

Shayla: Is Psalm 115:17 saying that the dead are unconscious?

Psalms 115:17 HCSB It is not the dead who praise the LORD, nor any of those descending into the silence of death.

Midrash:

You must keep in mind the author's principle purpose which was to clarify the uselessness of idols. In verses 5-7 he writes:

- **Psalms 115:5-7 HCSB** They have mouths, but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. (6) They have ears, but cannot hear, noses, but cannot smell. (7) They have hands, but cannot feel, feet, but cannot walk. They cannot make a sound with their throats.

The Hebrew in verse seven literally reads they "cannot mutter in their throats." Whereas in verse five the idols cannot clearly speak, in verse seven they cannot even make inarticulate sounds.

Now, ten verses later the author uses "silence" as a metonymy for death. To understand the use of metonymy in this manner, consider:

- **Psalms 94:17 HCSB** If the LORD had not been my help, I would soon rest in the silence of death.

The Psalmist was using the perspective of death from this side of the grave to illustrate the uselessness of idols. As a human corpse has a mouth, eyes, ears, nose, hands, and feet, yet is completely helpless to use any of them, so is an idol useless to render aid to anyone. This is not a comment on the afterlife but rather on the condition of a corpse.

For a clearer view of an Old Covenant saint's view of the afterlife consider the following:

- **Job 19:25-27 HCSB** But I know my living Redeemer, and He will stand on the dust at last. (26) Even after my skin has been destroyed, yet I will see God in my flesh. (27) I will see Him myself; my eyes will look at Him, and not as a stranger. My heart longs within me.

The Old Covenant also teaches that the death of the righteous (tzaddikim) is subjectively superior to the death of the wicked (rashaim).

- **Numbers 23:10 HCSB** Who has counted the dust of Jacob or numbered the dust clouds of Israel? Let me die the death of the upright; let the end of my life be like theirs.
- **Psalms 49:16-20 HCSB** Do not be afraid when a man gets rich, when the wealth of his house increases. (17) For when he dies, he will take nothing at all; his wealth will not follow him down. (18) Though he praises himself during his lifetime--and people praise you when you do well for yourself-- (19) he will go to the generation of his fathers; they will never see the light. (20) A man with valuable possessions but without understanding is like the animals that perish.

Note: The Lake of Fire (the ultimate destination of the rashaim) is described as a place of darkness.

The Psalmist knew that death was not the end of hope for the tzaddikim, and that God had more in store for them.

- **Psalms 16:9-11 HCSB** Therefore my heart is glad, and my spirit rejoices; my body also rests securely. (10) For You will not abandon me to Sheol; You will not allow Your Faithful One to see the Pit. (11) You reveal the path of life to me; in Your presence is abundant joy; in Your right hand are eternal pleasures.
- **Psalms 17:15 HCSB** But I will see Your face in righteousness; when I awake, I will be satisfied with Your presence.
- **Psalms 49:15 HCSB** But God will redeem my life from the power of Sheol, for He will take me. Selah
- **Psalms 73:24 HCSB** You guide me with Your counsel, and afterwards You will take me up in glory.