became convinced that humans are not immortal, but receive immortality only through the condition of faith in Christ at the resurrection. As a corollary, he also believed that the wicked who live and die in their sins will be punished through fire and utterly exterminated, rather than live in suffering forever.⁸ Storrs strongly emphasized that death is total deprivation of life, but most of his arguments are directed against the traditional belief in hell as a place of eternal torment. When he talks about the righteous, he wants to balance his statements in view of the resurrection promise, and he does that by means of the sleep concept. He says, “When men die they ‘sleep in the dust of the earth’ (Dan 12:2). They wake not till Christ returns ‘from heaven;’ or till the last trump.”⁹

As early as 1842, Storrs’ conditionalist ideas were accepted by Calvin French, a Baptist minister who also joined the Millerites. Despite his acceptance of the aberrant view that Christians can become as holy as to be

⁷ See George R. Knight, *Millennial Fever and the End of the World: A Study of Millerite-Adventism* (Boise, ID: Pacific, 1993), 113.

⁸ For a short biography of Storrs and a summary of his arguments, see LeRoy Edwin Froom, *The Conditionalist Faith of Our Fathers: The Conflict of the Ages Over the Nature and Destiny of Man* (2 vols.; Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1965), 2:305-313.

⁹ George Storrs, *Six Sermons* (1885 ed.), 16 (*Sermon 1*, 8). Storrs’ famous *Six Sermons* were first published in 1841, one year before he was converted to Millerism under the ministry of Charles Fitch (Knight, 194). In 1843, the *Six Sermons* were published again as part of the first number of the *Bible Examiner*, a paper edited by Storrs himself and directed to the Millerites (*ibid.*, 196).

PAROSCHI: DEATH AS SLEEP

above sin,¹⁰ French was able to advance the arguments concerning death as an unconscious state. In order to do that, he also appealed—rather extensively—to the biblical metaphors of sleep and rest, arguing that “the righteous and the wicked rest together in the graves in an unconscious state until they hear the voice of the Son of Man and come forth to the resurrection of life or damnation,” and that “they who sleep in Jesus will awake at the first resurrection,” while “the rest of the dead will awake at the second resurrection, and appear before Christ at the judgment.”¹¹ This seems to have been one of the first occurrences among the 1840s Adventists of the expression “sleep in Jesus,”¹² which would become rather popular even among the later SDAs,¹³ especially in obituary notices. Storrs’ biographical sketch published as an introduction to the 1855 edition of his *Six Sermons* so refers to Charles Fitch’s sudden death in October 1844: “He fell asleep in Jesus, in the glorious hope of soon awaking at the voice of the Son of God.”¹⁴ This mention of Fitch, one of the top Millerites, is fitting inasmuch as he became Storrs’ first ministerial convert to the doctrine of conditional immortality within the Adventist ranks, while the other movement leaders strongly rejected it.

With the fragmentation of the Millerite movement after October 22, 1844, several Adventist groups continued to believe in conditionalism and annihilationism;¹⁵ this was the case of Sabbatarian Adventism, to whom the concept of sleep started playing a central role in their understanding of

¹⁰ See Francis D. Nichol, *The Midnight Cry* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1945), 117.

¹¹ Calvin French, *Immortality, the Gift of God through Jesus Christ* (1842), iii.

¹² The expression may have its origin in 1 Thess 4:14 (KJV), but the Greek can hardly be translated that way. For discussion, see Ernest Best, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* (BNTC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1972), 186-194. The expression “those who have fallen asleep in Christ” of 1 Cor 15:18 (cf. 1 Thess 4:16; Rev 14:13) simply refers to “those who were believers when they died” (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* [NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1987], 744).

¹³ In fact, in his 54-page pamphlet, French refers to death as sleep 35 times, fourteen of which in the sentence “sleep in/with Jesus/Christ.” One time he explicitly refers to the “sleep of death” and seven times he uses the expression “sleep in the dust” of Dan 12:2.

¹⁴ Storrs, 5.

¹⁵ According to Knight, conditionalism and annihilationism were actually the main issues of contention among those who became known as the Albany Adventists (283-293). It was through the efforts of one of those groups that the founder of the Jehovah’s Witnesses was converted on the topics.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

death vis-à-vis the resurrection. In their first publication, in 1847, James White refers twice to the “sleeping saints” who will be raised by Jesus Himself at His second coming.¹⁶ Ellen G. White would use this expression at least fifteen times in her own writings. In fact, in the following years, she would make an extensive use of the concept of death as sleep in its various forms. Besides speaking of the “sleeping saints” who will be “kept in safety” until the resurrection morning, when they will be “awakened” by the voice of the Son of God and “called forth” from their graves, she also refers dozens of times to those who are now silently and for a little while sleeping/resting in their graves. She uses the expression even for herself, like in her diary entry for December 26, 1904: “May the Lord spare my life to do this work before I shall rest in the grave, is my prayer.”¹⁷ Two years later she would write in a letter: “I am waiting my summons to give up my work, and rest in the grave.”¹⁸

