

The Day of Death

in

Genesis 2:16-17

And the LORD God commanded the man, “You are **free to eat** from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you **must not eat** from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for **when** you eat of it you will **surely die.**” (Genesis 2:16-17)

The general consensus of the “death” of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden is normally believed to be “physical death.” In spite of this belief, the context does not allow for “physical death,” but rather, it addresses “spiritual death.” When God created Adam and Eve, they were created as “mortal beings” as well as “spiritual beings.” In other words they were created with two natures. We know from Scripture that after Adam and Eve ate of the “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil,” they did not immediately die a “physical death” that very day, but rather, they experienced or died a “spiritual death” “**in**” that self-same day. Moses reveals that Adam lived to be 930 years old (Genesis 5:4), which revelation alerts us to the fact that the death spoken of had to do with “spiritual death.” The reason we know that this had to do with “spiritual death” is that they were told that they would die in the day (b’yôm’) that they ate the forbidden fruit. In other words, this death occurred, or would occur, immediately upon the partaking of the prohibited food. Before we examine the Hebrew text of Genesis 2:16-17, we call attention to some translations of the Hebrew text:

- *New Revised Standard Version*: 2:17, “**in the day** that you eat of it you will die.”
- *New American Bible*: 2:17: “**the moment** you eat from it, you are surely doomed to die.”
- *Young’s Literal Translation*: 2:17: “for **in the day** of thine eating of it—dying thou dost die.”
- *The New Jerusalem Bible*: 2:17: “for **the day** you eat of that you are doomed to die.”
- *The Holman Christian Standard Bible*: 2:17: “for **on the day** you eat from it, you will certainly die.”
- *TaNaKh: The Holy Scriptures*: 2:17: “for **as soon as** you eat of it, you shall die.”

It goes almost without saying that the death in view is “spiritual death,” not physical death. In order to arrive at a clear and correct interpretation of the conversation, we will examine the Hebrew text to see if we can pinpoint **the day of death** as foretold in Genesis 2:17. Unfortunately, our translations do not always focus in on the Hebrew text in translating the Scriptures into English. Genesis 2:16 in the Hebrew text helps to clarify Genesis 2:17 in the Hebrew text. The NIV text is entirely too nebulous or imprecise, especially with the translation of “**in the day**” as “**when**.” When an interpreter approaches a certain text, it is not uncommon for the reader to transpose his or her own prior understanding upon the text, which interpretation simply means that the interpreter is imposing his or her own inherited presuppositions upon the text. As we approach the text with our prior understanding, we need to reevaluate any former presuppositions and turn our attention to the Hebrew text itself on Genesis 2:16-17 in order to establish beyond a shadow-of-a-doubt the true meaning of the “death” referred to.

HEBREW VERB DOUBLE CONSTRUCTION

The key to understanding whether or not the death mentioned in Genesis 2:17 is physical or spiritual “death” is found in the Hebrew verb double construction. Not only do we have a verb of double construction in 2:17, but we also have a verb of double construction in 2:16 concerning eating of the forbidden fruit. In 2:16, we are told that Adam and Eve could eat the fruit of every tree in the Garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God then said “to the man” that “from every tree of the garden **eating you may eat**” [’ā·kōl’ tō (’)·kēl’]. William David Reyburn’s and Euan McGregor Fry’s comments are informative concerning this “idiomatic double use of the verb: ‘**You may freely eat of every tree of the garden: freely eat** translates an idiomatic double use of the verb ‘eat’ that gives emphasis to the verb and means ‘certainly, surely, without doubt.’”¹

In both 2:16 and 2:17, we discover this “idiomatic double use of the verb.” In verse 17, God exempted the “the tree of knowledge.” The Hebrew grammar emphasizes this death—“**dying you shall die**” [môṭ’ tā·mûṭ’]. In order to interpret “dying you shall die” correctly, we need to examine the context as well as the force of the Hebrew grammar. The grammar does not allow for hundreds of years for death but of something that would be immediate “**in the day of your eating from it**” (2:17b). In 2:16 and 2:17, we observe that the **Infinitive Absolute** precedes the finite verb. Is this significant? Weingreen writes: “The “Infinitive Absolute expresses emphasis when it immediately precedes the finite verb.”²

