

THE MEANING OF THE WORD SHEOL AS SHOWN BY PARALLELS  
IN POETIC TEXTS  
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The meaning of the word Sheol is important both in Old Testament theology and cosmology. It is usually said, e.g. in the ISBE, Brown, Driver and Briggs Hebrew Lexicon, Hastings Bible Dictionary, etc., that Sheol is the place of departed spirits. Inasmuch as Sheol is often located as "down" in the Old Testament, the Hebrew cosmology is said to include a subterranean gloomy place like the Babylonian nether-world or Greek Hades. As both righteous and wicked go to Sheol, a two-compartment theory has been advocated with Christ delivering those in the better compartment on the occasion of his descent to hell and ascent to heaven referred to in Ephesians 4:8 and I Peter 3:20.

With all of this the writer has long been dissatisfied. I do not believe that Ephesians 4:8 refers to a descent to hell. It merely argues that the one giving gifts to men is the one who descended from heaven to the earth beneath (not lower parts of the earth) and then reascended. The verse quotes from Psalm 68:18 which tells in highly figurative language of God's victory over his foes. Paul interprets this of the victory of Christ over death, identifying the God who ascended with Christ who first descended in His incarnation.

Nor do I think that I Peter 3:20 teaches a descent of Christ to hell. I am satisfied with the exegesis that holds that it refers to a previous preaching in Noah's day. The argument of Peter touches on Noah's deliverance as a type of baptism. Noah's generation perished. They are the souls in prison. But they were warned by Christ who by the Spirit speaking through Noah preached to those sinners while the ark was preparing. Christ did not Himself go to the prison to preach to them. By the Spirit, He had preached to those souls who are now in prison. Christ did not descend to hell. Indeed, He told the thief that He was going to paradise—a place which Paul equates with the third heaven (II Cor. 12:2 f.)

Then did all men go to Sheol and what is Sheol? For some time I had thought and taught that Sheol in the early books merely meant "grave" and that in the course of time through the progress of revelation it came to mean in Proverbs, Isaiah, and Ezekiel a place of punishment for the wicked. This is the view expressed by Alexander Heidel in a very helpful excursus on this subject in *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago, 1946) pp. 170-207. More recent study, especially of passages where the word Sheol is used in poetic parallel with its synonyms, has made me incline to the view that Sheol simply means "the grave." If this be correct, then elaborate cosmologies built upon the concept of Sheol as the place of departed spirits and also teachings of soul sleep based on sleep in Sheol are all poorly founded.

The word Sheol is of uncertain etymology and is not to my knowledge used in ancient cognate languages. It is used once in a Jewish Aramaic text in the papyri from Elephantine where it clearly means just "the grave."<sup>1</sup> It is used 65 times in the Old Testament and a concordance is a pretty good tool to use in its study. I think that by classifying similar verses together we can touch on all the instances of usage.

Sheol is used four times in Genesis. Jacob is said to be in danger of going down to Sheol, mourning for his son. Genesis 44:31, though not poetic, has "death" in parallel with "going down to Sheol." The translation "grave" as in AV is suitable and widely acknowledged as correct.

Next the word is used in Numbers 16:30 and 33 where Korah and his company "went down quick into the pit (Sheol)." But not only did Korah and his fellows go to Sheol, his houses and goods also went down. His tents and things surely did not go to the place of departed spirits! The obvious meaning is that he and his goods were all buried alive in the earth. It is not stated in the text that Sheol was an underground cavity and that a hole was opened in the earth whereby Korah and his friends went down. This is not stated and should not be inferred. Korah was simply buried alive.

