

Ancestor worship – is it Biblical?

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Abstract

Ancestor worship is practiced in different forms around the world today, even in societies participating in the modern global economy. Ancestral beliefs are deeply dependent on the premise that the souls of the dead may return to the living and influence their lives; that it is possible and acceptable for the living to communicate with the dead and lastly that the living are able to exert an effect on the destiny of deceased ancestors. The following issues are most relevant to ancestor worship: 1) death and the afterlife, 2) possibility of communication between the living and the dead, and 3) the destiny of believers who die. The article looks at these issues from a Biblical perspective, offers Biblical guidelines in assessing ancestor worship and its cosmology and interprets ancestor worship theologically. The conclusion is that ancestor worship is incompatible with Christian faith.

1. INTRODUCTION

Although ancestor worship is a phenomenon which most people associate with primitive civilizations, it is still prevalent in many countries around the world today, including some who are generally accepted as modern societies and economies. It is practised extensively in Africa, Korea and Japan for example. In each of these countries this phenomenon is very closely linked to the cosmology of the people concerned and has a strong social and ethical function. However, this article departs from the premise that in spite of the socio-cultural significance of these rituals, the rituals themselves are intrinsically religious. This notion was discussed extensively in a previous article (Bae 2004). Therefore, in this article, ancestor worship in a narrow sense refers to the specific actions performed during the rites relating to the propitiation of deceased relatives and/or ministrations to their needs. Ancestor worship here is understood to refer to an attempt to preserve good relations

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with the departed kin.² These actions, on the part of the living who are in a position to render help, try to pacify or oblige the souls of the dead – by offering them what they may need in their new existence (Hwang 1977:343).

An important clarification needs to be made here, that is the distinction between ancestors and the dead. Although at times the line of division between the two may not be so strict,³ it follows logically that the category of “the dead” is larger than that of “the ancestors”. The “dead” is an open category (which includes all people who have died, either recently or long ago), whereas the category of “ancestors” relates to (more narrowly) the founders of a kinship group, of a community and even of a nation.

Some anthropologists and Catholic scholars have asserted that the social and ethical dimensions of the rituals can be separated from the religious connotations attached to ancestor veneration. The reason for this has to do with a specific missionary approach – that of assimilation and accommodation. However, in my view ancestor worship must be seen as a whole and therefore the social functions and ethical motivations intrinsic to these practices cannot be isolated from the religious elements. Consequently, this analysis prefers to understand ancestor rituals intrinsically as a form of worship and thus the term “ancestor worship” is used.

2. THE IDENTITY OF ANCESTORS

In most societies where the belief in ancestors is common, a record of people who have lived and died is kept in the memory of the living members of the community. They have moved into the category of ancestors, or the living dead. The concept of ancestral involvement in everyday life is more than a story or a myth. It is lived by millions in many areas in the world.

The living dead who hold influence over their living descendents is a succinct and common way of defining ancestors. Their identity is further explained as transcendental beings representing the religious, ethical and

² Following a similar line of thought, Helen Hardacre (1992:263) states: “The term ancestor worship designates rites and beliefs concerning deceased kinsmen. Rites of ancestor worship include personal devotions, domestic rites, the ancestral rites of a kinship group such as a lineage, periodic rites on the death day of the deceased and annual rites for the collected ancestors. Generally excluded from the category are rites for the dead having no specific reference to kinsmen, and beliefs about the dead in general that lack any special reference to kinship.”

³ Gluckman (1937:117-136), in his article *Bantu studies*, disagrees with this statement, and shows clear differences between ancestor worship and the cult of the dead. “Ancestors represent positive moral forces who can cause or prevent misfortune and who require that their descendants observe a moral code. The cult of the dead, on the other hand, is not exclusively directed to deceased kinsmen, but to the spirits of the dead in general. Here spirits are prayed to for the achievement of amoral or antisocial ends, whereas ancestors can be petitioned only for ends that are in accord with basic social principles.”

institutional values of society in their community. Their abode and influence range from the physical to the spiritual world.

Thus, the question now arises, what does the Bible teach about death and the afterlife? Are the dead able to communicate with the living? What happens to Christians who die?

3. WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT ANCESTOR WORSHIP AND ITS RITUALS?

There are some common threads in the practices of ancestor worship around the world indicating that ancestor worship is essentially based on the relationship between the living and the dead. In countries such as Korea, Japan and Africa, this belief is intrinsic to the cosmology of the people and in turn, informs their ritual practices. In all three cases, there is the underlying belief that the dead will benefit from the actions of the living descendants. This is essentially a symbiotic relationship, since the living descendants are believed to gain protection and blessings in return for their veneration of the ancestors.

This synergy is also based on the underlying beliefs about death and the afterlife. In all three cases, death is not considered to be a barrier between the living and the dead. In Japanese, Korean and African culture, the dead are believed to interact and communicate with the living members of the family. For example, in African culture, all deceased members of the family are believed to become part of the collective ancestor group and have the ability to influence the lives of their descendants for the better or to the detriment of the family. Interestingly enough, the actual physical location of the ancestors is unspecified. It is not clear whether they are considered to be living under the earth, in the sky, beyond the horizon or in the homestead (Nxumalo 1981:66-67; Amanze 2003:44; Chidester 1992:11; Mbiti 1971:133).

We now have to ask what the Biblical perspective is on these issues. More pertinently:

- What does the Bible say about the relationship between the living and the dead?
- What does the Bible say about death and the afterlife?
- Which passages in the Bible are relevant to dogmatic controversies in these matters?

The answers to these questions will provide a clearer picture of what a Christian's attitude towards ancestors ought to be.

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The fundamental point of departure of this study is *sola Scriptura*. Therefore, the perspective espoused by the Bible should fundamentally determine the Christian answer to ancestor worship. In this article, I will endeavour to identify and interpret scriptural evidence that may help us to formulate such answers.

3.1 The living and the dead

The most prominent issue to discuss in the light of the Scriptures is the relationship between the living and the dead. As said before, the relationship between the living and the dead is the cornerstone of ancestor worship. In many countries which practise ancestor worship, notably Japan, Korea and Africa, it is believed that the relationship between the living and the dead is one of inter-dependent synergy.

There is an intimate and interdependent association in which the dead and the living are believed to communicate and interact. The question arises as to what the Bible says about the condition of the dead and the relationship of the living with the dead. Is it possible for the dead to exert an influence on the lives of the living? Is it possible for the living to exert an influence on the salvation of the dead?