In a biographical article published in 1876, Mrs. White makes two surprising statements. After reporting a conversation her mother had with another woman about a discourse on the nature of death they had recently heard, she came to her mother and, deeply impressed by the comments, started posing her some questions. At a certain point she asked: “But, mother. . . do you really believe that the soul sleeps in the grave until the resurrection?” A few paragraphs later, when describing the impact this new doctrine had on her, she says: “This new and beautiful faith taught me the reason that inspired writers had dwelt so much upon the resurrection of the body, it was because the entire being was slumbering in the grave.”¹⁹ Both statements are theologically difficult, but it must be borne in mind that the episode took place in 1843, when Mrs. White (still Ellen Harmon) was only sixteen, and that she seems to be reproducing the very language she used at that time. Nowhere else does she speak of the *soul* sleeping, resting, or

¹⁶ James White, *A Word to the Little Flock* (1847), 6, 21. The expression “sleeping saints” seems to have been taken from Matt 27:52.

¹⁷ Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases* (vol. 14 [Nos. 1081-1135]; Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1990), 223.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 262 (Letter 112, 1906).

¹⁹ Ellen G. White, “Mrs. Ellen G. White: Her Life, Christian Experience, and Labors,” *ST*, March 9, 1876 (also in *Testimonies for the Church* [9 vols.; Mountain View, CA: Pacific, 1948], 1:39-40).

PAROSCHI: DEATH AS SLEEP

slumbering in the grave. She knows that there can be only living souls.²⁰ The closest she comes to the idea of a dead soul is when she speaks figuratively of sinners who have not yet accepted Jesus as their Savior. “A soul without Christ,” she says, “is like a body without blood; it is dead. It may have the appearance of spiritual life; it may perform certain ceremonies in religious matters like a machine; but it has no spiritual life.”²¹

In addition to Ellen G. White’s writings, a work that seems to have greatly influenced SDA idiom on the *state* of the dead is D. M. Canright’s *A History of the Doctrine of the Soul*, first published in 1871.²² In this book, the “sleep of the dead” became a doctrine, together with the mortality of the soul and the destruction of the wicked.²³ In fact, Canright refers to the “sleep of the dead” no less than 32 times in his book as a doctrine that was predominant in earliest Christianity and has always had its supporters throughout Christian history, including the Reformers and a number of other writers up to his time. After Canright, it became customary to refer to the sleep of the dead as a doctrine. This was done, for example, by J. N. Andrews, E. J. Waggoner, Uriah Smith, A. T. Jones, and others, besides Canright himself elsewhere.²⁴ The term “conditional immortality” was still used, but according to the *Comprehensive Research Edition of Ellen G. White’s Writings* it became secondary to the “sleep of the death,” and it looks like this is how our doctrine was already known outside our borders

²⁰ “The Lord created man out of the dust of the earth. He made Adam a partaker of His life, His nature. There was breathed into him the breath of the Almighty, and he became a living soul” (Ellen G. White, *Manuscript Releases* [vol. 10 (Nos. 771-850)]; Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1990], 326).

²¹ Ellen G. White, “Connection with Christ,” *R&H*, Nov. 23, 1897.

²² D. M. Canright, *A History of the Doctrine of the Soul* (2d ed.; Battle Creek, MI: SDA Pub. Assoc., 1882). The first edition (1871) was titled *History of the Doctrine of the Immortality of the Soul*.

²³ “The mortality of the soul, the sleep of the dead, and the destruction of the wicked, were doctrines held by all the apostolic fathers, and after them by many of the most eminent of the early fathers” (*ibid.*, iv).

²⁴ J. N. Andrews, *Thoughts for the Candid* (Oakland, CA: Pacific, 1889), 2; E. J. Waggoner, “Spirits in Prison,” *ST*, Feb 11, 1889; Uriah Smith, *Here and Hereafter* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1897), 326; A. T. Jones, “Historical Necessity of the Third’s Angel Message, No. 4,” *ST*, March 23, 1888; D. M. Canright, “A Plain Talk to the Murmurers,” *R&H*, April 12, 1877; *idem*, “To Those in Doubting Castle, No. 1,” *R&H*, Feb. 10, 1885.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

before the turn of the nineteenth century. In his eight-page pamphlet, *Thoughts for the Candid*, published in 1889, Andrews tries to convince his readers that the “sleep of the dead” is not “a gloomy doctrine”—“chilling, repulsive, forbidding”—as it is “often designated.” Rather, he says, it is the belief that impenitent sinners “must suffer to all eternity” that should be so described.²⁵

