

GRAVE MATTERS: SHEOL IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

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SHEOL AND THE GRAVE

A reading of various Bible translations reveals that translators have had problems with the Hebrew word *she'ol*. The AV, for example renders it "grave" 31 times, "hell" 30 times, and "pit" three times. The ASV and RSV render it "Sheol." The NIV has "grave,"¹ with a footnote reading "Sheol," to allow readers to decide for themselves. According to the description in the Bible, Sheol is deep underground, much deeper than a grave. It is possible, of course, that the original sense of *she'ol* was indeed "grave" and that only later did it come to mean the netherworld. In his comment on Genesis 37:35, Rashi says that the plain meaning of Sheol is "grave", and that homiletically it is *Gehinnom*.

It seems certain, however, that Sheol is *associated* with the grave, though precisely what this association might be is a matter of dispute.² Harris, for example, considers them to be identical. Pedersen, on the other hand, says that Sheol is the netherworld, but that the ideas of the grave and of Sheol cannot be separated. "Sheol is the entirety into which all graves are merged . . . Sheol should be the sum of the graves. All graves have certain common characteristics constituting the nature of the grave, and that is Sheol. The 'Ur'-graves we might call Sheol; it belongs deep down under the earth, but it manifests itself in every single grave . . . Where there is a grave, there is Sheol, and where there is Sheol, there is a grave."³

Heidel, too, showed that Sheol refers to the "underworld" as well as to the grave.⁴ Rosenberg believes that Pedersen and others were excessively influenced by extra-biblical material that describes the grave as forming "a veritable continuum with the underworld." "The concept of the grave and of the Sheol or its semantic equivalents," says Rosenberg, "were consistently kept apart . . . No concept of 'Ur' grave is attested in the Bible."⁵ Sheol, according to Rosenberg is generally the netherworld.

We can learn something about the relationship between Sheol and the grave from a scrutiny of several biblical passages that use these terms. The prophet Ezekiel locates Assyria, Elam, Meshech, and Tubal in Sheol after they were

defeated in battle (31:15, 16, 17; 32:21, 27). He also describes these nations as being in the grave (32:22, 23, 25, 26). Implicitly, then, Sheol and the grave are the same place. In addition, *bor*, "pit" occurs eight times in these chapters (31:14, 16; 32:18, 23, 24, 25, 29), and *eretẓ taḥtīt*, "netherworld" five times (31:14, 16, 18; 32:18, 24). Clearly, here the "pit" and the "netherworld" are synonymous with Sheol. On one occasion we even find that graves are located in the "uttermost parts of the Pit" (Ezek. 32:23). We can understand that, in the Bible, the term Sheol can be used to refer to an actual grave as well as to the place where the dead go.

When Isaiah rebukes the king of Babylon, who has been hauled down to Sheol (Isa.14:11–20), the word again has the sense of "grave." Both *she'ol* and *bor* occur twice in this passage (vv. 11 and 15 and 15 and 19, respectively). After the descent of the king of Babylon to Sheol is described, the text states that he has been cast out of his grave (v. 19), indicating that Sheol and the grave are the same place. Sheol is described as the place of worms and maggots, *Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, and the strains of your lutes! Worms are to be your bed, Maggots your blanket!* (v.11), a typical description of the grave.⁶

Job 17:13–16 also suggests that Sheol is the grave. Here Job describes Sheol as his home in the darkness. Job, like Isaiah, describes Sheol as a place of maggots and dust. In Job 24:19–20, too, there are maggots in Sheol. In Job 21:13 there is a description of the wicked who lived in wealth and died without pain. This is a problem for Job, whose life is characterized by agony. Both good and wicked lie down in the dust and are covered by maggots (v. 26). In other words, all go to the same place. Here the reference is undoubtedly to the grave.

Several different terms are used in Psalm 88. In verse 4 (RSV 3), the believer declares that he is in (or near) Sheol. But in verses 5 and 7 he uses the terms *yoredei vor*, "those who go down to the pit" and *bor taḥtiyyot*, "depths of the Pit." In verses 6 and 12 he says that he wants to be kept from reaching the grave. His companions are "the dead" (vv. 6 and 11); in the latter verse they are also referred to as *refa'im*, "shades." In verse 12 "grave" is parallel to Abaddon (which, as NJPS renders it, is the "place of perdition"). In the psalm, the believer asks, *Is Your faithful care recounted in the grave?* (v. 12), a frequent refrain in Psalms; e.g., *in Sheol, who can acclaim You?* (6:6). The

grave and Sheol are described in identical terms, and the assortment of terms in this psalm resembles that in Ezekiel 31–32.⁷

Sheol is also identified with the grave in extra-biblical writings. An Aramaic papyrus from Elephantine contains the word *sehol*, apparently with reference to the grave. It mentions a certain Bar Puneš, who provided services to the king and was accordingly rewarded by him. The king addressed Bar Puneš as follows: "In these, and thy bones shall not go down to Sheol, nor thy spirit."⁸ Since the word *sehol* appears in this text only once, we must be cautious when assigning a meaning, but the sense of "grave" is appropriate here.⁹

As we have seen, the identification of Sheol with an actual grave is quite plausible in a number of verses. They are described in similar terms and appear in cases of poetic parallelism. At other times, Sheol refers to the place where the dead descend following their death, the netherworld.

