



Biblical and Early Jewish Cosmology

Author: Ran F. Afek

Published: 17th September 2026

Ran F. Afek. 2026. "Biblical and Early Jewish Cosmology." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 17 September 2026. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/ancient-cosmology

Introduction

Ancient cosmology underpinning much influential biblical, early Jewish, and early Christian thought can be understood through a heuristic framework of four distinct time-space dimensions: cosmogony, history, afterlife, and eschatology. While scholars often conflate afterlife and eschatology under the broader category of apocalyptic thought, they nevertheless serve different functions. Afterlife concerns the posthumous fate of the individual whereas eschatology addresses the culmination of collective human history and the transformation of the cosmic order. Such cosmological conceptions can be seen across the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (hereafter, the Hebrew Bible), 1 Enoch, and Jubilees, demonstrating that early Jewish traditions maintained a consistent distinction between these periods. In the Hebrew Bible, afterlife is portrayed as a bleak descent to Sheol with no moral judgement while eschatology appears only in fragmented prophetic visions. First Enoch and Jubilees elaborate on eschatological expectations, including resurrection and global judgement, yet retain the biblical understanding that the righteous ultimately inherit a renewed earth rather than ascending to a heavenly afterlife. This framework illuminates the evolution of Jewish cosmological thought and clarifies the conceptual boundaries between individual and collective destinies. Such ideas have not only been influential in varied Jewish and Christian understandings of biblical texts but also in the development of Islamic cosmological thought.

The Four Time-space Dimensions of the Cosmos

'Afterlife' and 'eschatology' are heuristic terms that represent two distinct periods underpinning early Jewish thinking about cosmology and the ways in which biblical and related texts were understood from the ancient world onward. While some scholars tend to subsume both under the broader category of apocalyptic thought, there are conceptual and functional differences between them. Both notions address realities beyond ordinary human experience and are typically positioned at the 'end' of life; however, they differ in scope and orientation. 'Afterlife' refers to the posthumous fate of the individual and its transition to the realm of the dead whereas 'eschatology' denotes the culmination of collective human history and the transformation into a new cosmic or moral order. On this basis, cosmology in ancient Israelite thought may be heuristically divided further into four time-space dimensions: cosmogony (the origin of the world), history (the linear, sequential time in everyday life), afterlife (the individual's post-mortem fate), and

eschatology (the ultimate destiny of the world or humanity). Within this framework, the concept of apocalypse functions as a mode of revelation, unveiling what is to come beyond the limits of present reality.

Cosmogony

If cosmology can be divided into four temporal phases, the first is the creation of the world, commonly referred to as 'cosmogony.' This period is typically understood as a mythical time, beginning with the initial act of creation or the first encounter with the originating cosmic forces and extending until the emergence of humankind. In many ancient traditions, such as those of Greek mythology, Ancient Egypt, and Mesopotamia, this era encompasses narratives about the creation of the cosmos, the birth and conflicts of the gods, and the formation of the earth. These stories often culminate in primordial divine wars, followed by the appearance of heroic figures who serve as bridges between divine and human realms, and finally the settlement of humanity on earth. This cosmogonic phase also establishes the foundational relationship between human beings, the divine, and the cosmos. At its core lies the question of moral order: What is expected of humanity? What constitutes right and wrong? And critically; How, when, and by whom is morality enforced or rewarded? In ancient myths, the mechanisms of moral consequence vary widely. Punishment or reward may come through natural forces, divine beings, karma, fate, fortune, or even human authorities. In some traditions, there may be no clear system of moral enforcement at all, emphasising the unpredictability or indifference of the universe.

History

The second phase in the cosmological framework may be termed 'history.' This period encompasses the unfolding story of human existence on earth, beginning with the first emergence of humanity and continuing through to its unforeseen end. Unlike the mythical cosmogonic time, which is characterised by divine origins and supernatural events, historical time is lived, recorded, and interpreted as part of the human experience, though it often remains under the shadow of divine oversight.

History, in this context, is not merely a chronology of events, but a narrative space in which human behaviour is shaped, judged, and guided in accordance with cosmic and divine principles. Many historical accounts, especially within religious traditions, serve to demonstrate, explain, direct, and refine human behaviour in light of a perceived cosmological justice system, a framework through which the divine will is enacted in human affairs. For example, in the Hebrew Bible, historical narrative is often employed to illustrate divine reward and punishment. God is depicted as actively intervening in the lives of individuals and nations, bestowing prosperity, longevity, and enduring dynasties upon the righteous while delivering death, destruction, and the erasure of lineage upon the wicked (Collins 2002, 861). Verses such as Genesis 8:21-22, 9:11, 12:7, and 13:16 reflect this theological understanding, emphasising a direct correlation between moral conduct and divine response. In this way, historical time becomes a moral stage, a temporal expanse where human actions are not only lived but evaluated in light of a broader cosmic order.

Afterlife

The third temporal division in cosmological time is the 'afterlife,' a period concerned with the fate of the human being after death. This phase does not unfold in ordinary, historical times but in a metaphysical realm beyond the living world. It addresses what happens to the remains or essence of a person once life

on earth has ended. In contemporary Western traditions, the afterlife is typically conceptualised as a journey of the soul which undergoes judgement and is then assigned to heaven or hell based on moral merit. However, this is a development in the evolution of religious thought. In ancient belief systems, including those of Mesopotamia, Greek mythology, and the Hebrew Bible, the afterlife was portrayed quite differently.