To outsiders, however, acquainted as they were with a dualistic anthropology, the SDA insistence on the concept of death as sleep was entirely open to misunderstanding. In 1898, when commenting on a note recently published in an evangelical magazine (*Missionary Review*) ascribing a number of distinctive doctrines, including soul-sleeping, to the “Seventh-day Baptists,” Jones explains that the people in question should be SDAs, not Baptists. All the points mentioned in the note had little or nothing to do with the Baptists, but fitted perfectly the SDA doctrinal profile. “The SDAs,” Jones concludes, “could be grateful to the *Missionary Review* for such an advertisement if only we certainly knew what it had said all this about us.”²⁶ In fact, in 1860 R. F. Cottrell reproduced a statement by one of the *Review and Herald* correspondents who accused Sabbatarian Adventists of believing, among other things, that “at death the soul sleeps with the body till the resurrection, and that then the wicked will be burned up both soul and body.”²⁷ Of course, this could be nothing more than an isolated case of misunderstanding, but when five years later the same Cottrell takes pains to explain that “we do not teach that ‘the soul sleeps *with the body* in the grave,’”²⁸ this seems to indicate that for some people this was exactly what we believed. If it were not so, J. N. Loughborough would not have responded to this evangelical preacher either who “informed his congregation that those who believe the soul sleeps till the resurrection teach blasphemous doctrines.”²⁹ Similarly, M. Hull would not have said that “the doctrine of soul-sleeping is thought by some to be a dreadful heresy, but I can find no promise in the Bible to an

²⁵ Andrews, 2-3.

²⁶ A. T. Jones, “Who Are Meant?” *R&H*, Nov. 1, 1898.

²⁷ R. F. Cottrell, “Ignorance and Bigotry,” *R&H*, May 17, 1860.

²⁸ R. F. Cottrell, “A Very Materialistic Christianity,” *R&H*, Nov. 7, 1865.

²⁹ J. N. Loughborough, “Immortality of the Soul,” *R&H*, Feb. 10, 1859.

PAROSCHI: DEATH AS SLEEP

immortal soul.”³⁰ That the “sleep of the soul” was sometimes used for the “sleep of the dead” even among SDAs is clear from Canright’s book mentioned above, where the former and its variations occur with this sense no less than sixteen times.³¹

The point is rather simple: the persistent appeal of our pioneers to the sleep metaphor to describe death, giving this metaphor a doctrinal status, and even referring to it in terms of the sleep of the soul, made us vulnerable, leading many people to think that we believe in an intermediate state in which the souls of the dead remain dormant and unconscious in the grave waiting for the resurrection. It is important to highlight that for non-SDAs the soul-sleep concept could still be understood dualistically in connection with the immortality of the soul, and throughout Christian history there have been several immortalists who believed just that. This was, for example, the case of some early Syrian writers such as Ephrem (or Ephraem),³² John Wyclif,³³ William Tyndale,³⁴ and Martin Luther.³⁵ Many

³⁰ M. Hull, “Them Which Sleep in Jesus Shall God Bring With Him,” *R&H*, Sep. 10, 1861.

³¹ See Canright, *A History of the Doctrine of the Soul*, 132, 148, 150-152, 154-157, 169, 172. See also this comment by A. T. Jones: “That the dead are asleep, and they awake at the sound of the trump of God at the coming of Christ, and come forth at the resurrection of the dead, is the straightforward doctrine of the Bible. And however much men may sneer at it, as ‘soul-sleeping,’ ‘materialism,’ etc., it is the truth of God and of our Lord Jesus Christ” (“The Death of Lazarus: John 11:1-16,” *ST*, July 8, 1886). The same year, the *Golden Gate*, another evangelical periodical, wrote: “Our Adventist friends declare . . . that the soul sleeps after death till the literal resurrection of the body” (see E. J. Waggoner, “Ex-parte Evidence,” *ST*, Aug. 5, 1886).

³² Commenting on Ephrem’s interpretation of Luke 23:43, Sebastian Brock declares: “St. Ephrem is quite clear in his mind that the soul cannot enter Paradise without the body, and so the righteous cannot in fact enter Paradise until the final resurrection, when the body and soul will eventually be reunited; in the meantime the disembodied souls await the resurrection just outside the boundary of Paradise in a state that other Syriac writers describe as ‘the sleep of the soul’” (*St. Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns on Paradise* [Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir, 1997], 131).

³³ “Though he [Wyclif] still believed in the separate existence of the soul, he taught that the state between death and the resurrection is that of sleep” (Froom, 2:59).

³⁴ Norman T. Burns, *Christian Mortalism from Tyndale to Milton* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1972), 23, 31-32, 100, 106-111.

³⁵ On Luther’s teaching on the state of the dead, two things need to be clarified. First, though understanding “the condition between death and the resurrection as a deep and dreamless sleep without consciousness and feeling,” Luther “admittedly shares the dualistic

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Anabaptists and Socinians apparently also subscribed to this view,³⁶ which was also fairly widespread in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.³⁷ Even to this day “soul sleep” is generally defined as “a kind of temporary suspended animation of the soul between the moment of personal death and the time when our bodies will be resurrected.”³⁸ In view of such a scenario, our emphasis on the sleep of the soul was in fact doomed to misapprehension.