3.1.1 Communicating with the dead (spiritism)

Spiritism is founded on the idea that the living can communicate with the souls of the dead by means of mediums (individuals who act as intermediaries between the material and physical world). It is the contention of this study that such practices are neither “spiritual” nor approved of by God. The Bible has a negative view of necromancy or attempts to communicate with the dead. In fact, all contact with the spirit world is expressly forbidden irrespective of the nature of the spirits concerned (Lv 19:26-31; Dt 18:10-11; Job 7:7-10; Is 8:18-20; Lk 16:19-31).

Kim (1999:86; 1996:76) points out that those individuals who practise ancestor worship have an essentially pragmatic belief system which is primarily concerned with ensuring good fortune and avoiding misfortune. Shamanism is inextricably intertwined with the ancestor cult (Eliade 1964:461). Shamans are supposed to be experts in communication with the souls of the dead. They also use divination to ascertain the best ways of doing things as well as the most opportune moment to act. Kim (1999:87) and O’Donovan (1996:242) point out that it is by this means that the Korean and African people attempt to find guidance and solace. What is the Biblical view on divination and conjuring spirits? In the following section we look at a selection of relevant Scriptures.

- **Leviticus 19:26**

Leviticus 19:26 commands: “Do not eat meat with the blood still in it. Do not practise divination or sorcery” (NIV).

This Scripture has particular relevance. Grintz (1972:85) argues that slaughtering practices similar to kosher slaughtering is suggested. Therefore the basic meaning is ritual and sacrificial: draining the blood onto the ground would nourish chthonic deities or spirits. If it was performed as part of a divination ritual, it involved sacrificing the animal on the ground rather than on a stone, draining the blood into a deep trench and allowing the blood to soak in before the meat of the sacrificial beast could be consumed. The significance of this blood rite was that it was believed to draw the spirits to the surface and that it enhanced their powers of foretelling future events.

So Leviticus 19:26 specifically prohibited a chthonic interpretation of kosher slaughtering. The prohibition on divination covers augury and necromancy. Ronald (1980:685) suggests that נחש may denote “augury”, which involves predicting the future by looking at the movement of animals, smoke or metals. An example of this can be found in Genesis 44:2 where the account describes how Joseph used a goblet (גביע) for divination (נחש; Gn 44:25, 15). The other interpretation is that this term may be related to ענן, “cloud”, a word with the same consonants. Hartley (1992:321) argues that if this proves to be correct, it could mean that it includes predicting the future by looking at the movements of the clouds. The other interpretation is that the term is an onomatopoeic word for the sounds which a necromancer makes when he/she is communicating with a spirit.

Kaufmann (1960:21-24, 32-33) states that the Scriptures consistently reject divination because it is founded on the notion that there is an intangible force (fate) which exerts an influence on the destiny of all things. It negates the omnipotence of God as the Sovereign creator. This is evident in Deuteronomy 18:9-12.

Leviticus 19:31 prohibits the Israelites from interacting with אבת, “ghosts”, and ידענים, “departed spirits” for guidance and/or divination. Hartley (1992:321) further asserts that this was necessary since many nations in the ancient Near East sought spiritual guidance from the dead through mediums and spiritists. In Scriptures the word פנה, “turn”, is used to denote turning to God but more often refers to turning to other gods in worship (v 4; Dt 31:18, 20; Hs 3:1). The second term, בקש, “seek”, in a religious context denotes making a significant effort in the worship of God (2 Sm 21:1; Hs 5:6, 15; Zch 8:21-22; but in Is 8:19; 19:3 with אבות and ידענים). In this regard, Wagner (1975:238) states that it is only used to refer to spirits of the dead.

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The exegetical analysis therefore implies that these individuals who approached mediums were seeking divine guidance through contact with dead souls. The Biblical account of Saul's visit to the Witch of Endor is an example of this. On this occasion, he sought out Samuel's dead spirit for guidance. The Bible strongly condemns such practices (1 Samuel 28). Yahweh abhors such practices because it denies Him as the Sovereign Creator and Living God.

One of the major premises underlying the justification of ancestor worship is respect for the elder members of the community and family. Some have used Leviticus 19:26b-32 to justify the veneration of ancestor spirits. It reads: "Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD" (NIV). However, it is important though to note that these texts do not state that the deceased elderly members of the community are included. It refers clearly to the living members of the family. This is particularly important since immediately before Leviticus 19:32 the Bible exhorts Christians not to consult the dead. However, there is nothing inappropriate about a fitting burial to honour those who have died. Note also the admonition of Leviticus 19:31 which states "Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the LORD your God" (NIV).

The Bible expressly forbids consulting mediums or souls of the dead and also forbids certain practices which were associated with the dead. Notably the command in Leviticus 19:28 which warns "Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD" (NIV). This warning relates to the ancient practices of the living who scratched themselves or made markings on their bodies associated with sacrifices to the dead. Gehman (1999:150) thus argues that some of these traditions which were Babylonian (e.g. cutting of the hair and beards as a sign of mourning) were forbidden, although some Jews continued to practise it (cf Jr 16:5f, 41:4).

The Bible expressly forbids any practices which have a remote connection with any form of idolatry. Ancestor worship which has the notion of divine appellation intrinsic to it is therefore clearly forbidden by the Scriptures.

- **Leviticus 20:6, 27**

Hartley (1992:338) argues that Leviticus points out that God turns his back upon any person who זנה אהרי, "prostitutes himself" (cf v 5) by pursuing communication with אבת, "ghosts", and ידענים, "departed spirits" (Lv 19:31). Hartley (1992:340) asserts that the penalty the Scriptures prescribes for such

behaviour is ostracism from the people (Lv 7:21). Furthermore, the Bible prescribes the death penalty for a necromancer and spiritist.

- **Isaiah 8:19**

This text is very clear about God's view on spiritism: "When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living?" (NIV).

Gehman (1999:151) mentions that this text uses the word *darash* in two ways namely, an acceptable and an unacceptable way of asking God for guidance. At Mount Sinai they were formed into a nation with a special relationship with God, their Redeemer. Israel was chosen by the Lord, who said, "... out of all nations you will be my treasured possession" (Ex 19:5). Any "seeking" or "enquiry" by Israel was to be directed to Him alone. This exclusive relationship between God and His people was for the glory of God and the good of Israel.