WHO DESCENDS TO SHEOL?

The question remains whether both righteous and wicked descend to the same place. Some scholars believe that, in the biblical scheme of things, all human beings descend to Sheol.¹⁰ Others hold that it is reserved for the wicked only. Heidel, for example, writes that "there is no passage which proves that Sheol was ever employed as a designation for the gathering place of the departed spirits of the godly."¹¹

While Sheol has the connotation of a negative death, other expressions, such as being "gathered to his people" (Gen. 49:33), indicate a more positive death. Rosenberg suggests that Sheol is associated with premature death or "evil death," which is not the same thing as the normal death of human beings. Furthermore, she adds, "natural death is accompanied by unification with kin, and Sheol is never mentioned" in these contexts. Evil death . . . results in relegation to Sheol, which is never described as an ancestral meeting place."¹² Rosenberg admits that in some passages Sheol is the abode of all the dead (Ps. 89:49), but maintains that in principle it is the place of the wicked only.

RIGHTEOUS IN SHEOL

In fact, there are righteous individuals in the Bible who envision themselves in

Sheol. When Jacob receives the bitter news about his son in the Joseph narrative, he laments: *I will go down mourning to my son in Sheol* (Gen. 37:35). Here Sheol is associated with a miserable death. Similarly, Hezekiah of Judah imagined that he had *been consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years* (Isa. 38:10). Job, too, imagines himself in Sheol: *If I must look forward to Sheol as my home, and make my bed in the dark place* (Job 17:13). There are many passages in the Bible where believers ask God to deliver them from Sheol, because they will not be able to praise and extol him there. Johnston rightly noted that all of the loci mentioned above involve extreme trial, severe loss, and illness.¹³ Jacob, speaking many years later of his own death, does not use the term. In other words, when the righteous envision themselves in Sheol, they are talking about premature death or divine punishment, never about a natural death and a full lifespan.¹⁴ Thus, Sheol is not simply the place where wicked people go, but rather the place of a "bad death."

According to Job 3, after death everyone goes to a place where all are equal, lying down and sleeping the eternal sleep. We have to stress however, that Job does not refer here to Sheol, but only to an unnamed realm of death. In his suffering, he views the dark world of death as a place where he can be released from his torment and find the longed-for rest (vv. 14–19). This statement, that the righteous and wicked are totally equal and in the same place, troubled the Aramaic translator, who accordingly rendered verse 17, "There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest", as "There the wicked who have repented find surcease from the troubles of *Ge-hinnom*, and there the scholars who exhausted their strength in the Torah are at rest."

THE WICKED IN SHEOL

Several passages in Psalms describe the wicked descending to Sheol. For example: *Let the wicked return to Sheol, all the nations that forget God* (Ps. 9:18 [17]); *Let the wicked be disappointed; let them be silenced in Sheol* (Ps. 31:18 [17]). In the first of these verses, the descent of the wicked is referred to as "returning" (*shuv*). The same root is found in the Lord's curse of Adam,

to dust you shall return (Gen. 3:19). The idea of "reverting" thus indicates a return to the earth below, the substance first used by God to create Adam. Rashi, however, offers an interesting explanation that seizes upon the irregular form *li-she'olah* ("down to Sheol") in Psalm 9:18, with both the prefixed locative preposition *l-* and the locative suffix *-ah*. Rashi explains its significance: the wicked descend to the very lowest level of hell. First, when they die, they fall down into this "underworld." Later, when called to judgment, they will be found guilty and returned once again to the uttermost region of hell.

It is not just a case of the low-grade wicked going to hell. The most infamous among them do so while still alive (Ps. 55:16 [15]). Here, the psalmist curses the enemies whom he complained about at the very start, wishing them to go down alive to Sheol. This recalls the fate of Korah and his company (Num. 16:31). It may be that this image represents the sudden, unexpected arrival of retribution, as if the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them alive. More likely, however, the poet is speaking metaphorically and does not really mean for the Lord to create something new, causing the maws of the earth to gape wide and swallow his enemies, as did happen to Korah.

