

Where are the dead? The State of the Dead in the OT

Intro: In our first lesson we looked at the nature of man learning that each of us has a bi-part or tri-part nature (body, soul, and spirit) and that death is the separation of the soul/spirit from the body. In our second lesson we learned that the soul/spirit continues after death in a conscious state.

What can we know about this disembodied state? What does the Bible call the place where the dead reside and what is the state of people there? Tonight our lesson focuses on the OT teaching concerning the state of the dead.

Sheol is the most frequent OT term for the realm of the dead (66 times).

Its meaning

Hebrew lexicographer Gesenius suggested that it comes from a weakened form of the root from which is derived the words for a hollow hand (Is. 40:12) and a hollow way (between vineyards, Nu. 22:24). In post-biblical Heb. means the ‘deep’ of the sea. If this derivation is correct, the original sense will be the hollow, or more probably deep place. This fits well with other parallel descriptions of Sheol.

Some scholars hold the view that it is derived from the root meaning ‘ask’ or ‘inquire’. In this case it may have been originally the place of inquiry, where oracles could be obtained. The root is frequently used in the OT of consulting oracles, but the idea is certainly not a leading one in the conception of Sheol.

Its use

It is the place to which both the righteous and wicked go at death.
And he said, “Surely I will go down to Sheol in mourning for my son.”
(Genesis 37:35)

It is used a parallel expression for death itself.

The cords of Sheol surrounded me; The snares of death confronted me.
(Psalm 18:5)

Though both good and evil went to Sheol, premature entrance into “sheol” was often thought about as an evidence of God’s judgment or punishment.

For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol; neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay. (Psalm 16:10)

Thus Sheol is depicted as a place below the surface of the earth where the departed spirits go.

Other OT terms for the realm of the dead

Pit (Heb. “bor”)

Notice also a second description for the realm of the dead, “the pit”. (Hebrew words “bor” and “shachat”)

The first word literally referred to a “deep hole in the ground” and is often used in parallel with “sheol” as well.

O Lord, Thou hast brought up my soul from Sheol; Thou hast kept me alive, that I should not go down to the pit. (Psalm 30:3)

The earth below or the Nether world (In English this means “lower world” or the “underworld”)

For thus says the Lord God, “When I shall make you a desolate city, like the cities which are not inhabited, when I shall bring up the deep over you, and the great waters will cover you, then I shall bring you down with those who go down to the pit, to the people of old, and I shall make you dwell in the lower parts of the earth, like the ancient waste places, with those who go down to the pit, so that you will not be inhabited; but I shall set glory in the land of the living. (Ezekiel 26:19-20)

Ezekiel prophesies against Tyre for it sins against Israel. God is pictured as making the wicked go down to the “pit” (NASV) or the “lower earth. In Hebrew Ezekiel uses the term “arets tahtiyoth”. It is the place where the ancient people, whose places were laid waste by God, have gone. These are now going to join them there.

Abbadon

Sheol and Abaddon are never satisfied, nor are the eyes of man ever satisfied. (Proverbs 27:20)

The word means “destruction” and is based on the conception that death is often a means of destruction by God.

Summary: All these terms it appears refer to a place to which departed spirits go beneath the earth. It is not merely a grave, but the realm of death or destruction, the abode of departed spirits. However, note that in the OT there does not appear to be divisions in Sheol or any names that distinguish between the place of the righteous and the place of the wicked. The faithful associated whatever blessing they received from God primarily in terms of continuing their earth life and serving Him there and avoiding Sheol.

Concepts of life after death during the inter-testamental period show an advancement in the concept in the form of divisions within Sheol.

Perhaps the Jews made inferences from the justice of God that a distinction would be made between the righteous and wicked in the intermediate state as He had done on earth.

Also the common phrase describing the death of the righteous was the idea of being gathered to one’s people or fathers. Such a description might have fostered the concept of separate locations in the realm of Sheol.

In the later Jewish literature, in the apocalyptic book of Enoch we meet with divisions within Sheol for the wicked and the righteous, in which each experiences a foretaste of his final destiny (Enoch 22:1-14). Enoch presents four divisions or “hollow places”.

A place for spirits of the righteous (with a bright spring of water)

A place for sinners who are buried (and who experienced no judgment of God in their lifetime but now experiences pain until the judgment day)

A place for righteous spirits who have a "suit" to present to God for judgment (Abel is one of them who seeks judgment for his death by Cain)

A place for sinners "complete in transgression" (will not be slain in judgment or raised from death but continue to suffer forever)

Though these pictures are interesting, it is unlikely that Enoch was a prophet of God and thus, these pictures suggest the thinking of an inter-testamental writer about the afterlife.

Josephus, who was a Pharisee gave a description to the Greeks of the first century Pharisees' conception of the afterlife.

"Now as to Hades, wherein the souls of the righteous and unrighteous are detained, it is necessary to speak of it. Hades is a place in the world not regularly finished; a subterraneous region, where the light of this world does not shine . . . This region is allowed as a place of custody for souls, in which angels are appointed as guardians to them. . . the just are guided to the right hand, and are led with hymns sung by the angels appointed over that place, unto a region of light. . . with whom there is no place of toil, no burning heat, no piercing cold, . . . while they wait for that rest and eternal new life in heaven, which is to succeed this region. This place we call The Bosom of Abraham. But as to the unjust, they are dragged by force to the left hand, by the angels allotted for punishment, no longer going with a good will. . . Now those angels that are set over these souls, drag them into the neighborhood of hell itself; who, when they are hard by it, continually hear the noise of it, and do not stand clear of the hot vapour itself; but when they have a nearer view of this spectacle, as of a terrible and exceeding great prospect of fire, they are struck with a fearful expectation of a future judgment, and in effect punished thereby. . . even hereby are they punished; for a chasm deep and large is fixed between them; insomuch that a just man that hath compassion upon them, cannot be admitted, nor can one that is unjust, if he were bold enough to attempt it, pass over it." (Josephus Complete Works, trans. by William Whiston, p.637)

Conclusion: In the OT generally, the emphasis seems to have been on the contrast between life and death itself. In the providence and justice of God, the righteous considered God's blessing to be upon them by the preservation of life as opposed to being cut off and going down to Sheol prematurely in an act of judgment.

It seems reasonable that the Jewish sense of God's justice might be extended beyond the grave to suggest that God would likewise make a distinction in the state of the righteous and the wicked living in the intermediate state. This

**inference seems to have been made by Jews in the intertestamental period,
inferences that find support in God's NT revelation.**