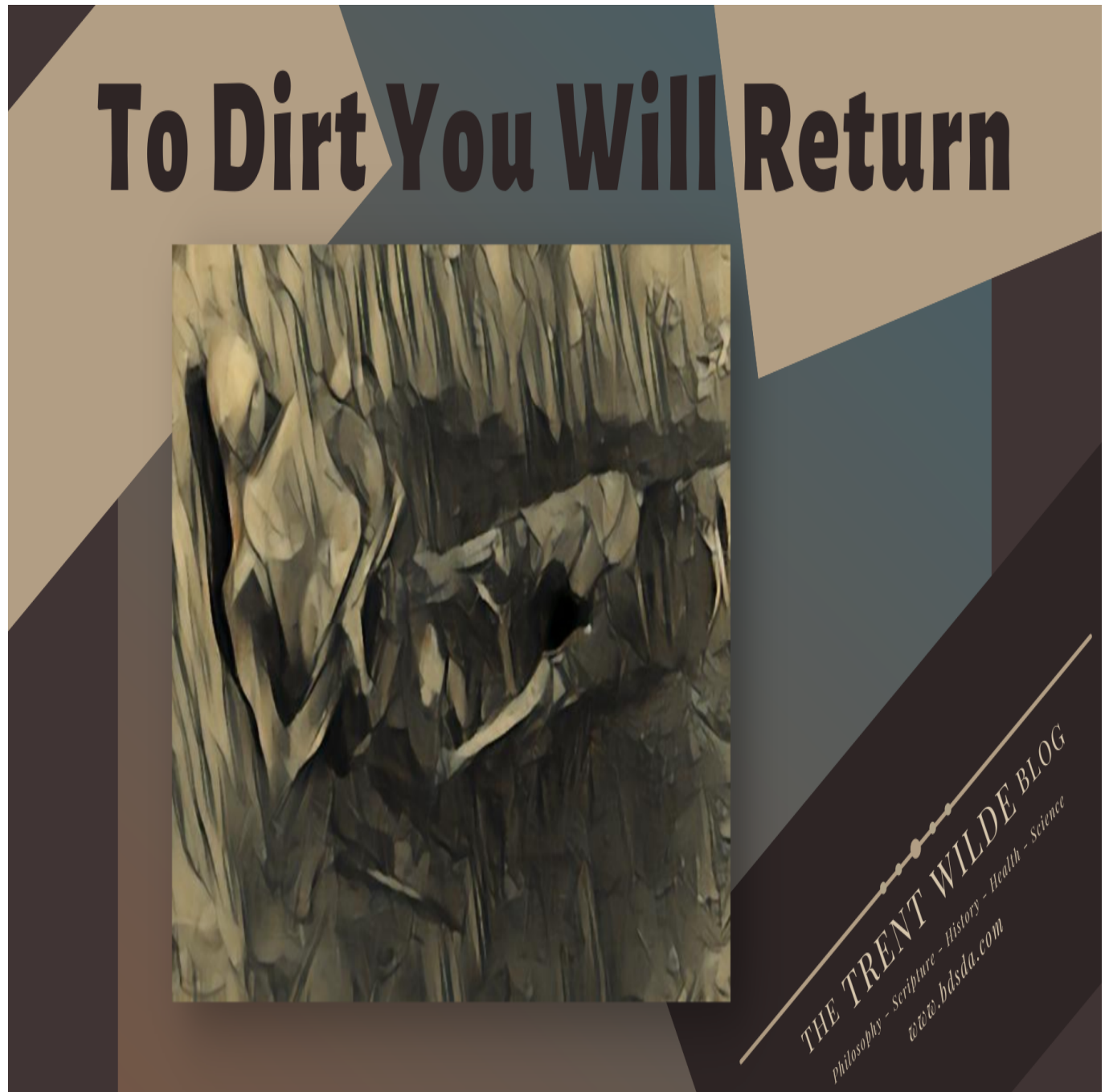


To Dirt You Will Return (Israelite Anthropology)

Description



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In this post, I'll answer the question from the end of [our last post](#): What did ancient Israelites think about death?