The problem, however, is that the improper use of the sleep metaphor was not confined to our pioneers. In several more recent publications by Adventist authors concerning the state of the dead we find statements—even official ones—that could inadvertently be taken as an endorsement of soul-sleep concept as it has traditionally been understood in some dualistic circles. One thinks, for example, of the following paragraph of Carlyle B. Haynes: “Death is really and truly a sleep, a sleep that is deep, that is unconscious, that is unbroken until the awakening at the resurrection. In death,” Haynes continues, “man enters a state of sleep. The language of the Bible makes clear that it is the whole man which sleeps, not merely a part. No intimation is given that man sleeps only as to his body, and that he is wakeful and conscious as to his soul. All that comprises the man sleeps in death.”³⁹ Another example, though more subtle, is found in

definition of death as separation of soul and body; accordingly, he also teaches that the soul enjoy a bodiless existence until the last day,” as Paul Althaus explains (*The Theology of Martin Luther* [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1966], 414). Second, even when affirming the concept of soul-sleep, Luther’s teaching is not consistent. Still according to Althaus, there are exceptions to this rule. “God can also awaken them [the dead] for a time—just as he allows those of us here upon the earth to alternate between waking and sleeping. And the fact that they are asleep does not hinder souls from experiencing visions and from hearing God and the angels speak” (415).

³⁶ Erickson, 378.

³⁷ Christopher Hill, *Milton and the English Revolution* (New York, NY: Viking, 1978), 318-319.

³⁸ R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 1992), 215. Sproul goes on to say: “When our bodies are raised from the dead, the soul is awakened to begin conscious personal continuity in heaven. Though centuries may pass between death and final resurrection, the ‘sleeping’ soul will have no conscious awareness of the passing of time. Our transition from death to heaven will seem to be instantaneous.” Then he adds: “Soul sleep represents a departure from orthodox Christianity” (ibid.).

³⁹ Carlyle B. Haynes, *Life, Death, and Immortality* (Nashville, TN: Southern, 1952), 202.

PAROSCHI: DEATH AS SLEEP

the influential *Questions on Doctrine*: “While asleep in the tomb the child of God knows nothing. Time matters not to him. If he should be there a thousand years, the time would be to him as but a moment.”⁴⁰ In the *SDA Bible Dictionary*, an entire paragraph brings out seven points of comparison between sleep and death in order to demonstrate why one “is a fitting symbol” of the other.⁴¹ There is also the suggestion that soul-sleep is taught by the NT,⁴² or the statement that “death is not complete annihilation—it is only a state of temporary unconsciousness while the person awaits the resurrection. The Bible repeatedly calls this intermediate state a sleep.”⁴³

Perhaps special mention should be made of LeRoy E. Froom’s two-volume classic on the history of conditionalist faith published in 1965, a work that has had in our midst an influence even greater than Canright’s in the nineteenth century, and has been acclaimed as “the most thorough historical, biographical, and bibliographical survey of conditionalism ever published.”⁴⁴ Several times in this work Froom refers to the sleep of the soul as a synonym for the sleep of the dead, even acknowledging that some who held this concept in the past still believed in the separate existence of the soul. This is the case, for example, of Wyclif, Tyndale, and Luther.⁴⁵ Another example is that of Joseph Priestley, an eighteenth-century theologian, philosopher, and scientist—the discoverer of oxygen, reputedly

⁴⁰ *Seventh-day Adventists Answer Questions on Doctrine* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1957), 523.

⁴¹ These are the points: “(1) Sleep is a condition of unconsciousness. . . . (2) In sleep conscious thought is dormant. . . . (3) Sleep brings an end to all the day’s activities. . . . (4) Sleep dissociates us from those who are awake, and from their activities. . . . (5) Normal sleep renders the emotions inactive. . . . (6) In sleep men do not praise God. . . . (7) Sleep is transitory and presupposes an awakening. . . .” (Siegfried H. Horn, ed., *SDA Bible Dictionary* [2d ed.; Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1979], 278).

⁴² In reference to Luther, Niels-Erik A. Andreasen says that “when describing the condition of the soul between death and resurrection, he occasionally accepted the NT picture of soul sleep” (“Death: Origin, Nature, and Final Eradication,” in *Handbook of Seventh-day Adventist Theology*, ed. Raoul Dederen [CRS 12; Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 2000], 339). See, however, n. 35 above.

⁴³ Ministerial Association of the SDA General Conference, *Seventh-day Adventists Believe: An Exposition of the Fundamental Beliefs of the Seventh-day Adventist Church* (2d ed.; Boise, ID: Pacific Press, 2005), 390.

⁴⁴ Edward W. Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of the Doctrine of Final Punishment* (Houston, TX: Providential, 1982), 398.

⁴⁵ See Froom, 2:57-59, 73-79, 93-95.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

next in significance to Isaac Newton's discovery of gravitation. According to Froom, in his *The Theological and Miscellaneous Works*, Priestley writes: "After the long prevalence of the doctrine of the intermediate state, that of the sleep of the soul has of late years been revived, and gains ground not so much from considerations of philosophy as from a closer sense of the Scriptures." Then he adds: "Though we should have a soul, yet while it is in a state of utter insensibility, it is, in fact, as much dead as the body itself while it continues in a state of death."⁴⁶

It would be natural to expect a note of clarification in relation to these and other dualists who embraced the soul-sleep concept, but unfortunately Froom never offers it. No wonder that we have been misunderstood to this day. This is why Anthony A. Hoekema makes an effort to explain that "it is . . . not quite accurate to say, as some do, that the SDAs teach the doctrine of soul-sleep, since this would imply that there is a soul which continues to exist after death, but in an unconscious state. A more precise way of characterizing their teachings on this point," he argues, "is to say that the Adventists teach soul-extinction. For, according to them, soul is simply another name for the entire individual; there is, therefore, no soul that survives after death. After death nothing survives; when man dies he becomes completely nonexistent."⁴⁷ Such a clarification could help us not only in relation to the outsiders but also to make ourselves more careful regarding the use of theological or doctrinal terminology.