Upon death, a shadowy representation of the person descended to a dark realm located beneath the earth. This place was known as 'Sheol' in the Hebrew Bible, 'Hades' in Greek tradition, or 'Kurnugia' in Mesopotamian mythology. In these ancient conceptions, the afterlife was not a moral arena. There was no divine judgement, no reward for righteousness, and no punishment for sin. Rather, all the dead, regardless of their earthly deeds, shared the same fate: a gloomy, eternal existence in the underworld (Collins 2002, 855–57; Segal 2004, 205). This period emphasised the inevitability and equality of death. Thus, the afterlife in this cosmological framework marks a mystical transition from human history to a state of cosmic stillness, characterised by absence rather than activity and by fate rather than justice.

One of the earliest written prototypes of the modern Western conception of the afterlife appears in the Myth of Er, found in Plato's *Republic* (10.614–621). This myth presents several elements that would later become the common Western afterlife. According to the story, when a person dies, the soul separates from the body and travels to a place of judgement, where it is evaluated based on the moral actions of the individual during life. The outcome of this judgement determines the soul's destiny: the righteous are sent to a realm of joy, pleasure, and harmony among other virtuous souls while the wicked are condemned to a place of suffering and torment.

In many later religious traditions, such rewards and punishments are portrayed as eternal. However, in Plato's account, the soul's sentence is limited in duration. Once the allotted time has passed, the soul's memory is erased, and it is reincarnated into a new earthly existence, continuing the cycle of life and death. According to Alan F. Segal, Plato's vision of the afterlife profoundly influenced Jewish thought in subsequent centuries (Segal 2004, 204). This raises a key historical and theological question: When and where did Platonic eschatological ideas begin to take root in Jewish tradition?

Eschatology

The final stage in the cosmological framework is 'eschatology.' The term derives from the Ancient Greek word *eschaton*, meaning 'the last,' and refers to the end of time, the culmination of history, and the destruction or transformation of the world as we currently know it. Eschatology typically unfolds in a structured narrative format. It begins with a period of global crisis, often involving moral collapse, natural disasters, or war, followed by the day of judgement. At this point, fundamental changes occur in the nature of human existence: a great many of the living will die and some of the dead are resurrected. The righteous are granted eternal life or a prolonged peaceful existence while the wicked are either condemned to eternal punishment or simply remain dead, denied the blessings of the new world.

Yet eschatology is not only about the sorting of souls or the redistribution of life and death. It often involves a cosmic dimension, with supernatural conflicts and cataclysmic events shaping the end of days. A central motif in many eschatological traditions is a cosmic war between the forces of good and evil in which both celestial beings (such as angels or demons) and human participants play significant roles. In addition, natural cataclysms, earthquakes, plagues, floods, and signs in the heavens often accompany this

final phase. These events herald the arrival of a Messiah, redeemer, or divine judge whose appearance marks the turning point toward restoration, salvation, or renewal. The eschatological period is thus filled with wondrous and terrifying phenomena, which, in the context of ordinary times, would appear catastrophic, unnatural, or miraculous. In sum, eschatology represents the mystical climax of cosmological time, a vision of ultimate justice, cosmic renewal, and the final reconciliation (or separation) of divine and human destinies.

Unlike the afterlife, eschatology is not a prevalent narrative in the ancient world. While ancient mythologies such as those of Mesopotamia (Eliade 1978, 56-84), Egypt (Collins 2002, 85-113), Greece (Collins 2002, 247-301), and even Plato's philosophical writings offer elaborate accounts of cosmogony and the afterlife, they generally do not present a vision of a definitive end to humanity or the cosmos. These traditions focus on the origin of the world, divine hierarchies, and the fate of individuals but lack a fully developed eschatological framework involving cosmic finality, resurrection, or ultimate moral reckoning on a global scale. The idea of a comprehensive end to the world, involving final judgement, the destruction of evil, and the renewal of creation appears to have been first introduced into Western thought through Zoroastrianism (Newsom 2016, ix-x).

One of the earliest prototypes of eschatological thought is found in early Zoroastrianism. In its cosmological framework, the universe is shaped by a dualistic struggle between two opposing divine forces: Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda), the god of light, truth, and goodness, and Ahriman (Angra Mainyu), the embodiment of darkness, deception, and evil. These two forces have been locked in a cosmic battle for dominion over the world throughout all of history. Zoroastrian Eschatology envisions that, in the final stage of this struggle, a cataclysmic war will erupt. Ohrmazd, aided by other divine beings and a righteous portion of humanity, will ultimately triumph. This victory will usher in a universal day of judgement, in which both the living and the dead will be judged. The process will involve the death of many of the living, the resurrection of select souls, and the final elimination of evil. Following this divine reckoning, the world will be renewed and perfected. All remnants of evil will be destroyed and a new cosmic order will emerge, one in which sickness, death, and human suffering no longer exist (Shaked 2016, 1522-34). This vision of an ultimate purification and the transformation of the cosmos is among the earliest known fully articulated eschatological systems, and it had a profound influence on later apocalyptic traditions in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Cosmological Time

In summary, cosmological time can be divided into four main periods: cosmogony, history, afterlife, and eschatology. Not all religions or belief systems incorporate all four, but when they do, each period serves a distinct conceptual and theological function. Among them, eschatology can be clearly distinguished from the afterlife, despite their similarities.