One can see that Sheol generally has a negative connotation. It is the final destination of the wicked, associated with unnatural and premature death. When mentioned in the context of the righteous, it involves an untimely death that is understood to be Divine punishment. The fact that Sheol is identified as the place of the wicked may point to a doctrine of posthumous reward and punishment, because the wicked descend there. However, because we have seen that it is also the miserable who go there, Sheol is more correctly identified as a place of "bad death" that may result from wickedness, but also from sorrow and an early demise.

PROVERBS 15:24: SEPARATION BETWEEN THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE WICKED

A clue to the fate of the righteous and the wicked may be found in the Book of Proverbs. This book includes admonitions and isolated sayings about wisdom and wise conduct. As opposed to the wicked, who descend to Sheol, the righteous ascend: *The wise man's path leads upward [le-ma'lah] to life, that he may avoid Sheol below [mattah]* (Prov. 15:24).¹⁵ The wise man follows a course in life that leads upward, so as to avoid the path leading down to She-

ol. All may choose either of the two paths, the one that ascends, which is the path of the righteous, or the other that descends, which is the path of the wicked: *See, I have set before you this day life and good, death and evil* (Deut. 30:15). The simple meaning of this verse is that *the wise man's path leads upward*, meaning to an elevated, good life, not necessarily to a special place above.¹⁶

Some scholars view the use of upward (*le-ma'lah*) and below (*mattah*) as expressing the contrast between a heavenly paradise reserved for the righteous and a hellish netherworld reserved for the wicked. This concept, however, originated in a later period and is foreign to the Hebrew Bible. Consequently, some assert that these adverbs do not belong to the original text but were interpolated when belief in the afterlife developed.¹⁷ They are indeed missing in the Septuagint, which reads, "The thoughts of the wise are ways of life, so that avoiding Hades he may be saved." We can explain these terms in light of Ecclesiastes 3:21, where the author wonders if men and animals are indeed different in terms of where they go after death: *Who knows if a man's lifebreath does rise upward and if a beast's breath does sink down into the earth?* This implies that the place where living things are expected to go after they die is down to the grave and to Sheol; yet the "upward" possibility remains of a special afterlife that is not one of gloom and misery.

There are several noteworthy passages that describe Sheol's location far below, diametrically opposite heaven. Biblical cosmology makes Sheol an abyss at the lowest level of the earth: *For a fire is kindled by My wrath, and it burns to the depths of Sheol* (Deut. 32:22); *If they burrow down to Sheol, from there My hand shall take them; and if they ascend to heaven, from there I will bring them down* (Amos 9:2); and again, *If I ascend to heaven, You are there; if I descend to Sheol, You are there too* (Ps. 139:8). A similar idea appears in one of the Amarna letters: "Should we go up into the sky, or should we go down into the netherworld, our head is in your hand."¹⁸ Sheol and heaven are thus paired to represent the uttermost limits of the world. They are both remote places, but not beyond the eyes of the Lord.

Later rabbinic theology distinguished between places reserved in the afterlife for the righteous and the wicked. Certain commentators, Radak, Ibn Ezra, and Malbim, saw in Proverbs 15:24 a reference to immortality for the righteous. The intelligent man will realize that the path of life is upward while the

path to death leads down. Homiletically, R. Bahya pointed out that the Hebrew term *orah* (*ḥayyim*), *path (of life)* alludes to the word *ore'ah*, meaning "guest." In other words, a wise person sees himself as a guest in this world, realizing that his sojourn is temporary. He knows that he will soon have to move on and that his soul yearns to return to its eternal source of life. Although it is harder to go up than down, because the law of gravity also applies here, the righteous will exert all his spiritual energy to rise up toward spiritual life, away from the path that leads to Sheol and ends in timeless death.

CONCLUSION

An examination of the term Sheol shows that in some ways it is similar to the grave, being the abode of the dead, but in principle it is different. When the biblical author uses the word Sheol, he has a "bad death" in mind, either that of the wicked or a bitter and premature demise. Sheol is the netherworld, subsequently called *Gehinnom* in rabbinic literature, the place reserved for evildoers. Not surprisingly, therefore, we read in the Book of Proverbs that for the righteous the path is upward and for the wicked it is downward to Sheol. Only in later writings, such as Josephus and the Book of Enoch, is Sheol divided between the righteous and the wicked.

