

Where are the Dead?

NT Teaching on the intermediate state

Intro: In our last lesson we looked at some of terms for the realm of the dead in the OT (Sheol, Pit, Netherworld, Abbadon). These terms convey the idea of a place of conscious existence of the spirit after death; but one of the principle concepts of the OT is the idea that to be brought to Sheol (at least prematurely) is an indication of humiliation and judgment.

The concepts of the afterlife development during the inter-testamental period seem to infer that there should be distinctions in the realm of the dead between the righteous and the wicked. These distinctions may derive from a sense of God's justice and from OT statements that depict the wicked being brought into the presence of other wicked men and the righteous being brought to their fathers. Hence in the literature between the testaments we find such concepts as partitions in Sheol and a place of rest called "Abraham's bosom" where the righteous exist after death).

In this lesson let's continue our investigation by considering the terms in the NT for the afterlife. We should not be surprised to see that the NT language often continues the ideas suggested by the OT terms.

The Abyss

The Greek word abyssos ('bottomless [pit]', 'deep') appears 9 times in the NT. It is once used to describe the place of the dead.

or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead)." (Romans 10:7)

This text comports well OT verses that speak of "death" as a "deep place" or "pit". And remember that this "pit" is used synonymously with Sheol.

Hades

Meaning

Vine comments: "It has been thought by some that the word etymologically meant the unseen (from *a*, negative, and *eido*, to see), but this derivation is questionable; a more probable derivation is from *hadosu*, signifying all-receiving." In Greek culture Hades was god of the underworld and the realm of death was divided into two sections, Elysium and Tartarus.

We should remember that Greek translators of the OT substituted the word "Hades" for Sheol. They were appropriating a word from the Greek language and culture. It is not surprising that the NT usages of Hades should often parallel the OT concepts of Sheol. In fact, in several texts OT language is being quoted or applied and we should expect a similar usage to the OT concepts.

Consider Jesus' statement concerning the judgment of Capernaum.

“And you, Capernaum, will not be exalted to heaven, will you? You shall descend to Hades; for if the miracles had occurred in Sodom which occurred in you, it would have remained to this day. (Matthew 11:23)

This text seems to build upon OT texts concerning sinful peoples and nations like Babylon and their ultimate destruction:

“But you said in your heart, ‘I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. ‘I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High’. Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit. (Isaiah 14:13-15)

Remember that in the OT, “descent into Sheol” had connotations of judgment. Jesus appears to use the word “Hades” as one might use the expression Sheol. It conveys the idea of humiliation and punishment in death in contrast to exaltation and salvation in life.

Consider Jesus’ statement concerning the church.

“And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades shall not overpower it. (Matthew 16:18)

Here Jesus again uses the OT conception of Sheol as a city with gates where the dead go and are held. Hezekiah used this expression:

I said, “In the middle of my life I am to enter the gates of Sheol; I am to be deprived of the rest of my years.” (Isaiah 38:10)

Here it appears “gates of Hades” might be synonymous with “the powers of death”. The passage could have several meanings:

Jesus might be saying, “I will build my church and it will never die!” In this sense the idea builds upon Daniel’s “kingdom that will never be destroyed” (Dan. 2:44).

Another possible meaning closely related is that though the church Jesus built would be subject to the powers of death, it would not be held by death’s gates. The church would be raised from death. Perhaps Jesus’ words to the church about to enter a period of persecution and death reflect this idea:

“Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living One; and I was dead, and behold, I am alive forevermore, and I have the keys of death and of Hades. (Revelation 1:17b-18)

Would the implication where be that the church would go into Hades; yet they need not fear, since Jesus has power over it?

Consider Jesus’ discussion of the rich man and Lazarus (Lk. 16:19-31)

For the first time in Scripture we see clearly the idea of a division in the afterlife between the righteous and the wicked.

That this is a picture of the intermediate state is evidenced by the existence of life on earth while these are dead.

Notice that the rich man is in “Hades” (it is unfortunate that the KJV translators chose to translate this as “hell”, leaving the wrong impression about this being the final state of punishment after the judgment, i.e. “Gehenna”). The rich man is not in “Gehenna” but “Hades”; yet he is in a state of torment. He is pictured as being in “flames”.

Lazarus in contrast is said to be in “Abraham’s bosom”.

Remember that this term was already used by Jews in the inter-testamental period and may be derived from the OT concept of “gathering to fathers”. It derives from figure of a close embrace of a child in the bosom of his father. It is a perfect picture of peace and security.

Is Abraham’s bosom also a part of Hades? Some say yes; others no. But what is clear that in the intermediate state there is a clear distinction in the condition of the righteous and the wicked.

Consider Peter’s discussion of the resurrection of Christ (Ac. 2)

‘For David says of Him, ‘I was always beholding the Lord in my presence; for He is at my right hand, that I may not be shaken.

‘Therefore my heart was glad and my tongue exulted; moreover my flesh also will abide in hope; Because Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, nor allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay. ‘Thou hast made known to me the ways of life; Thou wilt make me full of gladness with Thy presence.’ (Acts 2:25-28)

Peter used David’s 16th psalm as evidence that the Spirit of God revealed the resurrection of Jesus. It is interesting in the context of Psalm 16 to notice that the emphasis in David’s statement seems to be that he as a righteous man would not die, but instead would live. This is in keeping with the OT conception we pointed out earlier that to be “brought down to Sheol” was to be punished by God.

But Peter’s use makes clear that there was a deeper underlying meaning in David’s words. Whatever deliverance David might have expected from God could not ultimately save him from the death and corruption that all men must face as mortal beings. Hence, David himself could not totally fulfill these words. They would find their fulfillment in the “son of David” who was not “abandoned to Sheol” nor “whose flesh suffered decay”.

If in David’s case the words “abandoned to Sheol” suggested “will not die”, they certainly cannot have that meaning with Jesus Christ.

Instead the deeper underlying meaning must be “left in Sheol”. Here then we see that Jesus Himself in His death is pictured in the prophetic text as going to the Hadean realm and coming forth victorious from it.

Finally consider John’s statement of the resurrection.

And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. And death and Hades were thrown

*into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire.
(Revelation 20:13-14)*

It appears that in this text Hades is a general description for the realm of the dead. Death comes and Hades follows to receive the dead (Cf. Rev. 6:8). Now John pictures Hades giving up the dead and the inhabitants being judged. The language seems to suggest the possibility of either reward or punishment—“if” anyone was not found in the book of life.

“Hades” having been emptied of its inhabitants is itself an enemy of God (personified) and thus is judged as such by being thrown into the lake of fire.

Hades then seems to be a general name for the realm of the dead, comparable to the OT Sheol. The term is appropriated by NT writers since it already functioned in the language as the place of death, without implying agreement with the Greek culture. It is the place to which to both the righteous and wicked go. However, there is revealed a distinction in the state of those who go to Hades—some in torment, others comforted. This is consistent with the developing concepts we spoke about last week among the Jews in the inter-testamental period.