First, eschatology concerns global events that affect all of humanity, rather than the fate of a single individual following death, as in the afterlife. Second, eschatology involves both mass death and resurrection; many of the living perish while some or all of the dead are brought back to life. Third, whereas the afterlife is often envisioned as a continuous mystical realm that runs parallel to the historical world, eschatology marks a rupture, a series of unprecedented cosmic events that bring historical time to an end. Fourth, the location and scope of these periods differ. The afterlife occurs within the realm of the dead, often imagined as a subterranean space. By contrast, eschatology encompasses the entire

cosmos—heaven and earth alike—though its primary transformations impact the world of the living. Finally, the criterion of judgement is central to distinguishing the two. In the afterlife, personal judgement is optional or variable, depending on the belief system. In eschatology, however, global judgement is a defining element, a singular event that triggers the resurrection of the dead and fundamentally alters the structure and laws of the world, once and for all.

As noted, the division of cosmological time into these four distinct periods is not universally accepted. Not all religions recognise all four phases from the outset, and even within a single tradition, theological perspectives on these periods often evolve over time. Moreover, this fourfold framework does not hold uniform significance among scholars. Many treat eschatology, afterlife, and apocalypse as overlapping or synonymous concepts, blurring the boundaries between them (Himmelfarb 2009, 95–97; Collins 2016, 223–74). This conflation may arise from the thematic similarities between these periods (Shaked 2016, 1522–34) or from literary works that merge them into a single apocalyptic vision, such as the depiction of the afterlife within the eschatological narratives of 1 Enoch 22:1–14, Revelation 6:9–11, and the Qur'an 82:1–19. Nonetheless, distinguishing these categories likely held greater significance for the believers themselves, as such distinctions could serve not only as theological guidance but also as a framework for understanding divine order and human destiny. At the same time, these categories remain valuable as an analytical tool for scholars, enabling a clearer examination of the diverse cosmological structures and concepts embedded in philosophical and religious texts.

The Hebrew Bible Cosmology

The Hebrew Bible presents a rich and detailed cosmogony, devotes most of its narrative to the history of the Israelites, offers little to no explicit doctrine of the afterlife, and contains a limited and fragmented eschatology. Its eschatological elements consist of a few discrete and metaphorical visions, appearing primarily in prophetic texts written around the time of the destruction of the First Temple. In these texts, prophets envisage a distant future marked by the restoration of Israel's former glory, but these visions remain largely symbolic rather than constituting a fully developed eschatological system.

Cosmogony

The cosmogony of the Hebrew Bible is primarily found in Genesis 1–3, where the foundational relationship between God, the cosmos, and humankind is established. In Genesis 1, the cosmos is presented as the deliberate creation of God, who is transcendent and sovereign over creation. Humanity is created in God's image and positioned at the centre of creation, charged with dominion over all living beings (Genesis 1:26–31). However, this elevated status is conditional. In Genesis 2–3, humanity is required to obey divine command, and disobedience results in punishment. With the transgression in Eden, humanity becomes both moral and mortal, fashioned from perishable matter (Genesis 3:19, 22). The consequences of disobedience are immediate and enacted within historical time. God issues punishments that affect not only the individual but also their descendants (Genesis 3:16–24). Thus, divine justice in the Hebrew Bible is immanent—that is, taking place during the individual's life and within the human historical continuum rather than in a metaphysical afterlife or futuristic cosmic judgement.

History

These foundational relationships between God, humanity, and the cosmos continue throughout the Hebrew Bible, which is primarily presented as history. Across its narratives, the moral system of divine justice is consistently reinforced. Rewards and punishments are typically delivered within the lifetime of the individual and often extend to their descendants or people. Divine reward is commonly expressed through promises of prosperity, longevity, and a large, enduring dynasty (e.g., Genesis 1:28; 9:1; 12:2; 22:17; 26:24; 28:3, 14). Correspondingly, divine punishment frequently involves death and the termination of one's lineage, a concept referred to as *karet* in Hebrew (e.g., Exodus 17:14; 32:32; Deuteronomy 25:6, 19; Psalm 109:13). According to *HALOT* (Koehler, Baumgartner, and Stamm 1994–2000, s.v. כָּרַת), *karet* means 'to cut off' or 'to exterminate,' implying that divine judgement is enacted either upon the living or those yet to live. This principle is evident in key biblical narratives such as the Flood story, God's covenants with the patriarchs, the Fifth Commandment, the book of Job, Psalm 7, and many others.

Afterlife

In the Hebrew Bible concept of the afterlife, when a person dies, a weak and limited representation of the individual is sent to Sheol; a dark, shadowy realm located beneath the earth, considered the final destination of the dead. In Sheol, the dead exist in a state of eternal forgetfulness and silence (Collins 2002, 856–59). They are cut off from the world of the living and have no active presence or voice. As described in several biblical passages, the dead do not speak, nor can they praise or thank God (cf. Psalm 31:17–18 [Psalm 31:18–19 in the Hebrew version]; 94:17; 115:17; Isaiah 47:5). Even worship and remembrance are impossible in this realm (cf. Psalm 30:9–10; 88:10 [Psalm 88:11 in the Hebrew version]). As John J. Collins notes, Sheol is not a place of judgement or reward, but rather a neutral and lifeless domain, reflecting the limited and shadowy nature of afterlife beliefs in early Israelite religion (Collins 2002, 856–57).