According to Theodore Gaster, "The Old Testament offers no formal doctrine concerning the destination and fate of the dead; all that it says on the subject belongs to the domain of popular lore."¹⁹ Oesterley, on the other hand, writes: "We find in the Old Testament a mass of antique conceptions regarding life beyond the grave which the Israelites shared with other peoples, and which had been handed down from time immemorial."²⁰ Tromp observes that the Psalms contain numerous speculations about the afterlife: "The references to the hereafter in the Psalter are extraordinarily numerous and they seem to imply that the people's conceptions of after-life were not so elementary and primitive as is often believed. Even if this range of ideas was not originally popular, it must have become so through the Psalter."²¹

Johnston, however, maintains that the concept of an "underworld" was not important to the biblical author. All the biblical descriptions of Sheol – and they are not many – are in the first person, never in simple reportage or general description, and they speak of a dark and dreary place. According to Johnston, the biblical author was not particularly interested in the fate of the

dead.²² Indeed, nowhere in the Bible does there seem to be any account of descending to and returning from the nether regions, a familiar characteristic of Mesopotamian and Ugaritic literature; nor is there any description of someone going down to a place of judgment beneath the earth. While the Tanakh provides no detailed theology of the afterlife, the concept of a netherworld, of a place reserved for the wicked and the prematurely deceased, certainly exists in the Bible. That place is Sheol.

NOTES

1. R. Laird Harris, "Why Hebrew Sheol Was Translated 'Grave'," *The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation*, ed. Kenneth L. Barker (Grand Rapids, Mich: Zondervan, 1986) p. 58.
2. R. Laird Harris, "sheol," *TWOT* 2: 892.
3. Johannes Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture* (London: Oxford University Press, 1954) vols. I-II, p. 462.
4. Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949) pp. 170–191.
5. R. Rosenberg, "The Concept of Biblical Sheol within the Context of ANE Belief," Ph.D. thesis (Harvard University, 1980) pp.168–9.
6. Note that the accounts of the death of Antiochus IV (2 Macc. 9: 8–9) and of Herod Agrippa (Acts 12:20–23) both feature worms. Death by worms as the appropriate end for cruel sinners is found in Greek literature: see Herodotus iv. 205 and Pausanias ix. 7.24. See also Jonathan A. Goldstein, *II Maccabees* (AB41a; Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1983) pp. 354–5.
7. On these verses and others, see R. L. Harris, "The Meaning of the Word Sheol as shown by Parallels in Poetic Passages," *JETS* 4 (1961) pp. 129–135.
8. A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century BC*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1923) pp.179–182, No. 71:15.
9. R. L. Harris, "Why Hebrew Sheol was Translated 'Grave'," p. 58. He also mentions the cover of an ossuary found in Jerusalem, with the letters *shin/aleph/vav/lamed* engraved on it. As Rahmani notes, however, the ossuary also bears the Greek letters ΣΑΥΛΟΣ, so he reads it as the name "Saul." See, L. Y. Rahmani, "Jerusalem Tomb Monuments on Jewish Ossuaries," *IEJ* 18 (1968) p. 222.
10. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vols. I–II, pp. 461–2; Harris, "The Meaning of the Word Sheol," loc. cit.; John Gray, *I and II Kings*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970) p. 102.
11. A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels*, p. 186.
12. R. Rosenberg, "The Concept of Biblical Sheol," pp. 178–252.
13. Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol* (Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 2002) p. 81.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 82.
15. The "path of life" can be interpreted as eternal life in the presence of God, as may be inferred from Psalm 16:10–11.

16. Mordekhai Zer-Kavod, *Sefer Mishlei – Da'at Mikra* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1983) p. 94.

17. W. O. E. Oesterley, *The Book of Proverbs* (London: Methuen, 1929) p. 123; André Barucq, *Le Livre des Proverbes* ("Sources bibliques" series; Paris: J. Gabalda, 1964) p.136; William McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970) pp. 479–480.

18. Amarna Letter 264:11–19; W. L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992) p. 313.

19. Theodor Gaster, "Dead, Abode of the," *IDB* 1:787.

20. W. O. E. Oesterley, *Immortality and the Unseen World* (New York: Macmillan, 1921) p. 2.

21. Nicholas J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969) p. 211.

22. P. S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, op. cit., p. 85.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

July	Ezekiel	2 – 30
August	Ezekiel	31 – 48
	Hosea	1 – 10
September	Hosea	11 – 14
	Joel	1 – 4
	Amos	1 – 9
	Obadiah	1 – 1
	Jonah	1 – 4
	Micah	1 – 6
October	Micah	7 – 7
	Nahum	1 – 3
	Habakkuk	1 – 3
	Zephaniah	1 – 3
	Haggai	1 – 2
	Zechariah	1 – 14
	Malachi	1 – 2
November	Malachi	3 – 3
	Psalms	1 – 27