According to Watts (1985:126) the Scripture is translated as "Seek out the fathers". This is a clear reference to the practices of ancestor worship in which the living believe that the dead ancestors have a bearing on their current earthly existence. This is a clear condemnation of ancestor worship. Watts (1985:126) says that this Scripture also contains a fairly derogatory reference to the practices of necromancy when it describes the diviners/mediums/spiritist who "chirp and mutter" (הַמְצַפְצְפִים וְהַמְהַהֲמִים). This implies a garbled gibberish which the necromancer utters in his/her trancelike state. The text explicitly refers to people who consult the dead and therefore to the belief that the dead have the ability to help the living. This was necessary since the Ancient Near East (including Israel) was drawn to divination as much as any other group of nations in the history of mankind. The context here suggests that Isaiah had to defend his prophetic calling and role against diviners and spiritualists.

Gehman (1999:152) refers to Gesenius who defined a medium as someone with "a familiar spirit". The Hebrew word *ob* denotes in its simplest terms, "a leather bottle" which was typically used for water or wine. It later also denoted a "necromancer, sorcerer, conjurer who professes to call up the dead by means of incantations [magic words] and magic formulas, in order that they may give response as to doubtful or future things." This clearly compares the medium to a leather bottle, filled with a spirit. From the belly of the medium come the gurgling, bubbling sounds of the spirit which possessed him/her.

The Greek word ἐγγαστρίμυθος ("ventriloquist") was used by the Septuagint to translate the Hebrew term אוֹב (Lv 19:31; 1 Sm 28:3-9). Today the term "ventriloquist" denotes a person who has the ability to project his/her voice so that it appears to be coming from another person or puppet.

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However, among the Greeks it denoted someone who had a distinct involvement with spirits. Therefore, Langton (1942:178) argues that in the ancient world a ventriloquist implied a person who was virtually “pregnant” with a god or spirit.

- **Deuteronomy 18:10-14**

Deuteronomy 18:9-14 provides extensive guidelines on God’s view on practices associated with ancestor worship and divination (NIV):

When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving to you, do not learn to imitate the detestable ways of the nations there. Let no-one be found among you who sacrifices his son or daughter in the fire, who practises divination or sorcery, interprets omens, engages in witchcraft or casts spells, or who is a medium of spiritist who consults the dead. Anyone who does these things is detestable to the Lord and because of these detestable practices the Lord your God will drive out those nations before you. You must be blameless before the Lord your God. The nations you will dispossess listen to those who practise sorcery or divination. But as for you, the Lord your God has not permitted you to do so.

The Hebrew word for wizard or spiritist used in this passage, יִדְעָנִי denotes a wise and knowing person who is supposedly familiar with the secrets and mysteries of the unseen world. The King James Version translates this term as “the knowing one”. The female counterpart of the wizard is the witch. Both practise divination by the same means. Gehman (1999:155) points out that the Hebrew word actually denotes a “familiar spirit”. This points to the connection the wizard or spiritist had with the spirit realm (cf Lv 19:3 1; 1 Sm 28:3, 9; Is 8:19). This is not different from the role the shaman plays in primal religions and the role of the priest in ancestor rituals in Japan and Korea.

From the exegetical analysis of these Scriptures it is evident that a variety of terms have been used to denote anyone who has any contact with spirits. Christensen (2001:408) provides a fairly exhaustive analysis of the scope of the practices associated with necromancy to which the prohibition applies. Notably, he mentions that “one who practises divination” (קַסְמִים קְסָמִים) would further include practices such as hepatoscopy (the “art” of reading the liver from a sacrificial animal), belomancy (use of arrows from a quiver), necromancy consulting spirits of the dead), and also false prophecy (Ezk 21: 29; Jr 14:14).

Christensen (2001:408) further points out that the meaning of the term “soothsayer” (מִעֲוִיָּנִי) cannot be delimited with absolute certainty mainly because all interpretations are essentially founded on etymology. To support

this statement, Christensen (2001:408) refers to Ibn Ezra who derived the term from *'anan*, “cloud”, and asserted that it should be understood to denote “those who draw omens from the appearance and movements of clouds” (Tigay 1996:173). Furthermore, the term “omen reader” (מִנְחָשׁ) appears to refer to oleomancy which is essentially divination based on mixing liquids, such as oil and water. This could refer to the manner in which Joseph's silver goblet was used in matters of divination (Gn 44:5). On the other hand, Christensen (2001:408) mentions that a “sorcerer” מְכַשֵּׁף could denote a practitioner of black magic as it is used in Exodus 22:17, where it is described as a capital offence.

Christensen (2001:408) further mentions the phrase חָבַר חָבַר (a “caster of magic spells”) (v 11) as it is used in Psalm 58:5. In this Scripture it is understood to refer to magic of some sort used against venomous snakes. However, Finkelstein (1956:328-31) suggests the meaning “muttering” a spell and compares it to Akkadian *habaru* (“be noisy”). He also refers to “one who asks of a ghost” (שֹׁאֵל אוֹב) as a reference to the practice of necromancy (v 11). Christensen (2001) describes the common interpretation of the term אוֹב as that of a hole in the ground where offerings and requests for information were made to the dead. He mentions that “medium” (יִדְעוֹנִי) may be translated as a “familiar spirit”. He points out that it always appears with the term אוֹב and therefore may simply have an adjectival function to the term שֹׁאֵל אוֹב to describe a spirit or ghost functioning as a medium. This appears to be congruent with the account of King Saul and the “Witch of Endor” in which the ghost of the dead (Samuel) ascended from the depths of the earth and is seen by the medium. Consequently, Christensen (2001:408) argues that the phrase “one who inquires from the dead” (דֹרֵשׁ אֶל-הַמֵּתִים) more than likely means one who performs necromancy by any other means than the two previous terms mentioned (Tigay 1996:173).

As Wright (1953:446) states, every possible term available is used to ensure that the prohibition extended to all practices, customs and persons who had any affiliation with the spirit realm. This ensures that the prohibition is fairly exhaustive.

- **Luke 16:19-31**

Jesus' account of the rich man and Lazarus, recorded in Luke 16, provides further insight into the condition of the dead and what happens after death. O'Donovan (1996:220) points out that this passage clearly indicates that it is impossible for the living to communicate with the dead. Luke 16:25-28 clearly shows that the rich man wanted Lazarus to warn his brothers against making

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the same mistakes he had made. Nolland (1993:831) indicates that the usage of ἐν πᾶσι τούτοις which translates as “besides all this” in this verse appears to be consistent with Lukan usage. It further confirms the fixed determination of the will of God and the topology of Hades which objectifies the will and purpose of God. It is also emphatic that no momentary surge of sympathy can change this will and purpose of God.