However, there are a few notable exceptions. The first appears early, in Genesis 4:10, where the ground is said to cry out with the blood of Abel after his murder. As a result, God punishes Cain and the ground together, declaring that it will no longer yield its strength to him. While clearly metaphorical, this passage suggests a kind of responsiveness from the realm associated with death. The second example is found in 1 Samuel 28:3–25, where King Saul seeks to consult the dead prophet Samuel through a medium at Endor. The medium describes Samuel as "coming up" from the ground, and Samuel himself rebukes Saul, saying, "Why have you disturbed me by bringing me up?" The narrative uses the verb "to bring up" five times, along with "come up," implying that the dead can be seen and heard only when summoned from the realm below. While the story strongly condemns necromancy, it also clearly presents communication with the dead as possible, though prohibited.

Samuel is presented as one of the most beloved figures of God (cf. Jeremiah 15:1; Psalm 99:6). He was dedicated to God's service even before birth, and the Hebrew Bible records no fault in his life. Like Noah, the patriarchs, Moses, and other righteous heroes of the Hebrew Bible, Samuel did not receive a special place of rest but was said to have gone to Sheol, the common abode of the dead. At best, they are described as being "gathered to their ancestors," a phrase that typically signifies a peaceful death and burial in the family tomb (Collins 2002, 856).

The third and fourth cases involve two stories of individuals who entered God's realm without dying or descending to Sheol first. The first is Enoch. In Genesis 5:3–32, the genealogy from Adam to Noah follows a fixed pattern, listing each patriarch's birth, age at fatherhood, additional children, lifespan, and death.

Unlike the others, Enoch's death is not mentioned; instead, the text states, "Enoch walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him" (Genesis 5:24). In the Hebrew Masoretic Text, this can also be read as "and he was gone" or "and he was no longer found." The second story is more explicit: the prophet Elijah was taken up to heaven by God in a whirlwind, witnessed by his apprentice Elisha. The narrative states, "As they were walking and talking, a chariot of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them, and Elijah ascended in a whirlwind into heaven" (2 Kings 2:11).

The Hebrew Bible presents the afterlife as a dichotomy with two parallel paths. One path leads the dead to Sheol, from which there is no return to life. As Job states, "Those who go down to Sheol do not come up" (Job 7:9). Similarly, the psalmist asks, "Who can live and never see death? Who can escape the power of Sheol?" (Psalm 89:48). The other path involves being taken alive and, in the body, to be with God, likely in his heavenly realm, without dying or experiencing Sheol.

The imagery in Psalms 16, 49, and 73 depicts a world where wrongdoing often goes unpunished. The refuge for the righteous lies in the acknowledgment that all mortals—humans and animals alike—will perish and all the dead will descend to Sheol for eternity. Within these poems, certain verses highlight the special relationship between the righteous and God, giving the former confidence in the face of injustice. These verses, taken out of context, were later used to support alternative cosmologies. For example: "For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your faithful one see the Pit" (Psalm 16:10); "You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me with honour. Whom have I in heaven but you?" (Psalm 73:24–25); and "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me" (Psalm 49:15).

These verses can easily shift in meaning and be applied in later cosmologies of the afterlife, involving heaven and hell, where individuals ascend to live eternally with God rather than descend to Sheol. Collins notes that the poetic language here conveys the idea that the presence of God is an experience that transcends time (Collins 2002, 858).

If there is one book in the Hebrew Bible where a reader might expect to find signs of afterlife rewards, it is the book of Job. However, despite its lengthy and sometimes tedious monologues and dialogues about cosmic justice, neither Job's companions, Job himself, nor even God, when finally revealing his vision of justice, suggest any notion of afterlife reward or punishment.

In conclusion, the Hebrew Bible offers little elaboration on the afterlife. Judgement, reward, and punishment occur during a person's lifetime. The typical reward is a long and prosperous life accompanied by a lasting dynasty, while severe punishment often takes the form of early death and the extinction of the sinner's lineage. The only semblance of an afterlife reward appears in two exceptional cases, where God takes certain individuals alive and in the body to his heavenly realm, with no mention of their death. All others—righteous or wicked, loved or hated—follow the same fate as Samuel: they die and descend to Sheol, a dark and shadowy underworld where they remain as shades or Rephaim for eternity. Does this mean the dead in the Hebrew Bible are left with only the hope of resurrection at the end of days? What does the Hebrew Bible offer regarding eschatology?

Eschatology

Hebrew Bible eschatology is reflected in the writings of prophets from the First Temple period before and

after its destruction. They often describe distant future events, frequently introduced by the phrase “at the end of days.” Most of these prophecies focus on the restoration of Israel and the renewal of its glory following a period of sin and devastation (see Isaiah 11; Jeremiah 19:3-13; Ezekiel 37; Malachi 3-4). Scholars generally agree that only the book of Daniel qualifies as an apocalypse within the Hebrew Bible, where the term ‘apocalypse’ refers to depictions of futuristic times that are not necessarily limited to eschatological themes (Hays 2016, 38-40; Wyse-Rhodes 2016, 62). Other prophetic writings include metaphorical imagery corresponding to some eschatological elements but do not present a fully coherent or comprehensive narrative about the last days.

Among the eschatological events, the resurrection stands out as a miraculous highlight. Collins notes that while Ezekiel 37 and Hosea 6:2 are clearly metaphors within the context of national restoration, they do not prophesy the resurrection of individuals. In contrast, Isaiah 24-27, as interpreted by many scholars, does describe the resurrection of individuals within the framework of national restoration. In Isaiah 25:6-10, Collins points out that God is said to “swallow up death forever” which may imply an immortal state in the future. However, Isaiah 65:20 states, “No more shall there be in it an infant who lives but a few days, or an old person who does not live out a lifetime; for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth, and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.” According to Collins, this suggests that mortality still exists at the end of days, although people will live significantly longer (Collins 2002, 859).

