

### The Intermediate State of the Soul in the Old Testament

One day my overseeing pastor had some unexpected business to attend to, and asked me to teach a BIC class for him that evening. The lesson was on life after death and the coming Judgment, a topic I was sure I could handle on short notice. Unfortunately, I didn't get too far into lesson before running into problems. The Jewish woman I was teaching was completely surprised to hear that the soul of the unbeliever goes immediately to hell. She had always been taught that the soul goes to Sheol, which she staunchly asserted meant "the grave" and not "hell." Though I agreed that Sheol does sometimes refer to the grave, I insisted that in some passages it does refer to hell, though I couldn't point to any at that moment.

Though I showed her that the New Testament teaches the departure of the unbelieving soul to hell, she was not convinced that the Old Testament taught the same. Nor was I for that matter. Her question led me back to the Scriptures to see what the Old Testament does teach about the state of the soul after death.

It was the common belief of all ancient peoples that the soul survived the body after death, and Israel was no exception. The Old Testament expresses this truth many times. The NIV describes Rachel's death with the words "as she breathed her last" (Gen. 35:18). Literally, the Hebrew says, "as her soul went out" (הַנְּשָׁמָה יָצְתָה). As Jonah pouted about God's mercy to the people of Nineveh, he asked God to take his life (Jonah 4:3) – literally, take my soul from me (יָרָדָה נַפְשִׁי). As Elijah pleaded to God on behalf of a widow's dead son (1 Kgs. 17:21), he asked God to "let the boy's soul return to him" (יָרָדָה נַפְשׁוֹ). The Scriptures clearly teach that at death the soul leaves the body.

But where does the soul go once it leaves the body in death? To answer this question, we should first look at one place that is frequently suggested, the Hebrew term Sheol. The meaning of Sheol has been debated, and is usually defined in one of three ways.

The first and perhaps most common definition of Sheol is to equate it with the underworld, a dark, gloomy abode of departed spirits beneath the earth. The Assyrians, Babylonians, Egyptians and Greeks all believed in such a place. The Bible does describe Sheol as a deep, dark, gloomy place to which the dead go (Job. 10:21). Therefore it is held that Sheol is the Hebrew term for this universal belief in an underworld of souls.

However, this view has some difficulties. First of all, the Old Testament hardly ever designates those that go down to Sheol as "souls."<sup>1</sup> Secondly, the idea that the Hebrews shared in a belief in the underworld is based on the presupposition that as religions evolved they borrowed beliefs and concepts from the religions around them. This theory does not fit with the religion of Israel, which was in many ways far different from the heathen religions, and whose God did not tolerate syncretism of any kind. Furthermore, a similarity does not necessitate that two religions shared or borrowed beliefs. Just because the Canaanites believed in a fertility god who died and rose again year after year does not mean that Israel borrowed or shared this belief in resurrection. Finally, an Old Testament belief in the underworld would contradict the New Testament belief that souls depart either to heaven or to hell. Since the New Testament relies so

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<sup>1</sup> Heinrich Vogel, "The Old Testament Concept of the Soul," *WLQ* 61 (April 1964): 128.

heavily on the Old Testament, would it be possible for the New Testament to teach such a contradictory doctrine?<sup>2</sup>

A second interpretation of Sheol derives from the Septuagint's translation of the term. In every case but one, the Septuagint translates "Sheol" with the Greek word "Hades." In most instances in the New Testament, Hades means hell. Therefore it is assumed that the primary meaning of "Sheol" is "hell." It is acknowledged that Sheol does not mean hell in every instance, since a believer like Jacob planned on going there (Gen. 37:35), yet in most cases it should be translated "hell."

Yet the Old Testament passages that are cited as proof that Sheol means hell are not very convincing. Some passages are cited where Sheol is contrasted to heaven. "Though they dig down to the depths of the grave (Sheol), from there my hand will take them. Though they climb up to the heavens, from there I will bring them down" (Amos 9:2). But the contrast is not between eternal bliss and torment, but between height and depth. You could very rightly understand these passages to be talking about "sky" and "grave."

