

Sheol: The Old Testament Consensus

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There were 400 silent years – a gap between the closing of the Old Testament prophets and the writing of the New Testament. During this time the doctrine of the intermediate state (that state between death and the resurrection) underwent a sort of evolution. Jews became immersed in pagan communities which held to the doctrine made popular by Greek philosophy: the immortality of the soul.



The Judaism that emerged from this period was not consistent on the issue of the intermediate state. Some Jews adapted the Greek concept almost whole cloth. They conceded that all human souls are immortal, and understood "that the souls of the righteous proceeded immediately to heaven at their deaths, there to await the resurrection of their bodies, while the souls of the wicked remained in Sheol."¹ For them, Sheol became a place entirely associated with the punishment of the wicked, although their own scriptures insist that *Sheol* contains the righteous as well.²

Other Jews were not willing to concede that Sheol was exclusively for the wicked. Instead, they imagined "that there was a spatial separation in the underworld between the godly and the ungodly."³ These retained the Old Testament idea that all souls go to *Sheol* at death, adding only the Greek concept that these souls are immortal, and conscious of being in *Sheol* – or as the Greeks called it — Hades.

By the New Testament era, a third view (or a variation of the second) apparently became popular among the Jewish sect known as the Pharisees. Jesus must have accommodated one of their own stories when he told the Pharisees about the rich man and Lazarus.⁴ In that story, the rich man dies and ends up in Hades, while Lazarus is carried bodily to a place called Abraham's Bosom. The irony was not lost on the Pharisees, who would have expected just the opposite. For them, riches were a sign of the LORD's blessing, while poverty was viewed as a curse. Jesus used the story to warn the Pharisees that their godless greed was disobedience to the very laws they were trusting in for their salvation.

By using that story, Jesus was by no means condoning its theology. After all, he was not declaring doctrine to his disciples. He was speaking to a group who stood in opposition to his teachings. If Jesus were teaching his disciples about the intermediate state, his words would have conformed to the Old Testament consensus.

The best place to look for answers about the intermediate state is in the Old Testament. God's people struggled with this question for millennia before Plato was born. One has every right to expect God's word to provide answers, and for those answers to be consistent. The vast majority of biblical references to the intermediate state are in the Old Testament.⁵ By the time the Old Testament was completed, a theological consensus was clearly revealed. This Old Testament consensus reveals that *Sheol* is a much different place than that imagined by syncretistic 2nd Temple Judaism.

Sheol is Down There

When Jacob was told that his son Joseph had been killed by some wild animal, he was distraught. He imagined that Joseph was dead, down underneath the earth somewhere. Jacob was so upset that he thought he would die of grief. He tells his children who are trying to comfort him "No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning"⁶ This first reference to Sheol in the Bible reveals that the intermediate state is not a mystery that no one knows about. Jacob apparently knew that all people go there at death.

Jacob also knew that in some way *Sheol* is *down there*. The rest of the Old Testament has a number of references to *Sheol* that utilize the verb root that Jacob used: *yarad* – to go down or descend.⁷ Other verb roots used with Sheol portray the same idea: *nachat* – to go down⁸, and *shafel* – to be or become low.⁹ Both people from within the covenant community and those without went in the same direction at death.

Some have suggested that these are all references to being buried in the grave, and that *Sheol* is merely a reference to what happens to the body. Thus Sheol would be taken as a synonym for *Qever* – the grave or tomb. But Jacob could not have been referring to a literal grave, since Joseph's body was not found to bury.

Also, Sheol is normally associated with death in poetic parallels, not the grave. Of all the references to Sheol in the Old Testament, none directly parallel

with *Qever*. However, the term Sheol is often paralleled with synonyms for the grave, like *Bor*, the pit,¹⁰ and *Abaddon*, destruction.¹¹ This leads to the conclusion that the term Sheol has something in common with the grave, but cannot be equated with the actual grave itself. Although *Sheol* is often described as if it were a location, its Old Testament use leads to the conclusion that it more specifically refers to the human state after death. The location for the dead (at least those who are buried) is the grave. Their condition is Sheol.

This was the conclusion of Eric Lewis, whose examination of the 65 references to *Sheol* in the Old Testament led him to the conclusion that the term specified "not the place of interment, nor a presumed locality of departed spirits, but the condition of death, the death-state."¹² Lewis suggested that a synonym for Sheol emphasizing this connotation is *Gravedom*. But how does one reconcile the idea that *Sheol* is a state with all these references to a direction (down there)?