In Daniel 12:1-4, a bodily resurrection is described, followed by a cosmic day of judgement:

But at that time your people shall be delivered, everyone who is found written in the book. Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth [or “in the land of dust,” NRSV] shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. But you, Daniel, keep the words secret and the book sealed until the time of the end.

In this passage, the use of “like” (reflecting the Hebrew letter *kaf* meaning ‘as’ or ‘similar to’) denotes resemblance rather than identity. Thus, the righteous will neither literally become stars nor is there explicit indication that they will ascend to heaven.

When Malachi presents his vision of the distant future, he mentions the coming of a redeemer, a day of judgement, and possible cataclysmic events: “Behold, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a curse” (Malachi 4:5-6, or 3:23-24 in the Hebrew version).

Summary

In conclusion, the Hebrew Bible as a whole presents a clear cosmogony and focuses largely on the history of the people. It portrays an uneventful, rather dull afterlife and shows familiarity with some eschatological ideas, though it does not depict eschatology as a distinct, fully developed period with all its typical components. Moreover, the Hebrew Bible contains no explicit notions of immortality, global reincarnation,

deification, or angelification, and its references to “the end of days” concern events on earth alone. Instead, the Hebrew Bible offers scattered glimpses and brief prophetic visions of the future through selected prophets.

Other Pre-rabbinic Jewish Cosmologies

1 Enoch

Unless otherwise stated, all quotations from 1 Enoch are from the translation of Isaac 1983.

First Enoch is one of the oldest texts outside most canons of the Hebrew Bible and usually recognised as influencing some New Testament texts (cf. Jude 14–15). It weaves together the biblical stories of Enoch, the fallen angels, and the events leading to the Flood into a single narrative. Significant portions of the book are devoted to cosmology, geography, astronomy, and eschatology. Today, it is widely accepted that 1 Enoch influenced, among other texts, the authors of Jubilees and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Like the Hebrew Bible, it is considered a compilation of writings from different periods and authors, including: the Book of the Watchers (chapters 1–36); the Book of the Similitudes (chapters 37–71); the Astronomical Book (chapters 72–82); the Book of Dream Visions (chapters 83–90); the Epistle of Enoch (chapters 91–107); and an Appendix (chapters 105–108). The complete text survives only in the Ethiopic (Ge’ez) version (Isaac 1983, 5–12).

Chapters 1–11 of 1 Enoch (the Book of the Watchers) have been found in fragmentary form among the Dead Sea Scrolls, known as 4Q201 (4QEna ar), 4Q202 (4QEnb ar) and 4Q204 (4QEnc ar). In the first five chapters of the book, Enoch recounts a vision revealed to him by angels, not concerning his own generation but a future one. Notably, 1 Enoch 1:5 describes eschatological events. God and his mighty heavenly army will descend to earth, causing the earth to tremble and bringing destruction by fire, leading to the perish of all upon it. The day of judgement will come for everyone, including the righteous. After this global judgement, the righteous whom God elects will prosper, be blessed, and live in peace without sickness or evil, while the sinners will perish:

He will preserve the elect, and kindness shall be upon them. They shall all belong to God and they shall prosper and be blessed; and the light of God shall shine unto them. Behold, he will arrive with ten million of the holy ones in order to execute judgment upon all. He will destroy the wicked ones and censure all flesh on account of everything that they have done, that which the sinners and the wicked ones committed against him. (1 Enoch 1:8–9)

But to the elect there shall be light, joy, and peace, and they shall inherit the earth. To you, wicked ones, on the contrary, there will be a curse. And then wisdom shall be given to the elect. And they shall all live and not return again to sin either by being wicked or through pride; but those who have wisdom shall be humble and not return again to sin. And they shall not be judged all the days of their lives nor die through plague or wrath, but they shall complete the (designated) number of the days of their life. And peace shall increase their lives and the years of their happiness shall be

multiplied forever in gladness and peace all the days of their life. (1 Enoch 5:7-10)

More eschatological descriptions are found in 1 Enoch 91-92 (the Epistle of Enoch), with fragments preserved in the Dead Sea Scrolls as 4Q212 (4QEng ar). In these chapters, Enoch reveals to Methuselah and his other sons what has been shown to him about the future. The cause of the eschatological events is the accumulation of earthly evil and sin. A great plague will come from heaven, and God will emerge in wrath to bring judgement upon the earth:

All that which is (common) with the heathen shall be surrendered; the towers shall be inflamed with fire, and be removed from the whole earth. They shall be thrown into the judgment of fire, and perish in wrath and in the force of the eternal judgment. Then the righteous one shall arise from his sleep, and the wise one shall arise and he shall be given unto them (the people) and through him the roots of oppression shall be cut off. Sinners shall be destroyed; by the sword they shall be cut off (together with) the blasphemers in every place; and those who design oppression and commit blasphemy shall perish by the knife. (1 Enoch 91:9-11)

In this chapter, the resurrection is mentioned. The righteous shall arise from their sleep, and the wise shall awaken. Earthly judgement will first be carried out by the risen righteous dead, who will engage in battle, later to be joined by celestial angels. Only after this will the era of peace arrive, and sin shall be no more:

Then, after this matter, on the tenth week in the seventh part, there shall be the eternal judgment; and it shall be executed by the angels of the eternal heaven the great (judgment) which emanates from all of the angels. The first heaven shall depart and pass away; a new heaven shall appear; and all the powers of heaven shall shine forever sevenfold. Then after that there shall be many weeks without number forever; it shall be (a time) of goodness and righteousness, and sin shall no more be heard of forever. (1 Enoch 91:15-17)

In the following chapter, Enoch, now referred to as "Enoch the writer," summarises the key points he shared with his sons just one chapter earlier. As in the previous passages, celestial light accompanies the righteous in the eschatological vision:

Let not your spirit be troubled by the times, for the Holy and Great One has designated (specific) days for all things The Righteous One shall awaken from his sleep; he shall arise and walk in the ways of righteousness; and all the way of his conduct shall be in goodness and generosity forever. He will be generous to the Righteous One, and give him eternal uprightness; he will give authority, and judge in kindness and righteousness; and they shall walk in eternal light. Sin and darkness shall perish forever, and shall no more be seen from that day forevermore. (1 Enoch 92:2-5)

In 1 Enoch 104 (the Epistle of Enoch; fragments found in 4Q204 [4QEnc ar] among the Dead Sea Scrolls), Enoch encourages the righteous to remain hopeful about their fate in the eschatological future: "You will

shine like the lights of heaven, and [...] you are about to make a great rejoicing like the angels of heaven [...] for you are to be partners with the good-hearted people of heaven" (1 Enoch 104:2, 4, 6). All these texts correspond closely with the eschatological vision found in Daniel:

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt. Those who are wise shall shine like the brightness of the sky, and those who lead many to righteousness, like the stars forever and ever. (Daniel 12:2-3)

In these passages, Enoch and Daniel share notable eschatological similarities. First, the term 'wise' is added as a supplement to the more commonly used 'righteous.' Second, both the righteous and the wise receive a celestial shining, likely symbolising their closeness or special connection to the divine. This effect is similar to the shining of Moses in Exodus 34:29-30. However, there is no textual evidence suggesting that this shining, or any other attribute, would enable the resurrected righteous and wise, who are destined to join celestial beings in battling living sinners and executing final judgement, to eventually leave the purified earth and ascend spiritually to heaven forever, as some interpretations based on Daniel 12:2-3 propose (Collins 2002, 861; Segal [2004, 265] claims the same based on Daniel 12:2-3 alone, while Perkins [1984, 44] does not share this notion). Instead, these texts seem to uphold the basic Hebrew Bible principle expressed in Psalm 115:16, that "The heavens are the Lord's heavens, but the earth he has given to human beings," implying that even in eschatology, the earth remains humanity's eternal domain.

The afterlife in 1 Enoch is set in a distinct time and place separate from eschatology. In chapter 22 of the Book of the Watchers (found in Dead Sea Scroll fragments 4Q206 1 xxii, 4Q205 1 xi, and 4Q205 [4QEnd ar / 4QEnochd ar]), as part of Enoch's angelic-guided tour of the cosmos (1 Enoch 14-36), he is taken to the western side of earth to the mountain of the dead. There, Enoch sees the storage of the souls of all who have died. These souls are kept until the final day of judgement during eschatology: "They prepared these places in order to put them (i.e., the souls of the people) there until the day of their judgment and the appointed time of the great judgment upon them" (1 Enoch 22:4) (Perkins 1984, 24). The habitat of the dead is divided into four different beautiful yet deep, dark corners of the mountain. Enoch does not understand why the souls of the dead are separated in this way, which is understandable given that in the Hebrew Bible afterlife, all the dead share the same place and fate in Sheol.

Refael, the escorting angel, explains to Enoch the reason for the four separate pits for the dead. These divisions correspond roughly to the level of wickedness of the souls in their earthly lives. The righteous souls have a pit separated from the others by a spring of light. Another quarter is reserved for Abel and his descendants, whose cries still reach heaven. A third pit holds the sinners whose judgement was not carried out during their lifetime. They suffer great pain until the great day of judgement. The fourth corner is for others, not specifically categorised. Refael also describes the fate of these souls at the eschatological judgement. On the great day, the righteous souls will rise, while some sinners' souls will die. Others, however, will neither die nor rise but will continue to suffer eternal punishment in their assigned quarters (compare the translation of Isaac 1983, 24-25 to that of Ratzon 2012, 88-95).

Unlike the book of Daniel, in Enochian eschatology only the souls of the righteous will rise. Some of the souls of the wicked will perish while others will remain forever in their pits, enduring plague and pain. The text does not specify where or how the righteous souls will rise, whether in bodily form or as disembodied

spirits, and Enoch's guided tour moves on to the next cosmological vision. Nevertheless, the eschatological texts in 1 Enoch imply that the risen righteous souls will join the living righteous and, together with an army of angels, will fight on the day of judgement to eliminate evil and injustice from the earth. This victory will usher in a peaceful, sinless life on earth, making a bodily resurrection the more likely scenario.

In conclusion, 1 Enoch is likely the earliest Jewish text to elaborate on eschatology in such detail. Enochian eschatology begins with the accumulation of earthly sins, followed by cataclysmic events that signal the descent of a celestial army. This army joins the living and resurrected righteous in a global battle against sinners, evil, and darkness on the great day of judgement. The righteous are then illuminated by celestial light, all sin is eradicated, and the righteous inherit the earth. This ushers in an era of eternal peace, longevity, and the complete absence of sin.