Other passages are cited that describe Sheol as far beneath the earth. "You have delivered me from the depths of the grave" (Ps. 86:13). It is questioned whether a regular grave would be considered far beneath the earth. Surely the psalmist must be referring to something far lower, hell. Harris however points out that the Hebrews had no deep mines or oil wells to compare for depth, and some royal tombs were dug thirty feet deep. Therefore it is possible that depth could be associated with graves.<sup>3</sup>

Another passage that is frequently used in Deut. 32:22. "For a fire has been kindled by my wrath, one that burns to the realm of death (Sheol) below." A fire burning in Sheol is thought to be a clear reference to hell. Yet this passage probably is just describing the extent of God's wrath. If God is in heaven, his wrath burns from there to the depths of the earth. Furthermore, this fiery wrath is manifested not in the realms below the earth, but in various ways on the earth (v.23-25).

There are a few passages where it is possible that hell is being described. Job 14:22 says of someone after death that "he feels but the pain of his own body and mourns only for himself." Here it appears that the soul is in pain and sorrow, supposedly in hell. But it is not only the soul that is in pain but the body as well (ר#ג). Furthermore, the context indicates that "the pain" is not knowing what is happening on earth (v.21). This passage seems to be a poetic way of describing that the only thing a dead person feels is the pain of knowing he is no longer in the land of the living.

Another passage is Is. 14:9-10. Here former leaders of the world who have departed to Sheol are mocking the king of Babylon who has joined them. Some have thought this proves that people are conscious in Sheol. However, this again just seems to be a poetic way of describing the great king of Babylon becoming like everyone else in death. In fact, verse 11 seems to indicate that the grave is being described, where maggots and worms cover the king.

A final passage is Proverbs. 23:14. In encouraging parents to discipline their children, the proverb instructs, "Punish him with the rod and save his soul from death (Sheol)." Some have insisted that since all people die, this proverb must be talking about something other than death. However, the promise could be that discipline will save a child from premature death, as Prov. 19:18 asserts.

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<sup>2</sup> Laird Harris, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980) 2: 892.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p.893

As has been shown, interpretation of Sheol often goes to two extremes. Liberal scholars often maintain that Sheol is another word for the underworld. Conservative Christians often insist that in most cases Sheol means hell. However there is a third interpretation that seems to define Sheol the best. According to this definition, Sheol is another term for the grave.

Sheol is often paralleled to other terms that refer to the grave, such as grave (רַבִּי), pit (רַבִּי), earth (צֶרֶם) and destruction (נִדְבָה). Psalm 88:3-6 is a good example of this. “For my soul is full of trouble and my life draws near the grave (Sheol). I am counted among those who go down to the pit (רַבִּי). I am like a man without strength. I am set apart with the dead, like the slain who lie in the grave (רַבִּי), whom you remember no more, who are cut off from you care.”

Sheol is often described as a place of dust, worms and decay, expressions associated with the grave. Isaiah 14:9-11 was already mentioned, where Sheol was associated with maggots and worms. Job 21 offers another example. In this chapter, Job laments that righteous people often suffer a hard life and an early death, while the wicked prosper and go down to the grave (Sheol) in peace (v.13). Job summarizes his frustration by saying “One man dies in full vigor, completely secure and at ease. Another man dies in bitterness of soul, never having enjoyed anything good. Side by side they lie in the *dust*, and *worms* cover them both (v.23, 25-26). Here Sheol is equated with the casualties of the grave.

Finally, the descriptions of Sheol as a place of darkness, gloom, silence, from which you cannot return do not have to be talking about the underworld. These things very nicely describe the conditions of a grave or tomb. It appears then that Sheol is “not the place where the souls of men go, but the place where their bodies go – the grave.”<sup>4</sup>

If the soul does not enter Sheol after it leaves the body, where does it go? Ecclesiastes 12:7 says, “and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.” Though this verse does not make a distinction between believers and unbelievers, it does say that a man’s spirit returns to God. Throughout the book Solomon maintains that God will bring the deeds of the wicked and righteous to judgment (3:17, 12:14), and so it is assumed that once the spirit is judged by God, it goes to the place the Lord assigns him. Where or what that place is the book of Ecclesiastes does not mention.