Death as Sleep in Scripture

In Scripture sleep is used both literally and metaphorically. When it is used literally, which is the most common usage, it simply denotes the physical act of sleeping as part of human experience (Gen 28:11; Job 33:15; Dan 10:9; Luke 9:32). In its metaphorical sense, sleep may denote spiritual dullness, indolence, or lack of vigilance. In Proverbs laziness, indolence, and sleep are used in a quasi-moral way to depict the negligent person who refuses to acknowledge the reasonable needs of human life (6:9-11; 19:15; 20:13; 24:33-34). In Isaiah (29:10) and frequently in the NT

⁴⁶ See Froom, 2:217-218.

⁴⁷ Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Four Major Cults: Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormonism, Seventh-day Adventism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1963), 136. See also Erickson, 379.

PAROSCHI: DEATH AS SLEEP

(Mark 13:35-36; Rom 13:11; Eph 5:14; 1 Thess 5:6-9) sleep describes a spiritual lethargy that must be thrown away in order to remain awake in this evil world. When it is used in this way, the context is very often eschatological, warning us to be alert to the signs of the times.

Sleep (as well as lying-down and rest) is also used as a metaphor for death.⁴⁸ This is common in the OT (1 Kgs 1:21; Job 7:21; 14:12; Ps 13:3; Jer 51:39, 57; Dan 12:2). The expression “slept [or rested] with his fathers” is a fixed formula in reference to the death of Israel’s and Judah’s kings; it is used 36 times in the books of 1-2 Kings and 2 Chronicles. The metaphor is also found in the NT. When Jesus rose from the dead, we are told that “many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised” (Matt 27:52). After being stoned, Luke records that Stephen knelt down, said his last words, and “fell asleep” (Acts 7:60). By the time of his third missionary journey, Paul says that some of those “more than five hundred” who had seen the resurrected Christ had already “fallen asleep” (1 Cor 15:6). He also refers to those who “have fallen asleep in Christ” (vs. 18), to the resurrection of Christ as the “first fruits of those who have fallen asleep” (vs. 20), and to his hope that not all of them would “fall asleep” before Jesus’ second coming (vs. 51). In 1 Thessalonians, while addressing the situation of the brothers and sisters who had already died, Paul refers to them three times as if they had “fallen asleep” (4:13-15). Other NT references are Acts 13:36, 1 Cor 7:39, 11:30, 1 Thess 5:10, and 2 Pet 3:4.⁴⁹

According to the Gospels Jesus also used this metaphor in two different occasions. The first was in relation to Jairus’ daughter, who had just

⁴⁸ In the OT, when “sleep” is used metaphorically for death, the verb most often represents the Hebrew *šāḱav* (lit. “lie down”; Job 7:21; 14:12; 1 Kgs 1:21; 2:10; 11:21; etc.) or *yāšēn* (Ps 13:3; Jer 51:39, 57); the noun renders *yāšēn* (Dan 12:2). In the NT the verb translates either *kathēudō* (Matt 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52; 1 Thess 5:10) or the passive of *koimaō* (Matt 27:52; John 11:11; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor 15:6, 18, 20; etc.). No noun is used with this meaning; in John 11:13, though referring back to *koimaō* in vs. 11, *koimēsis* means literal sleep. In Christian tradition, however, *koimēsis* would be extensively used for death. The Christian word “cemetery” (*koimētērion*) comes from *koimēsis* and means “place of sleep.”

⁴⁹ Perhaps mention should also be made of Rev 6:11 and 14:13, where the death of God’s faithful people is described as resting (*anapauō*) “for a little while” or “from their labors, for their deeds follow them.” On these passages, see Ranko Stefanovic, *Revelation of Jesus Christ: Commentary on the Book of Revelation* (Berrien Springs, MI: Andrews University Press, 2002), 240-241, 454-455.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

succumbed to her illness and died (Mark 5:35).⁵⁰ Upon His arrival at Jairus' home, Jesus saw the commotion, people weeping and wailing loudly (vs. 38), after which He said: "Why all this commotion and wailing? The child is not dead, but sleeping" (vs. 39). The mourners responded cynically to Jesus and ridiculed Him (vs. 40). They could not make sense of His words, which seemed to imply that the girl was literally sleeping, while they knew that she was dead (vs. 35; cf. Luke 8:53).⁵¹