Over again, the word “eating” (2:16) in the Hebrew is an **Infinitive Absolute**³ to emphasize the certainty of contemporaneous death with eating. It is in this vein that the words of Gary D. Pratico⁴ and Miles Van Pelt⁵ are helpful in grasping the purpose of the **infinitive absolute**: “The Infinitive Absolute is a verbal noun with a variety of uses. The four most

¹ William David Reyburn and Euan McGregor. Fry, *A Handbook on Genesis*, UBS Handbook Series (New York: United Bible Societies, 1998), 70.

² J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew*, Second Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939, 1959)79.

³The **Infinitive Absolute** is a verbal noun.

⁴ **Gary D. Pratico**: Senior Professor of Old Testament and Hebrew Language at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts.

⁵ **Miles Van Pelt** is Alan Belcher Professor of Old Testament and Biblical Languages and academic dean for the Jackson campus of Reformed Theological Seminary. He has taught at Gordon College in Wenham, Massachusetts and at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary in South Hamilton, Massachusetts.

common uses are: (1) **emphatic**; (2) imperatival; (3) **contemporaneous action**; and (4) complementary”⁶ (Emphasis mine—bold). From this citation from Pratico and Pelt, two things stand out in the double verb construction in both 2:16 and 2:17—(1) **emphasis** and (2) **contemporaneous** action. Again, the following comments by Pratico and Pelt are extremely useful in seeking comprehension concerning this Hebrew verb double construction:

The Use of the Infinitive Absolute. The Infinitive Absolute is a verbal noun. With regard to function, however, there is no precise English equivalent to the Hebrew Infinitive Absolute. **It may be used in conjunction with other verbs to emphasize or intensify the verbal meaning.** It may also be used in the place of an Imperative to express a command. In special instances, it can be used with other verbs to express two verbal actions occurring at the same time.⁷ (Emphasis mine—underlining and bold)

Another scholar, Stanley M. Horton,⁸ also captures the heart of the **Infinitive Absolute** in Genesis 2:17: “Since Adam was both a spiritual and physical being, **spiritual death** (separation from God) **would be immediate** and physical death would come later.”⁹ Adam did not die physically “**in the day**” that he ate of the forbidden fruit, but he did die spiritually. Before we examine 2:17 in more detail, we need to reflect upon 2:16, which text also employs a double use of the verb “eat.” William David Reyburn’s and Euan McGregor Fry’s observation on the double use of the verb calls attention to the emphasis placed upon the subject with the use of the **Infinitive Absolute**: “**You may freely eat of every tree of the garden: freely eat translates an idiomatic double use of the verb ‘eat’ that gives emphasis to the verb and means ‘certainly, surely, without doubt’**”¹⁰ (Emphasis mine—underlining and bold). Once more, Reyburn and Fry add additional comments to reinforce the time of death based upon their eating of the forbidden fruit. We should read carefully the perception or comprehension found in their analysis:

For in the day that you eat of it is literally “for on the day [of] your eating from it”; that is, “the very day you eat from it,” or “straight away.” **You shall die** is the same Hebrew double verb construction as is translated “freely eat” in verse 16, and here the meaning is “you will certainly die,” “you will die for sure.” **The emphatic statement [infinitive absolute] may also be translated “you will die on the day you eat it.”**¹¹ (Emphasis mine—underlining and bold)

The Hebrew words in Genesis 2:17 *môṭ tāmûṭ*, (“you will surely die”) consist of two verbs that constitute verbs of double construction. The Hebrew word *môṭ* carries within its meaning “to die.” This verb is identified as (1) verb, (2) QAL, that is to say, SIMPLE ACTIVE, (3) **infinitive**, (4) and **absolute**. On the other hand the word *tāmûṭ* is identified as (1) verb, (2) imperfect, (3) second person, and (4) singular. As stated above, 2:16 also makes use of a verb of double

⁶ Gary D. Pratico and Miles V. Van Pelt, *Basics of Biblical Hebrew: Grammar*, Second Edition. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 256.