In addition, 1 Enoch is the earliest text to provide insight into the emerging Jewish concept of the afterlife. According to this vision, all souls of the dead are kept in pits within a mountain on the west side of the earth, sorted according to the degree of their sins. For most souls, the main judgement will occur only at the eschatology (more about Sheol is found in 1 Enoch 51:1; 56:8; 63:10; 99:11; 102:5, 11; 103:7). Some souls will die, others will remain in their pits, undergoing everlasting torment, while the righteous will be resurrected.

Jubilees

All quotations from Jubilees are taken from the translation of Wintermute 1985.

Fragments of the book of Jubilees were found at Qumran (e.g., 4Qm16Juba and 4Qm17Jubb). Some scholars argue that the text was composed by the Essene movement before the Qumran sect separated from the mainstream community. Regardless, it is widely agreed that Jubilees influenced other Dead Sea Scrolls writings, particularly the Damascus Document (CD) and the Genesis Apocryphon (1QapGen) (Wintermute 1985, 35-51, 43-44).

The book of Jubilees presents key moments of history from a celestial perspective, as revealed to Moses during his time on Mount Sinai. In the opening section (Jubilees 1:5-28), God briefly informs Moses about the distant future. It foretells that the people of Israel will eventually turn to other gods. When they fail to repent, God will scatter them among foreign nations. Later, upon their repentance, God will rebuild his temple among them and dwell with them forever in peace. This passage is best understood as a vision of future history rather than a description of eschatology or the end of time.

In Jubilees 23:11-31, the narrative incorporates more typical eschatological elements (Kugel 1994), including supernatural cataclysms, a cosmic battle between good and evil, and the establishment of a new world order. After Abraham's death, the world begins to deteriorate. It is a process that continues until the great day of judgement. Life expectancy sharply declines, and people's knowledge fails them. An evil generation arises who commit sins against the land, humanity, and God, forgetting his covenant. The world suffers from widespread affliction and natural disasters such as hail, famine, drought, and plague. People fight one another and, eventually, the righteous battle the wicked in a massive conflict marked by great bloodshed and countless deaths. Foreign nations rise, killing and torturing the people. At this time, a common child will appear as a centenarian. When a new generation begins to follow God's laws, the war between good and evil ensues and is ultimately won by the righteous. The righteous witness their

enemies' judgement and see curses fall upon them. After the day of judgement, the righteous will live for around a thousand years, remaining youthful as children. God will show mercy to hundreds and thousands who love him. They will live in peace and joy forever, with no Satan or evil remaining. Finally, when the righteous die, "their bones will rest in the earth, and their spirits will increase in joy, and they will know that the Lord is the executor of judgment; but he will show mercy to hundreds and thousands, to all who love him" (Jubilees 23:31).

Collins interprets this passage as indicating an ascension of the soul after death (Collins 2002, 861). However, such reading may be somewhat overstated. Within its immediate context, the phrase is more plausibly understood as a contrast between a peaceful death and a cruel one. Jubilees appears to differentiate the joyful and serene death of the righteous at the end of days from the violent, cursed death of the sinner, both in the eschatological age and throughout historical time. This distinction is evident, for example, in God's covenant with Noah following the Flood.

"And no man who eats blood or sheds the blood of man will remain upon the earth; and neither seed nor posterity will remain alive for him under heaven. For they will go down into Sheol, and into the place of judgment they will descend. And into the darkness of the depths they will all be removed with a cruel Death" (Jubilees 7:29). This aligns with Collins's broader argument (Collins 2002, 858-59), in which he discusses the differing fates of the righteous and the wicked in death, highlighting a consistent biblical motif: while the wicked are often met with violent or cursed ends, the righteous are granted peace and dignity in their passing.

The book of Jubilees offers little to no elaboration on what occurs in the afterlife. In this respect, its conception aligns closely with the Hebrew Bible's understanding of death. For instance, Jubilees 4:44 ("My spirit will not dwell upon man forever; for they are flesh, and their days will be one hundred and ten years") closely mirrors Genesis 6:3, which reads "My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years." The only notable change in Jubilees is a slight reduction in the human lifespan, from 120 to 110 years. This continuity suggests that Jubilees maintains the biblical monistic principal. Upon death, the person ceases to exist as a unified self; there is no surviving immaterial soul. Thus, Jubilees implies a view of death as total disintegration (Rosen-Zvi 2012, 17-22; against Barr 1993).

Another example of the continuity between Jubilees and the Hebrew Bible is a shared conception of Sheol. In both traditions, Sheol is depicted as a dark, silent, and inert realm located beneath the earth, a place where nothing happens. As Jubilees 7:29 states: "For they will go down into Sheol, and into the place of judgment they will descend. And into the darkness of the depths, they will all be removed with a cruel death." One might argue that Jubilees introduces a conceptual shift by referring to Sheol as "the place of judgement." However, this does not imply that judgement occurs immediately upon death. Rather, according to Jubilees' narrative, judgement is deferred. When a person dies, their deeds are recorded and preserved by Enoch (cf. Jubilees 4:23-24), but the execution of their sentence, whether reward or punishment, is postponed until the great day of judgement. Consequently, as in the Hebrew Bible, the afterlife in Jubilees remains passive and uneventful; divine justice is ultimately reserved for eschatology, not the intermediate state of the afterlife.