Sheol is used again in Deuteronomy 32:22. God's anger will burn "unto the lowest hell." This does not sound like the "grave." But remember that the Hebrew does not say "lowest." The word simply means "beneath." The word is *tahtit* and is used for the nether millstone, etc. The parallels in Deuteronomy 32 are "the earth and its produce" and "the foundations of the mountains." These are physical items. God's anger will burn down into the earth as far down as the Hebrews could imagine. It should be remembered that some ancient graves were deep. The Royal Tombs at Ur excavated by Woolley were 30 feet deep! Also remember that the Hebrews had no conception of a mean sea level used as a reference point for altitudes. For instance, the "waters under the earth" of the second commandment are not a subterranean lake. They are merely waters below shore line where fish live. This is easily seen from the context. The commandment prohibits images of things in the heaven, i.e. birds, moon, stars, lightning, etc. Then it prohibits images of things in the earth beneath, i.e. animals, men, trees, etc. Then it prohibits images of anything in the "waters under the earth." Surely this means images of fish who do not dwell in a subterranean lake, but below the water's edge in oceans, lakes, and rivers. So in Deuteronomy 32:22 "Sheol beneath" simply means a deep grave. No abode of anybody is mentioned in the context.

There are two passages in Samuel, both poetic: I Samuel 2:6 says that the Lord "brings down to Sheol and brings up." In the context, Hannah is exalting the Lord's power and goodness. The poetic parallel is "the Lord kills and makes alive," i.e. saves alive. "Bringing up from Sheol" has nothing to do with shades or with resurrection. It merely means preserving from death, in this context. The usage for "grave" is quite like that in Genesis. II Samuel 22:6 is a passage parallel to Psalm 18:5. It says that God saves from the "sorrows of Sheol." The phrase is parallel to the "traps of death." The previous verse refers to the "waves of death" and "floods of ungodly men." David is talking about death and the grave. He speaks of them as the king of terrors, as we would say. But no abode of departed spirits is in view.

In I Kings 2:6 and 7 the aged David advises Solomon to bring down Joab and Shimei to Sheol, i.e. to kill them. To bring them down to the grave is all that is implied.

There are eight passages in Job. Six of these have poetic parallels and in some cases these clarify the conception. Job 17:13 and 16 are clear: "If I wait, Sheol is mine house, I have made my bed in the darkness." This is explained in vs. 14 as the place of corruption and the worm. Clearly it means, "lie down in the grave." Verse 16 puts the "bars of Sheol" in parallel with "resting in the dust." Though the expression, "bars of Sheol," is used, this need only be a figure of speech similar to the "bars of the sea." Heidegger refers to this and compares such figures as the "hand of Sheol," the "mouth of the earth," (Gen. 4:11), etc.<sup>2</sup> The passage clearly uses Sheol to mean "the grave." It does not teach that the departed spirits dwell in darkness; it only says that the dead body in the grave is in darkness. Job 24:19 is similar. It says that as heat melts snow, so Sheol consumes those who have sinned. This does not teach annihilation of the wicked. The next verse says, "the worm shall feed on him."

It teaches the decomposition of the body in the grave. Only the wicked are referred to here, but that is because in the context the wicked who think themselves secure are the ones in view.

The other verses in Job are not so clear, but will all bear this meaning. Job 7:9, like a fading cloud, he that "goeth down to Sheol shall come up no more." The context is talking about death. In the grave the body wastes away. What happens to the personality, the verses do not say. That was Job's problem at the moment! Job 14:13 is similar, "O that thou wouldest hide me in the grave." This is equivalent to wishing for death. In passing, may I suggest that this passage teaches resurrection as well as does the more famous one in Job 19:25. Job here poses the problem of a tree cut down which yet will yield a second growth. But man of much more worth dies and what happens? Apparently nothing happens, but this is illogical. So in verse 14 Job declares with confidence that he will wait "until my change comes." What is not clear from the translation is that the word "change" in vs. 14 is derived from the same root as is "second growth" in vs. 7. In effect Job is expressing his faith that somehow for man too God has reserved a "second growth," a resurrection. It reminds one of Franklin's epitaph in which he expresses his confidence that God will bring the old book out in a new edition!

Job 21:13: That the wicked "in a moment go down to Sheol" is more of a problem. It was a problem to Job. The wicked have an easy death while Job suffers. Verses 23ff. say that one man dies easily, another in bitterness. They lie down in the dust alike, worms cover both. This is to say that all go to Sheol, to the grave. But here Job sees further. In vs. 30 the wicked are said to be reserved to the day of destruction. This is not said to be Sheol or a lower part of Sheol. This is paralleled to being brought forth to the day of wrath.