Sheol is of Extreme Depth

Sheol is to *down* as heaven is to *up*. It is not simply six feet under. Moses spoke of the fire of God's anger burning to the depths of Sheol.¹³ Zophar said that God's limit is higher than heaven and deeper than Sheol.¹⁴ David described the LORD's deliverance as being from the depths of Sheol.¹⁵ When describing God's omnipresence he said "If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!"¹⁶ The LORD complained through Isaiah that Israel

prostituted herself by sending envoys to all far-off lands, even sending them down to Sheol.¹⁷

His words through Amos describe the extent to which God was determined to go to bring punishment upon his own disobedient people:

If they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; if they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. If they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search them out and take them; and if they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the serpent, and it shall bite them. And if they go into captivity before their enemies, there I will command the sword, and it shall kill them; and I will fix my eyes upon them for evil and not for good.¹⁸

Here again, Sheol is contrasted with heaven – not because it is a place of suffering and heaven a place of pleasure. Heaven is listed because it is a high place – like the top of Mt. Carmel. Sheol is mentioned because it is a low place, like the bottom of the sea.

Perhaps the ancient Hebrews imagined Sheol an extremely deep place because of the mystery surrounding it. Perhaps it was thought so because people went there and did not come back. Perhaps it was regarded so because it was a mystery – hidden to everyone except God himself.¹⁹ Regardless, when the Old Testament saints spoke of Sheol it was obviously not synonymous with heaven. It was the exact opposite. Yet this is the place that all souls entered at death.

Sheol is Silent

Another stark contrast the Old Testament presents when comparing Sheol to heaven is the activity they describe to each place. Heaven and earth are places

where God is praised continually.²⁰ But when the soul reaches Sheol that praise stops abruptly. David prays for God to "let the wicked be put to shame; let them go silently to Sheol."²¹ The deaths of his enemies would not only silence them upon earth, it would silence them in the underworld as well. Sheol is a place where the once mighty now lie still.²² It is the land of silence, where the dead go down to silence.²³

Hezekiah prays that God would rescue him from his sickness because "Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness."²⁴ What he was saying was that if he died, his praises would stop. Sheol was a place of silence for both the believer and the unbeliever. For that reason, it makes sense for King Hezekiah to plead with God to rescue him from death. His death would not glorify God. His rescue would — and did.

David had a similar experience when he was in threat of death, and he prayed for God to deliver him "For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?"²⁵ His plea is so like that of Hezekiah that they mark a certain approach to the whole concept of Sheol. To these two people of God, there was no afterlife. There was merely silence and stillness – a waiting on God to perhaps rescue by resurrection. To neither of these Old Testament saints would a residence in Sheol be considered a goal to attain. For both of them it was an inevitable consequence of their own mortality – to be avoided at all costs.

David's son Solomon had an insatiable curiosity, and set his mind to study everything that could be studied. He wrote thousands of proverbs encapsulating his wisdom, and composed over one thousand songs.²⁶ His "wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east and all the wisdom of Egypt."²⁷ Yet when he described Sheol, he merely warned his readers to do whatever they wanted to do before death, because "there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going."²⁸ His studied assessment of Sheol agreed with the Old Testament consensus. He saw it as a place where the thoughts are silenced.

Sheol is Dark

Other characteristics of *Sheol* found in the Old Testament consensus do not match modern views of the afterlife. Job described a person in *Sheol* as spreading out his bed in darkness.²⁹ He described *Sheol* as "the land of darkness and deep shadow, the land of gloom like thick darkness, like deep shadow without any order, where light is as thick darkness."³⁰ David describes those "long dead" as "sitting in darkness."³¹ Jeremiah described "the dead of long ago" as dwelling in darkness now.³² If *Sheol* is a place, then darkness might only imply a lack of visual awareness in that place. If *Sheol* is a state, then these references to darkness would imply a lack of cognitive awareness in that state.

Sheol is Sleep

David prayed to the LORD, "Consider and answer me, O LORD my God; light up my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death."³³ He anticipated that his death would find him in *Sheol* and doing what all others in *Sheol* are doing: not praising, not singing, not playing golden harps. He defined existence in *Sheol* as sleeping the sleep of death. The exact phrase "slept with his fathers" is found 36 times in the Old Testament.³⁴ It was a common expression used to describe the fact that someone had died.

Daniel described existence in Sheol as sleeping in the dust of the earth.³⁵ It was a condition which required an awakening – a resurrection. This sleep was never the hope of Old Testament saints. The resurrection and restoration to life was the hope. Sleep was simply a way of describing the state of death itself. Jesus used the same terminology to describe the death-state of Jairus' daughter.³⁶ He said of Lazarus (in Sheol) that he had "fallen asleep, but I go to awaken him".³⁷

Conditionlists prefer to use the term sleep to describe the intermediate state for several reasons, among them: 1) it is used by the scripture itself; 2) it emphasizes the need for resurrection; 3) it

places the hope of humanity not in the death-state itself, but in the LORD who will raise (awaken) the dead.