⁷Ibid., 253.

⁸ Stanley M. Horton (1916-2014): American theologian.

⁹ Stanley M. Horton, *Genesis*, International Editor, Thoralf Gilbrant, The Complete Biblical Library, thirty nine volumes (Old and New Testaments), (Springfield, Missouri: World Library Press, Inc., 1994), 1:31.

¹⁰ William David Reyburn and Euan McGregor Fry, *A Handbook on Genesis*, 70.

¹¹Ibid.

construction. John Peter Lange¹² calls attention to the **Infinitive Absolute**: “The free enjoyment of all trees is strongly expressed by the intensive idiom.”¹³ Remember, as mentioned above that Weingreen pointed out that “The **Infinitive Absolute** expresses emphasis when it immediately precedes the finite verb, and duration when it immediately follows it.”¹⁴ Also, Kyle M. Yates calls attention to the **Absolute Infinitive** as not admitting of any prefix or suffix.¹⁵ The following citation by Gordon J. Wenham¹⁶ is very helpful:

The death sentence demonstrates God’s seriousness in prohibiting access to the tree. The parallels also show that Speiser (cf. Cassuto) is unjustified in retranslating “you will certainly die” by “you shall be doomed to die” (15). **The text is a straightforward warning that death will follow eating**. Nor can the contradiction between this warning, the snake’s remarks (3:4), and the conclusion of the story be resolved by retranslating “on the day” as “when.” Though this phrase can mean vaguely “when” (cf. 2:4; 5:1), **it tends to emphasize promptness of action** (e.g., Num 30:6, 8, 9, etc.), especially in the closely similar passage (1 Kgs 2:37, 42). Whether the serpent was right to dismiss the **divine warning, here so emphatic and explicit**, as mere bluff will be discussed below.¹⁷ (Emphasis mine—bold)

Wenham’s comments are extremely informative concerning the meaning and the grammar of the Hebrew text. He calls attention to Speiser’s translation of “**in the day**” as “**when**.” In his comments concerning Speiser’s translation of the Hebrew text, he states that Speiser’s interpretation is unjustified. In other words, Wenham is saying that the Hebrew phrase “**in the day**” “tends to emphasize promptness of action.” As mentioned above, the NIV also adopted the erroneous rendering of “in the day” as “when.” In the beginning of this study, we cited from five different translations concerning the Hebrew phrase “**in the day**” (b’yôm’). Two of these translations are tremendously clear as to the strength and the power of the interpretation of “**in the day**.” The New American Bible translates the Hebrew phrase as “**the moment**.” On the other hand, the Hebrew scholars of the Hebrew text (TaNaKh of the Holy Scriptures) translate the Hebrew phrase as “**as soon as**.” Once more, we should reflect upon the comments of Reyburn and Fry concerning the significance of the **Infinitive Absolute** in unraveling the exact moment of death as foretold by God:

For in the day that you eat of it is literally “for on the day [of] your eating from it”; that is, “the very day you eat from it,” or “straight away.” **You shall die** is the same Hebrew double verb construction as is translated “freely eat” in verse 16, and here the meaning is “you will certainly die,” “you will die for sure.” The emphatic

¹² John Peter Lange (läng Ý, 1802-1884), German Reformed theologian and exegete.

¹³ John Peter Lange et al., *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Genesis* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2008), 206.

¹⁴ J. Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew*, Second Edition, 79.

¹⁵ See Kyle M. Yates, *The Essentials of Biblical Hebrew, Revised Edition* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1938, 1954), 45.

¹⁶ **Gordon J. Wenham** (born 1943): Senior Lecturer in Religious Studies at The College of St. Paul and St. Mary in Cheltenham, England. He is the author of two commentaries on Numbers and Leviticus, co-editor of *Law, Morality and the Bible*. He is also a British Old Testament scholar.