Nolland (1993:830) further mentions that only ἐρωτῶ ... ἵνα in verse 26 appears to be Lukan diction. This is translated as “I ask ... that” used in a petitionary manner which indicates that although he acknowledges that his fate is sealed and unchangeable, something may yet be done for those for whom he harbours affection. As Nolland (1993:831) points out, the plea for a personal warning indicates that the rich man is aware of his moral accountability for his own actions and that he realises too late that he could have acted differently.

However, as verses 19-31 shows, this request was not granted. From this account it is evident that there is a clear divide between the righteous and the unrighteous dead and that the dead do not have freedom of movement as suggested by the underlying beliefs of ancestor worship. Clearly then, the dead are not able to exert an influence on the lives of the living. From this passage it is clear that the dead cannot communicate with the living on any matter. The response to the rich man’s request was that his brothers needed to believe what God had said to save themselves from torment. Yamaguchi (1985:46) argues that the belief that the ancestors are able to communicate with the living members of the family is meaningless. Therefore, the Bible does not encourage or support a relationship between the living and the dead. Furthermore, these Scriptures indicate that the fear of the ancestors is unfounded.

3.2 Powers and spirits?

3.2.1 Magical powers

The Biblical perspective on witchcraft is clear and unambiguous. Gehman (2005:159) points out that the Scriptures clearly indicate that any form of witchcraft is strongly condemned by God. In the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 18:9-14 is clear in its admonition to guard against witchcraft and encompasses all known forms of occultist practices with which the Israelites were familiar at the time. The admonition to abstain from all practices related to witchcraft, magic and sorcery is related to the context of God giving Israel the land of Canaan on the condition that Israel would remain unblemished and untainted by false religion and remain loyal to God. The New Testament

continues the condemnation of magic practices as manifestations of rebellion against God and is clear in its rejection of such practices as found in Galatians 5:20; Acts 8:9-24; Revelation 21:8; 22:15; Acts 13:6-12.

3.2.2 Ancestral spirits

Very little reference is made in the Bible to ancestral spirits or ancestor worship, although indirect inferences or suggestions could be teased from the etymology of words, as above, or perhaps from behind or between the lines.

Gehman (1999:178) points out that the righteous dead cannot return and communicate with the living as 2 Samuel 12:23 and Job 19:27 clearly state that when a person dies the relationship between the living and the dead is irrevocably severed. The righteous dead are in the presence of God and therefore cannot be called back to earth. The only Scripture which could possibly suggest that it would be possible for a person to return to communicate with the living is the passage at 1 Samuel 28. He also argues that Mosaic Law equated communication with the dead with a form of idolatry, which is in essence a sin of spiritual prostitution (1999:180).

However, the mere fact that a prohibition on necromancy or communicating with the dead was considered necessary suggests that the phenomenon could be more of a problem and more widespread than described in the Scriptures.

3.2.3 King Saul at Endor (1 Sm 28:3-19)

The encounter between King Saul and the Witch of Endor is often understood to indicate that the living can communicate with the dead. From the foregoing Scriptures it is evident that God condemns any attempt to contact the dead. However, 1 Samuel 28:3-19 appears to suggest that it is possible for the living to contact the dead. This passage is open to numerous interpretations but does not prove conclusively that the dead are able to communicate with the living. Even if Samuel were able to speak with Saul, this was an unusual instance of the special power of God and needs to be examined closely.

3.2.3.1 Context

The incident with King Saul at Endor needs to be understood in the historical context in which it occurred. Fischer (2001:28) points out that before the imminent battle against the Philistines, Saul's loneliness and desperation is evident as recorded in 1 Samuel 28:3-6 and Saul's sense of alienation is reinforced by the recollection of Samuel's death at 1 Samuel 28:3. After Samuel's death, Saul no longer had the advantage of Samuel's prophetic revelations to guide him. As a result, Saul prayed to God but God did not

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speak to him in the conventional ways – that is in his dreams, Urim or prophets. Instead, Saul's questions were met with silence. In desperation, Saul turned to the woman at Endor. Previously, Saul had acted morally by expelling mediums and wizards from the land, but ironically at this point he regresses and seeks a medium's counsel.

Because of his previous actions, Saul disguises himself and seeks the counsel of a necromancer or spiritist who conducts a séance to communicate with the late Samuel. The Scriptures describe Samuel coming out of the ground and speaking with Saul, The late Samuel tells Saul that the next day his sons will be "with" him.

3.2.3.2 יִדְעָנִי and אֹבֹת

When one considers an exegetical analysis of the account it is significant that the Scriptures' description that Samuel appeared to rise from the ground is supported by the Hebrew term for medium (אֹב) which Hoffner (1974:133) relates to the Akkadian "pit" (*ab*) which denotes the ritual hole in the ground where souls of the dead were believed to reside and exit from when they were invoked.

However, Lust (1974:134) argues that אֹב is often used in the plural which etymologically connects the spirits of the deceased ancestors or the instruments of the ancestral ghosts which are used to represent them. Kim (1996b:26) concurs and argues that Lust's proposal appears to be convincing because in some passages these two terms are closely related to the necromancer and souls of the dead (cf Dt 18:10-11; Is 8:19; 19:3). This will be explored in more detail in the next section.

Arnold (2004:201) argues that the use of the word is often linked with the term used to denote "spiritists" (יִדְעָנִים) which suggests the necromantic practices involved in communicating with the dead and by implication the phenomena associated with the ancestor cult in general (cf Milgrom 2000:1768-85; Albright 1990:141-42).

Lewis (1989:114) argues that the terminology used in 1 Samuel 28:8 may indicate that Saul's night visit may have been a military necessity but night time may also have been the preferred time for such séances since the darkness of night was considered to be the most appropriate time to communicate with the dead. Horsnell (1997:45-51) further mentions that Saul's explicit instruction to the woman to "consult a spirit for me" is essentially a *terminus technicus* for divination. Furthermore, the necromantic ritual concerned here is also indicated by the recurring use of words which means to "bring up" (אֶעֱלֶה לְךָ) a spirit. Therefore, the terminology is not peculiar to necromancy alone but extends to all forms of divination.

- **Representative interpretations**

This account of Saul's visit to the woman at Endor sparked controversy among scholars for centuries. Some questions have still not been answered satisfactorily and scholars have not reached consensus on the interpretation of this passage. Did anything or anyone actually appear to Saul? What is the appropriate interpretation of this incident? There are three different interpretations of this scriptural account.