Sheol is Universal

The thing most stressed in the Old Testament concerning *Sheol* is that it is synonymous with death itself. In the New Testament, this is seen by the terms *death and Hades* appearing next to each other.³⁸ All those who die (the event) experience *Hades (the state)*. In the Old Testament, this fact is seen in numerous passages where death and *Sheol* are placed in parallel. David, for example says "the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me."³⁹ He also says "in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise?"⁴⁰

Other psalmists reflect the same association between death as an event, and Sheol as the state it initiates. The sons of Korah say of the foolish "Like sheep they are appointed for Sheol; Death shall be their shepherd"⁴¹ Ethan the Ezrahite proclaims "What man can live and never see death? Who can deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?"⁴²

Hannah prayed "The LORD kills and brings to life; he brings down to Sheol and raises up."⁴³ The theology of her prayer is impeccable. To die is to be brought down to Sheol, where all the other dead are. To be rescued from that condition is to be brought back to life, and that is something that only the LORD can do.

Summary

Sheol, then, is a silent, dark state or condition in which everyone exists at death, and can only live again by a resurrection from the LORD. It is always contrasted with heaven, and never equated with it. It is not the hope of the saints; rescue from it is the hope of the saints. That is the Old Testament consensus.

Footnotes

1. Richard N. Longenecker, "Grave, Sheol, Pit, Hades, Gehenna, Abaddon, Hell" in Donald E. Gowan, ed. *The Westminster Theological Wordbook of the Bible*. (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2003), 189.

2. Hezekiah, for example, lamented that at the age of 39 he must walk through the gates of Sheol, being deprived of the rest of his years Isaiah 38:10. And David spoke of his hope that God would rescue him from death by saying confidently that God would not abandon him to Sheol Psalm 16:10. Both of these men of God understood entering Sheol as synonymous with dying.

3. *The Bible and the Future*

4. Luke 16:19-31.

5. References to Sheol in the Old Testament outnumber those of Hades in the New Testament over 6 to 1. Also, most of the New Testament references merely use the term Hades without explaining it.

6. Genesis 37:35.

7. Genesis 42:38, 44:29, 31; Num. 16:30, 33; 1 Sam. 2:6; 1 Kings 2:6, 9; Job 7:9, 17:16; Psalm 55:15; Prov. 1:12, 5:5, 7:27; Isaiah 14:11, 15; Ezekiel 31:15, 16, 17, 32:21, 27.

8. Job 21:13

9. Isaiah 57:9.

10. Psalm 30:3; Prov. 1:12; Isaiah 14:15, 38:18; Ezekiel 31:16.

11. Job 26:6; Prov. 15:11, 27:20.

12. Eric Lewis, Christ, The First Fruits (Boston: Warren Press, 1949), 48.

13. Deuteronomy 32:22.

14. Job. 11:8.

15. Psalm 86:13.

16. Psalm 139:8.

17. Isaiah 57:9.

18. Amos 9:2-4.

19. Job 26:6; Prov. 15:11.

20. Psalm 69:34, 113:3, 145:3-7, 148:2.

21. Psalm 31:17.

22. Ezekiel 32:21, 27.

23. Psalm 94:17, 115:17.

24. Isaiah 38:18.

25. Psalm 6:5.

26. 1 Kings 4:32.

27. 1 Kings 4:30.

28. Ecclesiastes 9:10.

29. Job 17:13.

30. Job 10:21-22.

31. Psalm 143:3.

32. Lamentations 3:6.

33. Psalm 13:3.

34. 1 Kings 2:10, 11:21, 43, 14:20, 31, 15:8, 24, 16:6, 28, 22:40, 50; 2 Kings 8:24, 10:35, 13:9, 13, 14:16, 22, 29, 15:7, 22, 38, 16:20, 20:21, 21:18, 24:6; 2 Chr. 9:31, 12:16, 14:1, 16:13, 21:1, 26:2, 23, 27:9, 28:27, 32:33, 33:20.

35. Daniel 12:2.

36. Matt. 9:24; Mark 5:39; Luke 8:52.

37. John 11:11.

38. Rev. 1:8, 6:8, 20:13-14.

39. 2 Samuel 22:6.

40. Psalm 6:5.

41. Psalm 49:14.

42. Psalm 89:48.

43. 1 Samuel 2:6.