Before getting started, I should repeat a qualification I made [a few posts back](#). I'm generally referring to "what ancient Israelites believed" on these subjects, but please keep in mind that not all ancient Israelites believed precisely the same thing, even on this topic. Plus, it's not like we have written records from every Israelite; we only have the voices of a few. The reason why I'll at times speak broadly about what ancient Israelites thought on a topic is that on certain topics one view clearly predominates in their literature. This is the case for all the topics I've covered over the last few posts, and it's the case for the present topic as well. With that said, let's get into it!

There are indeed ancient Israelite texts that speak about death very plainly. So to get our answer, I could just quote them, and we'd be done. But I think it's important for you to understand not only *what* they thought, but *why* they thought it. Remember, they didn't have a bible upon which they based their beliefs. So their reasons couldn't be "the bible says so." Instead, their understanding of death was rooted in their understanding of human nature.

Let's start with the famous line from Genesis 3:19:

For dirt you are
and to dirt you will return.
– Genesis 3:19 (NABT)¹NABT stands for *Not A Bible Translation* – my own translation.

How different this is from, say, this:

For spirit you are
In dirt you dwell
To the spirit realm you'll go
when you shed your shell

Again, the text in Genesis doesn't say you *dwell in* dirt; it says you *are* dirt. And it doesn't say your *shell*, or your *dwelling*, will return to dirt; it says *you* will return to dirt. Humans, according to this text, are literally phenomenally fashioned formations of dirt. We don't dwell in dirt, and we aren't dirt plus an immaterial something. We just *are* dirt, and we are *just* dirt. Have you ever heard someone say "you are not your body"? Well, according to this, you *are* your body, so for your body to die and return to dirt is for *you* to die and return to dirt.

Another passage that touches on this is contained a Psalm we quoted from [last time](#). It's Psalm 30:10 which reads:

What profit is there in my blood
when I go down to the pit?
Will dirt thank you?
Will *it* tell your truth?
– Psalm 30:10 (NABT)

This is just a few verses before one of the passages that attribute musical creativity to the liver.

The author of this psalm clearly understood humans as material organisms whose mental activities are performed by bodily organs, who are dirt and who return to dirt at death, thus losing all ability, including the ability to thank God and tell truth. (Pretty different from the doctrine that at death, your body is buried while you go to heaven to be with God and praise him!)

There are so many passages on this subject, but for sake of time, we'll look at just one more. A few posts back (in the one called "[Dirt You Are](#)") I quoted from Ecclesiastes 3:18-20. It also says that we are dirt and that when we die we return to dirt. And it points out that this is true of all mammals. Furthermore, it says that we humans are ourselves mammals just like the others. We have the same nature, and we die the same death. Later in Ecclesiastes is perhaps the most famous verse expressing the truly dead nature of death. It's Ecclesiastes 9:4-5 and 10:

...to the living there is hope, for a living dog, he is better than the dead lion.
For the living know that they will die, but the dead, they don't know anything.
And there is no longer for them a reward,
For their memory has been forgotten.

...

All that your hand finds to do, do in your strength, for there is no work, or thought, or knowledge, or wisdom in the grave, that whereto you are going.

– Ecclesiastes 9:4-5, 10 (NABT)

It's hard to imagine a more explicit denial of consciousness in death! And notice, it rejects consciousness in death *not* by asserting that humans have non-physical souls that become unconscious when we die. Some people today hold to that view, sometimes called "soul sleep." Conversely, Ecclesiastes denies conscious death and non-physical souls altogether. It has a unified, principled philosophy of human nature and death rooted in materialism. It teaches that humans are purely material animals whose thoughts are simply the activities of certain bodily organs. When a human dies, their thinking organs decompose into ordinary, unorganized dirt, and can think no more.

In case you don't know, we'll be hosting a series of live meetings through zoom from October 11 to 17 (2022). It's on a topic closely related to what we've been talking about in the last several episodes. If you're interested in coming, check out the image below for the details.

UPDATE: The meetings now finished. You can watch the recordings [HERE](#).

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