- **Psychological interpretation**

Figart (1970:20) proposes a psychological interpretation and uses ecstasy as the means of producing the illusion of Samuel (cf Fokkelman 1986:606; Figart 1970:20; Erdmann 1960:332). Therefore, according to this interpretation, the medium would have allowed herself to become emotionally involved and psychologically identified with Samuel that the vision was produced. Narcotics may not necessarily have been used here. This is not an uncommon experience of modern day mediums who claim to have had visions of people. Fokkelman (1986:606) on the other hand approaches the text from an ontological perspective and denies the existence of a spiritual world and assumes that Saul saw nothing. This points to the possibility that the medium was just particularly adept at guessing and used her general knowledge and psychological insights to convey Samuel's message.

Gehman (1999:145) points out that the medium herself appeared to be frightened of what she saw (1 Sm 28:12). At the outset, the meeting with Saul appeared to be nothing out of the ordinary and she asked Saul the same questions she would have asked any other person who sought her services. She asked Saul: "Whom shall I bring up for you?" (1 Sm 28:11). This implies that she believed to have power over the dead (Gehman 1999:145). Figart (1970:20) further argues that this is contrary to the plain statement of the text, which when read without presuppositions of a narcotic trance on the part of the woman, resembles a normal conversation between Saul and Samuel.

- **A deliberate deception**

Some scholars (Buswell 1962:310; Davies 1955:186) argue that the work of the medium was a case of "a mere deception". Their argument is based on the fact that the medium of Endor was in fact a law breaker and adept at deception. Since mediums were expelled from the land, she would have had no alternative but to practise deception. Therefore, she was the only one who saw the vision of "Samuel" and Saul saw nothing. To indicate that it was definitely Samuel because it was an old man in a robe could refer to any elderly male. However, Saul immediately decided that this was Samuel.

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The words of Samuel to Saul may be interpreted as generic statements an experienced fortune-teller could use to deceive many people. She may also have used ventriloquism to project her voice to resemble the voice of Samuel. Although the prediction proved to be true this may be ascribed to Saul's emotionally depressed state and because of his emotional state the prophecy's fulfilment was unavoidable (Gehman 1999:144).

Figart (1970:23) points out that the Scriptures do not indicate that the woman reported Samuel's words but that Samuel and Saul communicated without an interloper. Furthermore Figart (1970:23) argues that it would have been difficult to guess the outcome of the battle and the penultimate fate of Saul and his sons.

- **Satanic impersonation**

The third group of scholars (Fischer 2001:35; Gehman 1999:148; Roberts & Donaldson 1963:234) believe that it was not Samuel who appeared to Saul but Satan. Most of the early church fathers believed that this was another manifestation of the battle against demonic powers and that the apparition of Samuel was none other than demonic trickery. Fischer (2001:35) points out that according to Augustine the apparition of Samuel was formed by some phantom or mock apparition from the Devil (*Ad Simplic. ii, 3*, quoted in Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*, vol 3.95.4.2).

This notion was historically taught during the 16th and 17th centuries by the church fathers who believed that by divine ordering Saul saw under the form of Samuel a ghost, an illusion produced by demonic devilish powers" (Erdmann 1960:335). Thus, Luther referred to the appearance of Samuel as "a devil's ghost", and Calvin said it was not the real Samuel but a spectre (awesome looking ghost) (cf Gehman 1999:148).

The Bible indicates that demons do have the ability to assume any form and be visible to people (2 Cor 11:14; Rv 16:13). They therefore also have the ability to assume the form of someone who has died and would therefore be recognisable to the person to whom they are appearing. Although this interpretation of Saul's encounter with the woman of Endor has been endorsed by many scholars there are some illogicalities.

Moreover, Eaton (1995:112) and Klein (1983:269) contended that the spirit of Samuel was clearly not familiar to the woman because she cried out with a loud voice as soon as she recognised the deceased Samuel. In other words, she was afraid of an apparition which she had not anticipated (Keil 1956:262). Pigott (1998:438) argues that the situation was not in her control. Whether or not the woman recognised Saul after the appearance of Samuel is not clear. Fischer (2001:32) and Fokkelman (1986:606) argue that the reason

why the woman was afraid is not so much because of the appearance of the spirit of Samuel but because she recognised Saul as the king who prosecuted mediums. She had not expected him or recognised him and was afraid that he would expel or kill her (Brueggemann 1990:193). It may be that she made the mental connection after she saw Samuel's apparition and then only recognised her visitor as Saul.

Keil and Delitzsch (1963:263) argue that the fact that the medium used the term אֱלֹהִים (28:13) to describe Samuel: "I see a divine being coming up out of the ground" is significant. The term can be translated as a "divine being" or simply a "godlike being". More pertinently, in respect of ancestor worship, the dead are sometimes referred to as "god" in an attempt to denote a form of transcendental character which exists beyond the here and now (Lewis 1989:112-16; Johnston 1994:417).

Arnold (2004:203) points out that אֱלֹהִים may also denote the sense of "ancestral" preternatural being, rather than simply the "shades of the dead". This is even more evident if one relates the Hebrew term for "medium" (אֹב) etymologically to אב ('āb), "father, ancestor" as Lust (1974:135-139) proposes. The parallel use in Isaiah 8 appears to confirm that the use of אֱלֹהִים in such contexts can be understood to denote the ancestral dead, and not simply ghosts or the souls of the dead. Therefore, it stands to reason that it is plausible that it was Samuel and not Satan who appeared. This can be construed to be as a result of God who allowed a special working of His power similar to the fates of Enoch and Elijah who never actually died.

- **Contemporary interpretations**

The more contemporary interpretation is that it was in fact the spirit of Samuel who appeared to Saul. Scriptures clearly state that Samuel appeared to Saul and does not indicate anything to the contrary. Therefore, Fischer (2001:35) concludes that Samuel appeared as an ancestor and therefore follows a literal interpretation of the text. Gehman (1999:145) states that most Biblical scholars since the 18th Century have supported the belief that it was Samuel himself who appeared to Saul. However, there are some scholars who believe that this can occur at any time under normal circumstances and those who are of the opinion that this is only possible by a special working of the power of God.