The second occasion was when Lazarus died. When He was informed that the one He loved was sick (John 11:3), Jesus did not respond immediately. Instead He stayed two more days in the place where He was (vs. 6), time long enough for Lazarus to die. When He finally decided to go to Bethany, He said: "Our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I am going there to awake him" (vs. 11). This confused the disciples, who took Jesus's words at their face value, concluding that sleep would be good for Lazarus (vs. 12), and Jesus would not have to risk His life by going to Judea (cf. vss. 7-8). The evangelist then intervenes and informs the reader that the disciples did not understand Jesus correctly. As in the case of Jairus' daughter, Jesus was not speaking about sleep in its normal sense, but

⁵⁰ The story of Jairus' daughter (Mark 5:21-43) also appears in Matthew (9:18-26) and Luke (8:40-56). Most interpreters think that the earliest account of this story is the one preserved in Mark, and that both Matthew and Luke rewrote the story to fit their particular theological agenda (see John P. Meyer, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus* [3 vols., ABRL; New York, NY: Doubleday, 1994], 2:777-778). Irrespective of the merits of this hypothesis, however, the focus here is not related to who wrote first and who changed it, including their supposed redactional motivations for doing so. And since both Matthew (9:24) and Luke (8:52) agree with Mark (5:39) regarding Jesus's statement on the girl's condition—the three of them say in their own way that the girl was "not dead but sleeping" (*ouk apethanen alla katheudei*)—any account would actually suit our purposes here. Yet, the choice fell to Mark.

⁵¹ Some argue that the girl was not dead but in coma, implying that her salvation was not from death but from premature burial (Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel according to St. Mark: The Greek Text with Introduction, Notes, and Indexes* [London: Macmillan, 1952], 285-286). This interpretation, however, does violence to the story's flow by ignoring the messenger's report in vs. 35, the presence of the mourners in vs. 38, and the mockery in vs. 40, besides the fact that Jesus had not yet seen the girl. In other words, if she was not dead the whole story would not make sense at all (see Werner Kelber, *Mark's Story of Jesus* [Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1979], 32-33). Also, in Luke's account the miracle at Jairus' house is plainly identified as a resurrection (8:55-56), not as a healing. On the possibility that in its earliest form the narrative was a story of healing and not of resurrection, see Meyer, 781-784.

PAROSCHI: DEATH AS SLEEP

figuratively as a reference to death (vs. 13). It was necessary for Him to tell them plainly: “Lazarus is dead” (vs. 14).⁵²

Thus, in both stories Jesus resorted to the sleep metaphor to refer to death, and in both of them He was greatly misunderstood. The misunderstanding, however, was not because the metaphor was a novelty introduced by Him, but because He used it in an unconventional way: not simply to describe death itself, but to deny its irrevocable character. That the metaphor of death as sleep was not alien to Jesus’ contemporaries can be argued not only from its usage in the OT, but also from its recurrence in both Jewish literature⁵³ and Jewish tomb inscriptions in Greek and Latin, as Craig S. Keener has shown.⁵⁴ As a matter of fact, death as sleep was also common in Greco-Roman literature.⁵⁵ Because of their resemblance, Sleep and Death were twin brothers in popular religion.⁵⁶ This unequivocally points to the fact that sleep was (and still is in several modern cultures) a widespread metaphor for death because of their phenomenological resemblance,⁵⁷ that is, death looks like a sleep and is therefore described as such.⁵⁸

Before any theological conclusion be drawn from the presence of this metaphor in Scripture, therefore, it is necessary to acknowledge the simple

⁵² On the historical reliability of the Lazarus’ story, see Graham H. Twelftree, *Jesus, the Miracle Worker: A Historical and Theological Study* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999), 308-310. After a lengthy discussion on the tradition and redaction of the story, Meyer concludes that “the basic idea that Jesus raised Lazarus from the dead does not seem to have been simply created out of thin air by the early church” (831), though his conclusions are not exactly similar to Twelftree’s.

⁵³ 2 Macc 12:45; Sir 30:17; Jub. 23:1; 36:18; 1 En. 89:38; Pss. Sol. 2:31; L.A.B. 3:10; 4 Ezra 7:31-32; 2 Bar 11:4; 21:25; 36:11; T. Mos. 10:14; L.A.E. 48:2; T. Dan 7:1; T. Iss. 7:9; T. Zeb. 10:6; Gen. Rab. 62:2.

⁵⁴ See Craig S. Keener, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary* (2 vols.; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2003), 2:840-841.

⁵⁵ E.g., Sophocles *Oed.* sol. 1578; Callimachus *Epigrams* 11, 18; Plutarch *Apoll.* 12, *Mor.* 107D; Propertius *Eleg.* 2.28.25; Diogenes Laertius 1.86; Ps.-Callisthenes *Alex.* 3.6.

⁵⁶ Homer *Il.* 3.8; 13.231; Statius *Thebaid* 5.197-199; cf. Sophocles *Phil.* 827-829.

⁵⁷ For further references, see Horst Balz, “ὕπνος κτλ.,” *TDNT* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), 8:548-553.