In Job 11:8 Sheol is simply the deep, opposite of high heaven. It is like Deuteronomy 32:22 already discussed. In Job 26:6 there is more uncertainty. Here Sheol is paralleled with Abaddon as both being known to God. This would be true for both the grave and hell. Not much can be proved from this for any view.

In the Psalms there are 15 passages—more than in any other book. Sheol is paralleled with "death" in 6 passages as follows: (1) Ps. 6:5, "In death there is no remembrance of thee, in Sheol who will give thanks." This merely speaks of the obvious fact that one day this poor stammering tongue will lie silent in the grave. (2) Psalm 18:5 was already treated as parallel to II Samuel 22:6. (3) Ps. 49:14,15, the wicked are "laid in Sheol, death shall feed on them." Heidel argues<sup>3</sup> here that verse 15 proves that Sheol is more than "grave" for verse 7 declares that all shall die and verse 15 says that the righteous shall be delivered from the hands of Sheol. This argument is interesting, but not conclusive. If, as many think, verse 15 is speaking of resurrection, then it merely means that the righteous do indeed die, but hope in the resurrection. (4) Ps. 55:15, "Let death seize upon them, and let them go down quick into hell," reminds us of the Korah passage in Numbers. The word "quick" of course is the old English for "alive." The imprecation is for the wicked to be put alive in the grave. There is probably some figure here. The Jews later buried very promptly and it may be that the Psalmist prays that a person may be punished with death so promptly that he will be as if buried alive. (5) Ps. 89:48 asks who it is who shall not see death, who shall deliver his soul (i.e. himself as is often clearly the meaning of *nephesh*) "from the hands of Sheol." Sheol is here paralleled with "death." (6) In Ps. 116:3, the sorrows of death are paralleled with the pains of Sheol. The passage is very like Ps. 18:5 and II Samuel 22:6. In all six of these passages the poetic parallel with "death" indicates that Sheol simply means the "grave."

A further important parallel is in Psalm 88:3. The Psalmist in distress approaches Sheol. This paralleled with going down to the "pit," *bor*. He is like those that lie in

“grave,” *qeber* (vs. 5) whom God no longer remembers. God has laid him in the lowest pit, i.e. in the “pit beneath,” in darkness, in the depths. It is clear that all these expressions refer only to the tomb. There is no declaration here that the afterlife is dark and a place which God forgets. It is simply that the grave or the pit or Sheol is the place of the dead body. The grave of course is dark. The body is ostensibly forgotten.

Another parallel with “pit” *bor* is in Psalm 30:3. “Thou has brought up my soul from Sheol, thou hast kept me alive from going down to the pit.” In verse 9 it asks what profit is there when I go down to the “pit” *shahat*, shall the dust praise thee? The word *shahat* here rather naturally refers to the corruption of the grave. Its parallel is “dust.” Verse 3 also means simply “grave.” We should remember that “pit” *bor* 42 times out of 62 clearly means a hole dug in the earth and used for a cistern, well, or dungeon. In the remaining 20 times it means the pit of death. It should be presumed to mean the burial pit, the grave, if possible.

There are six more passages in the Psalms which we must treat briefly: Ps. 141:7, “As when one ploweth and cleaveth the earth, our bones are scattered at the mouth of Sheol” (RV). This would well fit the idea that Sheol is simply the “grave.” Psalm 16:10 is the famous Messianic verse, “Thou wilt not leave my soul in hell.” Here Sheol is paralleled with *shahat*. The RSV here translates this word by “pit.” But we have seen that in Psalm 30:9 *shahat* can mean “corruption.” Modernists in general take it from the verb *shuah* “dig” and regularly translate it “pit.” But it can also come from the verb *shahat* to “destroy” and mean “corruption.” *Nahat* is such a double noun coming from either of the two verbs *nuah* “rest” or *nahat* “go down.” *Shahat* in Job 17:14 is mentioned in connection with the “worm.” The translation “corruption” is better in all these cases. The Septuagint translates it “corruption” in Psalm 16:10 and the New Testament in Acts 2:31 and 13:36 makes quite a point of this translation. On these bases, I would translate Psalm 16:10: “thou wilt not abandon me to the grave, thou wilt not allow thy holy one to see corruption.” The verse teaches a resurrection of the body from the grave and therefore clearly applies to Christ as the New Testament indicates.