Some scholars (Anold 2004:201; Fischer 2001:32; Manyeli 1995:108; Robinson 1993a:143; Setiloane 1986:18) believe that necromancy is prevalent today and that some mediums do have the ability to communicate with the dead on behalf of the living. This is clearly the view held by people in

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Africa and elsewhere.⁴ In other words, they believe that the world of the living and the dead are not so far apart and that it is possible for the living to communicate with the dead. Oleka (1998:127) and Gehman (1999: 145) believe that they can appear to the living in dreams and vision or via mediums. On the other hand, some evangelicals (Pigott 1998:438; Eaton 1995:112; Klein 1983:271; Beuken 1978:10) find this difficult to believe because they state that it is not plausible to believe that any medium has the ability to command a righteous spirit to leave their rest and appear before the unrighteous. They contend that mediums who are not complying with God's prohibition on necromancy do not have sovereign power over the lives of the saints. Therefore, Klein suggests that Samuel himself did appear but through the special working of God's power.

There are numerous instances in the Bible which indicates that it is impossible for the dead to communicate with the living. The incident with Saul and the woman of Endor is an exception and the ultimate interpretation must be logical and aligned with the Scriptures as a whole. The fact that Samuel appeared to Saul should be seen as an exceptional manifestation of God's power in which God chose to rouse Samuel for His divine purpose. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this text has been used to substantiate African exegesis. Thus, some scholars consider the deceased Samuel as an ancestor in this text (Arnold 2004:203; Fischer 2001:203; Lust 1974:139).

The pertinent question which needs to be answered now, is what happens to those who die? What implications does death have for non-Christians and Christians?

- **Own interpretation**

It is important to bear in mind that Saul never actually saw Samuel himself but experienced him as it were through the woman's eyes. Pigott (1998:438) rightly points out that the situation was not in medium's control. He argues that God used her séance as a tool to convey a message to Saul. From Saul's perspective and that of his commanders it may have appeared to be Samuel's message of what the future held for Saul but in reality it was God's judgement.

⁴ Fischer (2001:27) commented on this passage in the African perspective which is legitimate because of its animistic background not shaped by Western post-enlightenment rationalism. According to his opinion, that is to say, the belief systems of African societies are comparable to those of ancient Israel and can provide similar insight into texts and practices of the Israelites.

Consequently, one must bear in mind that the woman was used as a vehicle for God's expression as evident from the following points. Firstly, the medium was the only one who saw Samuel. The fact that she was alarmed when she saw the apparition indicates that she realised that she was not in control and may have recognised "Samuel" as God's messenger. Secondly, she did not anticipate what would happen next. She was chastened and realised that it was much larger and far outside the normal scope of her experiences.

3.3 Death and afterlife

One of the most significant differences between the Christian view and that of ancestor worship relates directly to the different views on death and afterlife. The traditional African view is that death constitutes a transition which is followed by a mode of existence which differs only marginally from one's earthly existence (cf Bae 2004:352). The Christian perspective of death is very different from this. In the Biblical context, death marks a complete break with earthly existence. Schwarz (1979:172) argues that the new form of existence is a radical departure from the tempo-spatial realities of natural existence and facilitates a closer union with God. Therefore, although both Christian and African traditional religions acknowledge the existence of life after death, it is imperative to take a closer look at what the Scriptures say about death and life after death.

3.3.1 Predestined death

Human beings are a synthesis of body and spirit. It is suggested in the Scriptures that when the body decomposes after death the spiritual element survives (e.g. Ps 16:10; 17: 15; Heb 12:23). Death appears to be inevitable when one considers the way in which the human body has been created. Physical demise and ultimate dissolution are an inescapable part of God's punishment of human sin. A common understanding of death in the Bible is that it signifies a separation from God. The unbeliever, who dies, is eternally separated from God, that is suffers a second death.

3.3.2 Physical death as the first death

Gulley (1992:111) points out that the Old Testament connects death to sin (Ps 90:7-10) where God said to Adam, "on the day that you eat of it you will die" (Gn 2:17). The New Testament develops this connection between death and sin and Paul clearly states that "sin came into the world through one man and death through sin" (Rm 5:12), and that "the wages of sin is death" (Rm 6:23), and again that "Death came through a man" (1 Cor 15:21). John speaks of that "Death is linked with God's judgment" (Rv 2:11; 20:6; 21:8).

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However, the Bible teaches that physical death is not the fait accompli of God's punishment. When one examines the matter closely it is clear that Adam did not die immediately on the day that he committed sin. Similarly, in Romans 5 and 6 Paul contrasts death as a result of Adam's sin and the life that Christ brings to mankind. Morris (1982:273) argues that the possession of eternal life does not nullify physical death. It is opposed to a spiritual state rather than a physical event. Therefore, death which is a result of sin extends beyond a physical death of the body.

Gehman (1999:218) argues that physical death is a result of spiritual death and is the separation of the body from the spirit. Spiritual death on the other hand is as a result of the separation of man's soul from God. This relationship was severed when Adam and Eve chose to sin. Therefore, death involves more than the dissolution of the physical body. Man dies as a spiritual and physical being.

3.3.3 Eternal death as the second death

The New Testament underscores the serious consequences and repercussions of sin when it refers to the second death (Jude 12; Rv 2:11, etc). The second death signifies eternal damnation and perdition. These references must be understood together with passages in which God speaks of "eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels", into which the wicked will be cast (Mt 25:41), "eternal punishment" (set in contrast to "eternal life", Mt 25:46), and such. Jesus repeatedly warned the people to take care to avoid being cast "into hell, where the fire never goes out" (Mk 9:43). Morris (1982:273) indicates that the final state of impenitent man is described as death, punishment and being lost.

The instances where the second death is mentioned as such in the New Testament are Revelation 2:11; 20:6, 14; and 21:8. These Scriptures speak of it as a "lake of fire" (Rv 20:14; 21:8) and is juxtaposed with receiving a crown of life (Rv 2:10) and life lived in the presence of God (Rv 21:3-7; 22:3-5). The second death constitutes a final destruction of anything which belongs to the realm of evil. It therefore includes those individuals who do not have their names written in the Book of Life (Rv 20:15), the unrighteous (Rv 21:8), the false prophet and the beast (Rv 19:20), the devil (Rv 20:10), and Death and ᾠδης (*Hades*) (Rv 20:14). In Jude 12 the second death is also alluded to. Watson (1992:111) thus argues that Jesus also warned against the second death, "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in hell" (Mt 10:28; Lk 12:4-5; RSV).

From these points, it is evident that the Bible's portrayal of death is not positive, but rather as a result of God's judgement, as a result of sin. The second death and eternal torment follows eternal severance with God in Christ.