¹⁷ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, vol. 1, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998), 67–68.

statement [**Infinitive Absolute**] may also be translated “**you will die on the day you eat it.**”¹⁸ (Emphasis mine—underlining and bold)

SUMMARY

Remember, the **Infinitive Absolute** emphasizes the **contemporaneousness** of spiritual death (môṭ' tā·mûṭ'--2:17) with the time of eating ['ā·kōl' tō(')·kēl'--2:16] of the forbidden fruit. A correct interpretation of the **Infinitive Absolute** is crucial to a factual and accurate interpretation of Genesis 2:16-17. In conclusion, I call attention to another scholar, Ephraim Avigdor Speiser,¹⁹ who failed to capture the significance of the **Infinitive Absolute** employed by Moses. In his explanation of Genesis 2:1-17, he missed the mark in grasping the moment of death that God decreed as revealed in the Hebrew text. Apparently, Speiser allowed his presuppositions to interfere with sound exegetical skills as a Hebrew scholar. I do not question his integrity. There is a difference between rebellion against the Scriptures and an honest mistake of the heart. Nevertheless, he failed to distinguish between physical death and spiritual death. Genesis 2:17 is dealing with “spiritual death,” not “physical death” as proposed by Speiser. The following comments are informative in some aspect of his commentary on these verses and, at the same time, some of his observations contradict his previous remarks as to the meaning of “**on the day**” as meaning “**the moment**,” which version or translation is on target. We should read and reread his remarks to capture the ultimate contradictions in his analysis of “**the moment**” versus “**Death did not result in this instance**”:

16. *you are free to eat.* Or “you may eat freely.” Heb. employs here the so-called “**infinitive absolute**” construction, in which the pertinent Heb. form is preceded by its infinitive. The resulting phrase is a flexible utterance capable of conveying various shades of meaning; cf. next vs.

17. *the moment.* Heb. literally “**on the day**”; cf. 4b.

you shall be doomed to death. Another **infinitive absolute** in Hebrew. The phrase need not be translated “you shall surely die,” as it invariably is. Death did not result in this instance. The point of the whole narrative is apparently man’s ultimate punishment rather than instantaneous death.²⁰ (Emphasis mine—underlining and bold)

The above citation from Speiser demonstrates that scholars are not always consistent in their handling of the Hebrew text. We began this study with four citations of Genesis 2:17 to illustrate the various translations of “**in the day**” as equivalent to “**as soon as**.” In this study, we examined several Hebrew scholars concerning the two **Infinitive Absolutes** in both Genesis 2:16 and 2:17. Our findings revealed that the **Infinitive Absolute** emphasizes that the “death” Adam

¹⁸ William David Reyrburn and Euan McG. Fry, *A Handbook on Genesis*, UBS Handbook Series, 70.

¹⁹Ephraim Avigdor Speiser (1902-1965, age 63), a Jewish Polish-born American Assiriologist. He discovered the ancient site of Tepe Gawra in 1927 and supervised its excavation between 1931 and 1938. Also, he translated and wrote an extensive commentary for the volume on Genesis in the Anchor Bible Series and was one of the editors of the Torah in the New Jewish Publication Society of America Version of the Old Testament.

Heb. Hebrew.

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²⁰E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, vol. 1, Anchor Yale Bible (New Haven: London, Yale University Press, 2008), 17.

and Eve experienced was contemporaneous, that is to say, simultaneous with the moment of eating, not hundreds of years later. In other words, “spiritual death” and “eating” occurred at the same time. The **Infinitive Absolute** is translated as “dying you will die.” What does this translation mean? It simply carries the idea that “you will die on the day you eat it.” From our investigation of the Hebrew text, we conclude that this “death” was not “physical death” but rather, it was “spiritual death.” What was lost in Adam has been regained “in” and “through” Jesus the Christ. In Jesus, we have been resurrected from “sin death” or “spiritual death” to eternal life.