Although it does not appear that the Old Testament says where the souls of unbelievers go, there are some passages that perhaps speak of the fate of the believer. Gen. 25:8 says that Abraham “was gathered to his people.” What is interesting is that Abraham’s being “gathered to his people” is distinguished from his death and his burial. The same is also said of Isaac (Gen. 35:29) and Jacob (Gen. 49:29,31,33). Some have said that “gathered to his people” is just another way of saying that these three patriarchs joined their ancestors in death. But the fact that it is distinguished from death and burial leaves the possibility that these words describe Abraham, Isaac and Jacob joining their fellow departed believers in heaven.

There are also a number of proverbs that seem to be talking about the fate of the believer after death. Prov. 14:32 says “When calamity comes, the wicked are brought down, but even in death the righteous have a refuge.” The “refuge in death” for the righteous seems to hint at life in heaven. However it is possible to understand this passage in another way. When a calamity that could cause death comes upon the wicked, he will die. However, when death threatens a righteous man, God will rescue him.

Prov. 15:24 says “The path of life leads upward for the wise, to keep him from going down to the grave (Sheol).” The path “upward” again hints at heaven. But if Sheol means grave, then

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 893

“upward” could just be in contrast to going “down” to death. This would then be another passage that describes God rescuing the righteous from death.

Prov. 12:28 says “In the way of righteousness there is life; along that path is immortality (תְּוֹפֵל ) אֶ- no death). This is a pretty clear Old Testament statement for life after death. However, whether this is talking about life immediately after death or after the Last Day is not stated.

Finally, in the psalms and proverbs there are many passages that talk about life (Ps. 133:3), future (Num. 23:10), gazing on the Lord (Ps. 27:4), and the Lord leading his people (Ps. 139:24). In examining these passages one should avoid two extremes. On the one side are those who will deny even the clearest passages that speak about immortality. Robert Martin-Achard maintains that even Psalms 16, 49 and 73 do not explicitly talk about life after death. The afterlife is not on the minds of the psalmists; they are only concerned about their present life with God. Behind this communion with God might be the hope that the bond will not be broken, but that is not the issue.<sup>5</sup>

On the other side are those who believe that every passage that talks about life or future is expressing the hope of life beyond the grave. Mitchell Dahood holds that “eternity” is an essential part of the Hebrew concept of life, and therefore it would have been superfluous for them to qualify the term “life” with “eternal.” For them the eternal aspect of life would have been obvious.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, Dahood feels that the afterlife is found throughout the psalms.

Probably the best way to deal with these psalms is somewhere in the middle of these two extremes. Passages like Ps. 16:10, 17:15, 49:15, and 73:24 clearly speak about life beyond the grave, and one should not shy from stating as much. At the same time, one must recognize that even these passages do not clarify whether they are speaking about life immediately after death or life after Judgment Day. On the other hand, passages that aren’t so clear should be examined individually within their own context. Even after a thorough study, a definite conclusion might not be reached as to whether the afterlife is in view or not. On both sides, one should be careful not to say too much.

Even though the Jewish woman’s belief on where the soul goes after death was wrong, she probably understood the Old Testament’s teaching on the afterlife better than I did. There is no explicit reference to the soul suffering in hell once it leaves the body. There is no explicit reference to the soul of the believer going to be with his Lord (though there are more implicit). Even though the Old Testament says very little on the intermediate state of the soul, this should not surprise us. The New Testament says little too. The ultimate goal, to which both Old and New Testament believers fix their eyes is the Last Day when soul and body together rise to be with the Lord forever.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life* (London: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), 180-181

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell Dahood, *The Anchor Bible: Psalms III* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970) xlvi