3.3.4 Death as a thorough severance

Mbiti (1970:264) states that African peoples believe that death does not annihilate life and that the departed continue to exist in the hereafter. Kim (1999:61) concurs when he argues that in terms of ancestor worship death is considered to be a summons to the hereafter and death is accompanied by a death messenger from the hereafter. In other words, the deceased person is believed to continue to exist just as he or she did in this world. Lim (1984:230) thus states that in terms of ancestor worship, this constitutes the belief that the living are able to have communion with the living soul of the dead. Thus, death is considered to be a transition, or a threshold into a new world. Gehman (1989:54) points out that for followers of the ancestor cult it means that the dead person becomes part of the living-dead which entitles him/her to funerary rites and rituals. Death is not viewed in a positive light but on the other hand not as a catastrophe either (except in case of the untimely death of a most important or strategic person).

The question is whether or not the Bible opposes this view? Ecclesiastes 9:4-10 clearly rejects the notion of communion or interaction between the living and the dead when it states that "... the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. Indeed their love, their hate, and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun ... There is no activity or planning or wisdom in *שְׁאוֹל* where you are going."

Beyerhaus (1966:137-145) further contends that Jewish and Christian scholars agree that it is dangerous to pursue communication with the dead. This perceived danger lies in fears that the spiritual forces at work in such activities are "not the souls of the departed but the power of the fallen angels or demons who are masters of disguise" (Bae 2004:352). Therefore, it stands to reason, that the state of the dead does not constitute a continuation of life on earth or a parallel reality to live on earth in which individuals have the same physical needs for food, shelter, clothes (Bae 2004:352). Thus, the ancestor cult's notion that the ancestors are able to influence and help their living descendants is unscriptural and irreconcilable with the Christian view of God and death. The ancestors clearly do not have any supernatural powers which enable them to bestow benevolence or inflict suffering upon their descendents.

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What does the Bible teach about the state and place of the dead once they have died a physical death? What is the Biblical view of the afterlife? Where do the dead live? Do they have a physical abode?

3.4 Where are the dead?

The Hereafter has been a central theme in the Christian faith. Death constitutes the beginning of torment for the unrighteous and a blessing for the righteous. Thus as Dabney (1972:820) points out, death marks the irrevocable destiny for those who have died. When an unbeliever dies, he or she is removed from the presence of God and any blessings which emanated from God's grace. (Ps 6:5; 30:9; 31:18; Is 14: 11; 38:18-19 and Job 3:13-19).

It is important to bear in mind, that in the Old Testament the dead are believed to enter the underworld known as *שְׁאוֹל*. The Old Testament closely relates the afterlife to *שְׁאוֹל*. Thus, one cannot conceive of where the dead live without considering what *שְׁאוֹל* meant.

3.4.1 Two beliefs about the dead

When one discusses *שְׁאוֹל*, one needs to look at the pervasive beliefs about the dead. There are generally two beliefs related to beliefs about the dead in the Bible. The first belief is that people are judged immediately after death, and the spirit of the person will be present with Christ and joins those who are saved or those who have been condemned (Heb 9:27; 2 Cor 5:1-9; Rv 20:14-15; Lk 23:43 Phlp 1:21-23). For those who agree with this view *שְׁאוֹל* was to become the abode for the condemned (Penelhum 1997:36). This appears to be supported by Philippians 1:21-23 in which Paul states that there is an instant transition of his spirit from this world to the presence of Christ. This interpretation appears to corroborate Christ's statement to the criminal on the cross (Lk 23:43).

The second view is concerned with the expectation of personal resurrection. The Hebrew Scriptures contain only a few number of Scriptures which appear to substantiate this view, namely Isaiah 26:19 and Daniel 12:2 ("Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt"). In these two texts personal resurrection is mentioned and envisaged for those long dead and has become a pervasive concept in Judaism.

3.4.2 The abode of the dead

There are numerous terms which are used in the Old Testament to denote the abode of the dead. The most common of these is *שְׁאוֹל* which occurs approximately 66 times. Lewis (1992:105) points out that. Several terms are

used to describe the abode of the dead in the New Testament as well. The word ᾠδης most commonly translates שְׁאוֹל in the LXX and is used ten times in the New Testament. It shares many of the physical characteristics of שְׁאוֹל, and it too can designate either the underworld or the personified lord of the underworld.

- **Various depictions of שְׁאוֹל**

There are different understandings of what the word שְׁאוֹל denotes. Rosenberg (1980: 12) and Oppenheim (1956:221) indicate that שְׁאוֹל is usually translated as the underworld. Although there is not much consistency in the translation of the term, Morris (1982:273) and Lewis (1992:107) agree that it is generally depicted as a place to which one “goes down” (Nm 16:30; Job 7:9; Is 57:9; Is 29:4; Ps 88:3-4) and therefore appears to represent the lowest place possible (Dt 32:22; Is 7:11) in contrast with the highest heavens (Am 9:2; Ps 139:8; Job 11:8). Furthermore, Job 17:16 describes it as a place of dust, darkness (Job 10:21), silence (Ps 94:17) and forgetfulness (Ps 88: 12). Thus שְׁאוֹל indicates a realm of sleepy, shadowy existence in the depths of the earth.

However, some scholars (Gehman 1999:231; Tan 1985:82; Otto 1990:147) have suggested that שְׁאוֹל should be interpreted semantically to convey the grave as the destination for all who die (Gn 42:38; Hs 13:14), both the wicked (Nm 16:30; Ps 9:17) and the righteous (Gn 37:35). There is a close connection between שְׁאוֹל and the grave, although there has been some debate about the nature of the connection. Harris (1986:71) for instance believes that שְׁאוֹל always denotes simply “grave” and never “underworld” (as quoted in Lewis 1992:108).

This appears to be consistent with the Scripture which states that Samuel came up from the earth when the woman of Endor summoned him (1 Sm 28:8, 11, 13). It was generally accepted that Samuel came up from שְׁאוֹל (as Arnold 2004:202 and Fischer 2001:35 asserted). If so, it follows that שְׁאוֹל at that stage was not understood to be a place of punishment. Thus, Payne (1962:528) asserts that this explains passages in which the righteous are described as going down into שְׁאוֹל.