In conclusion, the primary focus of Jubilees is not eschatological but apocalyptic. The book centres on history, revealing to Moses the past, present, and future, while incorporating elements of cosmogony and,

to a lesser extent, eschatology. The afterlife in Jubilees is even more austere and uneventful than in the Hebrew Bible, offering the descent to Sheol without further elaboration. By contrast, its vision of eschatology shares notable similarities with 1 Enoch and, to some degree, with Daniel, particularly in its expectation of the final judgement, cosmic upheaval, and the triumph of righteousness.

Summary

In summary, these pre-Dead Sea Scrolls texts (from the Hebrew Bible, 1 Enoch, and Jubilees) present a relatively consistent cosmological framework. In the afterlife, all humans die, except for Enoch and Elijah, who are taken up to heaven in bodily form while still alive and thus fall outside the standard afterlife narrative. For everyone else, the afterlife is bleak and uneventful, following either a glorious or disgraceful death, depending on one's righteousness in life. The body is buried, and a shadow-like essence descends to Sheol (or a pit), a dark and gloomy realm located at the bottom of the earth or within a mountain. There, the only remaining hope lies in the distant prospect of eschatological intervention. In 1 Enoch, the souls of the righteous are granted slightly more favourable quarters than others, but no soul ascends to heaven for a beatific afterlife. Instead, all await the final and only day of judgement, when their ultimate fate will be determined.

These texts contain some form of eschatology centred around a global day of judgement. In these visions, beings from heaven descend and play a role in the fundamental transformation of the earth. On that day, both the living and the dead receive ultimate justice. Some of the righteous dead may be resurrected, returning to life on earth and joining the living in a renewed world. The primary aim and outcome of eschatology in these texts is the creation of a better world for future generations. A world marked by peace, righteousness, and extended human longevity. However, in eschatology, no individual is granted eternal life; immortality generally remains beyond human reach.

References

Abdel Haleem, M. A. S., trans. 2004. *The Qur'an*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Barr, James. 1993. *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality*. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Charlesworth, James H., ed. 1983–1985. *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*. 2 volumes. New York: Doubleday.

Collins, John J. 2002. "Death and Afterlife." In *The Biblical World*, edited by John Barton, 855–71. London: Routledge.

Collins, John J. 2016. "The Dead Sea Scrolls." In *The Apocalyptic Imagination: An Introduction to Jewish Apocalyptic Literature*, 3rd ed., 223–74. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.

Eliade, Mircea. 1978. *A History of Religious Ideas, Volume 1*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Eliade, Mircea. 1979. *A History of Religious Ideas, Volume 2*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Flusser, David. 1979. *Yahadut u-Mekorot ha-Notsrut: Mehkarim u-Masot [Judaism and the Sources of Christianity: Studies and Essays]*. Jerusalem: Sifriyat Po'alim.

Hays, Christopher. 2016. "'Proto-Apocalyptic' Constellations in the Bible and the Ancient Near East: Revelation, Interpretation, Combat, and Judgment." In *Apocalypses in Context: Apocalyptic Currents through History*, edited by Kelly J. Murphy and Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler, 38–40. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Himmelfarb, Martha. 2009. *The Apocalypse: A Brief History*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Isaac, E. 1983. "1 (Ethiopic Apocalypse of) Enoch: A New Translation and Introduction." In *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 1*, edited by James H. Charlesworth, 5–89. New York: Doubleday.

Koehler, Ludwig, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm. 1994–2000. *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Translated and edited by M. E. J. Richardson. Leiden: Brill.

Kugel, James. 1994. "The Jubilees Apocalypse." *Dead Sea Discoveries* 1 (3): 322–37.

Moazami, Mahnaz, ed. 2016. *Zoroastrianism: A Collection of Articles from the Encyclopaedia Iranica. Volume 2*. New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation.

Newsom, Carol A. 2016. "Foreword." In *Apocalypses in Context: Apocalyptic Currents through History*, edited by Kelly J. Murphy and Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler, ix–xii. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Perkins, Pheme. 1984. *Resurrection: New Testament Witness and Contemporary Reflection*. Garden City, NY: Doubleday.

Ratzon, Eshbal. 2012. *The Conception of the Universe in the Book of Enoch*. PhD dissertation. Tel Aviv University. [Hebrew]

Rosen-Zvi, Ishay. 2012. *Body and Soul in Ancient Judaism*. Tel Aviv: Modan. [Hebrew]

Segal, Alan F. 2004. *Life After Death: A History of the Afterlife in Western Religion*. New York: Doubleday.

Shaked, Shaul. 2016. "Eschatology in Zoroastrianism and Zoroastrian Influence." In *Zoroastrianism: A Collection of Articles from the Encyclopaedia Iranica, Volume 2*, edited by Mahnaz Moazami, 1522–34. New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation.

Stone, Michael E., ed. *Jewish Writings of the Second Temple Period*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984.

Wintermute, O. S. 1985. "Jubilees: A New Translation and Introduction." In *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha, Volume 2*, edited by James H. Charlesworth, 35–142. New York: Doubleday.

Wyse-Rhodes, Jackie. 2016. "Apocalyptic Literature beyond the Biblical Canons: Fallen Angels, Divine Journeys, and the Meaning of Life." In *Apocalypses in Context: Apocalyptic Currents through History*, edited

by Kelly J. Murphy and Justin Jeffcoat Schedtler, 61–86. Minneapolis: Fortress.

Article information

Ran F. Afek. 2026. "Biblical and Early Jewish Cosmology." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.), *Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements*. 17 September 2026. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/ancient-cosmology

Downloaded: 2026-09-17

Provided under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0