⁵⁸ In philosophy, phenomenon (*phainomenon*) is any object, fact, or occurrence as it is immediately perceived by the senses. It contrasts with what is apprehended by the intellect. The Greek verb *phainesthai* (“to seem/appear”) does not indicate whether the thing perceived is other than what it appears to be.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

fact that the use of sleep in reference to death is not restricted to Judaism and Christianity, and that such a use owes its origin to the phenomenological similarity of both. If the mourners (in Jairus' daughter's story) and the disciples (in Lazarus' story) misunderstood Jesus it was only because in both occasions He used sleep to describe the tragedy of death in light of the approaching miracle, something they had no means to predict or reasons to expect. On a rhetorical level, both statements of Jesus (Mark 5:39; John 11:11) are clear examples of irony, in which what is meant is different from what is said.⁵⁹ That is to say, in no statement is Jesus rejecting the notion of a real death, "but rather. . . superimposing upon it a secondary. . . frame of reference. Death is not final, not ultimate."⁶⁰ There is an interesting rabbinic parallel to this concept in Genesis Rabbah, where Jacob is told, "Thou shalt sleep, but thou shalt not die."⁶¹ The contrast in this passage is clearly between physical death and the resurrection, and it is this contrast that is symbolized in Mark 5:39 and John 11:11.

These are two important points: sleep is not an essential description of death, and on the lips of Jesus it only highlights the reality—and the imminence—of the resurrection (cf. John 11:23-25). This means that it is not appropriate to use sleep to understand the nature of death and by extension the condition in death or the ontological state of the dead. Neither the metaphor itself nor its use by Jesus allows such a procedure. Death is not sleep. One may resemble the other, but they are in fact two different things. Andrew T. Lincoln concurs: the NT use of sleep for death "was not meant to indicate the actual state of those who had died as some sort of unconscious existence but was a metaphor that stressed the temporary and

⁵⁹ "In common parlance, irony is the statement of one thing with the intention of suggesting something else. . . . Ironic incongruity underlines both the teachings of Jesus . . . and His fate. . . . As literature the Scriptures are filled with dramatic irony, in which the reader knows what the characters do not" (Richard N. Soulen, *Handbook of Biblical Criticism* [3d ed.; Atlanta, GA: John Knox, 2001], 88).

⁶⁰ Jerry Camery-Hoggatt, *Irony in Mark's Gospel* (SNTSMS 72; Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 39-40. Commenting on Mark 5:39, William L. Lane declares: "Jesus's statement means that in spite of the girl's real death, she has not been delivered over to the realm of death with all of its consequences" (*The Gospel of Mark* [NICNT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974], 197).

⁶¹ Gen. Rab. 96:60-61.

PAROSCHI: DEATH AS SLEEP

reversible effect of death.”⁶² Similarly, Bruce Reichenbach insists that “the metaphor ‘sleep’ . . . does not describe the ontological state of the dead, but rather refers to the possibility of the deceased: that though they now no longer exist, by the power of God they can be recreated to live again.”⁶³

The biblical description of death is that of termination or annihilation (Job 7:21; 14:12). When the person dies, nothing remains, as the breath of life returns to God and the body decomposes to the basic elements from which it was formed (Ps 146:4; Eccl 12:7; cf. Gen 2:7; Job 33:4; Eccl 9:5-6, 10). As Haynes explains, “the union of two things, earth and breath, served to create a third thing, soul. The continued existence of the soul depended wholly upon the continued union of breath and body. When that union is broken and the breath separates from the body, as it does at death, the soul ceases to exist.”⁶⁴ Samuel Bacchiocchi puts it this way: death is presented in Scripture “as a return to the elements from which man originally was made. . . . [Death is] the termination of one’s life, which results in the decay and decomposition of the body. . . . [It means] the deprivation or cessation of life.”⁶⁵ Even though this cannot be “really and truly” equated with sleep, this metaphor has gained a considerable importance in the SDA understanding of death.⁶⁶ But, even more worrisome are those statements that may sound like an endorsement of the soul-sleep concept, as if death were in fact an intermediate state in which the person lies inactive in the grave until the resurrection morning.⁶⁷

⁶² Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel According to Saint John* (BNTC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 321.

⁶³ Bruce Reichenbach, *Is Man the Phoenix? A Study of Immortality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Christian University Press, 1978), 185.

⁶⁴ Haynes, 54.

⁶⁵ Samuele Bacchiocchi, *Immortality or Resurrection? A Biblical Study on Human Nature and Destiny* (Berrien Springs, MI: Biblical Perspectives, 1997), 138.

⁶⁶ See the following statement: “The condition of sleep, with its apparent unconsciousness well portrays the condition in death. . . . Of all the biblical metaphors for the state of the dead, that of sleep is the most important, enabling us to speak gently and naturally about the dead in a way that does not frighten the survivors. It portrays the experience of dying as sleeping into an unconscious state in which all normal mental functions such as thinking, planning, loving, hoping, and believing cease” (Andreasen, 325). Similarly: “Death is not complete annihilation—it is only a state of temporary unconsciousness while the person awaits the resurrection. The Bible repeatedly calls this intermediate state a sleep” (*Seventh-day Adventists Believe*, 352).