The question arises as to how one should interpret the expression of the phrase “to be gathered to one’s people” which generally occurs with notices of death and burial and appears to imply that one joins one’s ancestors in the afterlife. This phrase occurs ten times in the Scriptures and only in reference to Israel’s ancestors and leaders (Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Aaron). Elsewhere there are a few similar, probably derivative phrases (Jdg 2:10; 2 Ki 22:20; Ps 49:19). Another phrase, “To sleep with

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one's fathers", also occurs and is used restrictively in reference to the kings of Israel and Judah who died peacefully, irrespective of whether they were considered good or evil and irrespective of their place of burial. Johnston (2001:cd) therefore argues that regardless the origins of the phrase, the usage and context suggest a type of death rather than a reunification in the afterlife as suggested by the tenets of ancestor worship.

- **Ἅδης in the New Testament**

The Greek equivalent for **לֹאֵשׁ** which is used in the New Testament, is **Ἅδης**. Gehmann (1999:289) argues that **לֹאֵשׁ** was to the Old Testament saints what **Ἅδης** was to the Greek speaking New Testament church.

In this regard, Lewis (1992:107) points out that as is the case with **לֹאֵשׁ**, **Ἅδης** is understood to mean a place to which one goes down (Mt 11:23; Lk 10:15). Sometimes **Ἅδης** is used to denote the abode of righteous and the wicked (Lk 16:23; Ac 2:27), a temporary holding place for the dead until the resurrection when **Ἅδης** will give up its dead as recorded in Revelation 20:13. However, **Ἅδης** is used with a definite connotation of judgement and punishment as conveyed in the account of the rich man and the Lazarus (Lk 16:23). There is a further distinction to be drawn between **Ἅδης** and Gehenna which is understood as the eschatological fiery hell in which the ungodly will be punished after death (Mt 5:22).

3.4.3 Afterlife: what happens to believers who die “in Christ”?

As discussed **לֹאֵשׁ** and **Ἅδης** have been interpreted to denote (1) the underworld as the place of the dead, or (2) the grave which indicates the state of the dead. This article is aligned with the latter view. The reason for this is because there is not sufficient evidence to suggest that the Bible strongly supports an intermediate state as the place where all who have died lie and await the final judgement. On the contrary, the New Testament indicates that the believer will be united with Christ immediately after death. This denotes a blissful state beyond our present understanding and expectations.

The Bible teaches that the believer is immediately reunited with Christ in heaven (1 Th 4:13-17; 1 Cor 15:1-11; Phlp 1:21-25; 2 Cor 5:1-10; Jn 11:25; Lk 23:43; Lk 16:19-3; Lk 20:27-38; Mk 12:18-27; Mt 27:52-53; Rv 14:13). The believer exists in Christ's presence as a disembodied being while the physical body returns to the ground and becomes dust again. Therefore, this contradicts the premise of ancestor worship which implies that the righteous dead will return and communicate with the living. Therefore, the soul of the dead cannot be recalled by a medium who is acting contrary to the will of God

(Heb 9:27; Rv 20:13-15; Rm 2:6-8; Gn 18:25). Furthermore, the dead ancestors do not remain on earth to interact with the living.

4. CONCLUSION

The ritual practices associated with ancestor worship are heavily reliant upon the premise that the dead are able to return to the living and have an influence on the lives of the living; that it is acceptable for the living to communicate with the dead and lastly that the living are able to exert an influence on the destiny of the deceased ancestor. In fact the preceding sections have made it clear that the Bible condemns necromancy and associated practices, and therefore it is not in alignment with the Bible's principles. Secondly, the discussion has pointed out that although some individuals do experience what appears to be the spirits of deceased ancestors, the Biblical evidence which has been presented makes it clear that these experiences or apparitions should not be taken "at face value".

Furthermore, the Bible makes it clear that once a person has died it is impossible for him or her to return to communicate with the living. It is clear from Romans 6:23 that all men die and that death is the wages of sin – an inevitable consequence. The only incident in the Scriptures which has been the source of dogmatic controversy is the incident where Samuel "appeared" to the Witch of Endor (1 Sm 28). The explanations which have been put forward have made it clear that what was "seen", was a result of the special working of God's power, and by His permission for His purposes. As the Bible clearly admonishes, those who dabble in necromancy or spiritism commit what is considered to be spiritual prostitution.

The abode of the dead which is expounded in the Scriptures is known as ᾠδης or שְׁאוֹל. The aforementioned sections have conclusively shown that ᾠδης and שְׁאוֹל refer to the common grave of mankind where all souls are destined to go once they have died a physical death. The final destination of the righteous souls is heaven and therefore the analogy of Lazarus and the rich man cannot be construed to prove that the living can communicate with the dead or that the living can have a bearing on the destiny of the dead. It was not possible for the rich man to communicate with his living relatives to warn them of their imminent fate if they did not mend their ways.

The Scriptures clearly indicate that the righteous who die, are immediately reunited with Christ (cf Lk 23:43, Phlp 1:23). At the resurrection those who have died will be changed and resurrected with a spiritual body to allow them to enter into a fuller state of fellowship with God. The notion of the immortality of the soul is a major precept of the ancestor cult. However, the New Testament's promise of a resurrection refers to the resurrection of the

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whole body. The notion of the soul existing in an intermediate state or a deep sleep which is fundamental to the ancestral rites is contradictory to the teachings of the New Testament. Passages in the Bible which deal with death as a sleeping state such as Matthew 9:24 and 1 Corinthians 15:51 and 1 Thessalonians 4:13 could be construed as a metaphorical description to ensure that mankind do not fear death rather than a description of an intermediate state.

Some scholars have tried to prove that Christ descended into ᾠδης after his death to minister to the dead or to proclaim his victory over them. It became clear however that scriptural proof of such doctrine is contentious and that the meaning of 1 Peter 3:18-20, the classical scriptural reference, is obscure. The living are not able to effect a change for the good of the dead. The salvation of mankind is based on Christ's ransom sacrifice on the cross and therefore sacrifices which are made for the dead are of no value. The notion of vicarious baptism which has been suggested by some scholars does not have sufficient evidence in exegetical or hermeneutical terms to make it a credible argument. Paul denies the interpretation of vicarious baptism when he says in 2 Corinthians 5:10: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body."

Therefore, it is clear that the final destination of each individual is dependent on their own faith and actions while they were alive. Each individual is accountable to God and once a sinner has died the wages of his or her sins cannot be paid by the living. In other words, the central premise which underpins the theology of ancestor veneration is flawed. It is impossible for the dead to communicate with the living and it is impossible for the living to improve the destiny of the deceased ancestor. The New Testament is clear that there is no way for the dead to change their fate.

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