⁶⁷ For examples, see above 9-11.

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

Now, there is no question that there will be a resurrection, as in the case of Jairus' daughter, Lazarus, and several others, besides Christ Himself. Some will resurrect "to everlasting life" and some "to shame and everlasting contempt" (Dan 12:2; cf. John 5:28-29). And the resurrection to everlasting life will be possible precisely because of the resurrection of Christ (1 Cor 15:17-18; 1 Thess 4:14). This is also how the expression "the firstborn from the dead" (Col 1:18; Rev 1:5) or "the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep" (1 Cor 15:20; cf. vs. 23) has traditionally been understood.⁶⁸ To use a classical statement, "the resurrection of Christ is a pledge and proof of the resurrection of His people."⁶⁹ So the biblical teaching is that, though death means complete termination or annihilation, it is not final or definitive, except for what the Bible calls "the second death," which refers to the final extermination of the wicked (Rev 20:11-15; 21:8). For believers, death does not have the last word (1 Cor 15:26, 54-55; cf. Rev 2:11; 20:4-6).

But then comes the paradox: if death means termination, resurrection is much more than an awakening. It truly means recreation. If there is nothing left, there is nothing to be awakened or to come out of the tomb. All aspects of the present life reach their end at death. The memory of the personality and character of the deceased is preserved only in the mind of God.⁷⁰ Sometimes not even the bones are extant. Yet, they will live again (John 5:25, 28; 11:25; Rev 20:6). So in order to be resurrected there has to be a new creation, this time not from dust, but from heaven (cf. 1 Cor 15:47-50). There is no physical link between this life and the new life in the resurrection. "Though they no longer exist, by the power of God they can

⁶⁸ See James D. G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 97-98.

⁶⁹ Cf. Leon Morris, *The Cross in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1965), 258 n. 134.

⁷⁰ Andreasen, 317-318. Cf. Ellen G. White: "Our personal identity is preserved in the resurrection, though not the same particles of matter or material substance as went into the grave.... The spirit, the character of man, is returned to God, there to be preserved. In the resurrection every man will have his own character.... The same form will come forth.... It lives again bearing the same individuality of features.... There is no law of God in nature which shows that God gives back the same identical particles of matter which composed the body before death. God shall give the righteous dead a body that will please Him" (*The SDA Bible Commentary* [7 vols.; rev. ed.; ed. Francis D. Nichol; Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1980], 6:1093).

PAROSCHI: DEATH AS SLEEP

be recreated to live again”⁷¹—a recreation out of nothing, a new life out of our annihilated and crushed life. Thus, the awakening metaphor, also frequently used in the Bible, is simply the counterpart of the sleep metaphor. One is just the logical equivalent of the other.⁷² As sleep does not convey the nature of death, awakening does not express the character of resurrection.

Conclusion

The SDA view on what happens at death has been sometimes misunderstood; first, because the way we ourselves have occasionally used the sleep metaphor to describe death and, second, as a result of the dualistic connotation traditionally associated with soul-sleep. It could be argued that this comes from a reading of Adventist literature unmindful of the larger context of biblical anthropology in which these statements are made. This, however, is no excuse for not making every effort to express our understanding of the subject as clearly and completely as possible. Sleep is not a description of the nature of death. And it could not be different, as death means complete cessation of life with all that it includes. Sleep can be used to portray death only phenomenologically. On the lips of Jesus the metaphor does carry an important meaning, but that is only related to the assurance and immediacy of the resurrection, not to death as such. This raises a further point, and that is whether it is valid to refer to death as an intermediate *state*.⁷³ If death means cessation and resurrection a recreation, is it not misleading to talk about an intermediate *state*? Is there really a *state* of the dead to talk about? Would it not be semantically—and anthropologically—more precise to refer to death as an intermediate or an intervening *period* (of time) rather than a *state*?⁷⁴ By misusing the sleep

⁷¹ Reichenbach, 185.

⁷² “There is harmony and symmetry in the expressions ‘sleeping’ and ‘awakening’ as used in the Bible for going into and coming out of . . . death” (Bacchiocchi, 143).

⁷³ See, e.g., *Seventh-day Adventists Believe*: “Until that day [of the resurrection], death is an unconscious state for all people” (387). This statement appears in our official doctrinal formulation (# 26: “Death and Resurrection”). Similarly: “Since death is a sleep, the dead will remain in a state of unconsciousness in the grave until the resurrection, when the grave . . . gives up its dead” (ibid., 391).

⁷⁴ Though of course we can only talk about the period of death from the perspective of the living, not of the dead (Eccl 9:10), as it happens when we refer to the intermediate state, which always means “of the dead.” From the perspective of the dead nothing exists, not even

JOURNAL OF THE ADVENTIST THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

metaphor we run the risk of failing to do justice to the seriousness of death and of detracting from the true meaning of the resurrection.⁷⁵

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time (cf. Phil 1:23).

⁷⁵ See discussion in Anthony A. Hoekema, *The Bible and the Future* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), 93-94.