Psalm 9:17 and 31:17 go together. The wicked are turned into Sheol; the wicked are silent in Sheol. Psalm 9:15 says that the heathen are sunk in the pit that they have made, their feet are ensnared in a net. This argues that the Psalmist is not talking of eternal punishment, but only of a speedy end of the wicked. The translation “grave” suits very well. In Psalm 139:8, “If I make my bed in Sheol,” Sheol is opposite to the heights of heaven. It is like Job 11:8 and Deuteronomy 32:22 already considered. Ps. 86:13 similarly speaks of deliverance from the lowest hell, or as we have argued, from the “grave beneath.” It refers to preservation from death.

There are nine passages in Proverbs. In one, 1:12, Sheol is paralleled to “pit,” *bor*. In three it is parallel to “death,” (5:5, 7:27, 9:18). In two it is parallel to “abaddon,” a Hebrew word from the root “to perish.” (15:11; 27:20). The translation “grave” will fit all six of these. In Proverbs 23:14, whipping a child shall “deliver his soul from Sheol,” looks at first sight like a reference to eternal punishment. But Heidel argues, rightly, I think, that it merely means, preserve a child from an untimely end.<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 15:24, the way of life to the wise is to “depart from Sheol beneath” is very similar. A wise man will not come to an untimely death. Proverbs 30:16, the “grave” is never satisfied would fit either the concept of the grave or the abode of departed spirits.

Really, the crucial passages for our view are in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 31 and 32. These passages speak about the humiliation of the kings of Babylon and Egypt. At first sight, and in the English translation, these verses seem to refer to hell. Heidel,

however, makes out a good case that here also the meaning is simply "grave."<sup>5</sup> In Ezekiel 32:26-27, the reference is to fallen warriors who lie in Sheol with their weapons laid under their heads, i.e. in the grave. Ezekiel 31:14-17 is similar. The phrases here are "delivered to death," "go down to Sheol," "go down to the pit," "go down to the earth beneath." In Isaiah 14:11 it distinctly says the king of Babylon is brought down to Sheol a place of worms and maggots. Verse 18 adds that other kings lie entombed in glory, but he is not buried in state—he is trampled with other corpses on the field of battle. He was not to be united with the other kings in burial.

In view of these clear verses, I am a bit surprised that Heidel takes Isaiah 14:13-15 as the underworld. It says no more than verses 11 and 18. The prophet only says that the paths of glory lead but to the grave. The expression "to the sides of the pit," *bor*, fits well an ancient grave which had a shaft with several side chambers. Verse 9 is of a piece with this representation though it may include a figure of speech in representing the inhabitants of the graves as welcoming a new addition to their company.

Other passages in Isaiah are 5:14, "Sheol hath enlarged herself" and pomp and glory and all shall descend into it. This is like Isaiah 14:11 which mentions the worms of the grave. In Isaiah 28:15 and 18, death and hell (Sheol) are paralleled. I personally wonder if these are not nicknames for the Assyrians with whom Israel had made an evil covenant. Or it may be that they are nicknames for idols referred to as lies and falsehoods in the last of verse 15. In Hezekiah's Psalm in Isaiah 38:10,18, the king thanks God for deliverance from death—from the pit of corruption or corruption of weakness (*shahat beli*). Sheol is equalled to death and to those who go down to the pit. These cannot praise God, but only the living. Heidel agrees<sup>6</sup> that these verses refer only to the grave.

The last passage in Isaiah is 57:9. It is a figurative passage, thou didst "debase thyself even unto Sheol." The import of the passage is not too clear and much should not be made of it in favor of any view.

There are six miscellaneous passages remaining: Hosea 13:14 says, "I will ransom them from the power of Sheol, I will redeem them from death." The parallel to Sheol is "death." The passage is most naturally taken to refer to the grave. It is so used very clearly in I Corinthians 15:55. Indeed the New Testament passage loses its point if Sheol is taken as the place of departed spirits. Amos 9:2 contrasts digging "into Sheol" to climbing "up to heaven." The next verse contrasts hiding in the top of Carmel with hiding in the bottom of the sea. The passage is much like Psalm 139:8. The meaning "grave" fits very well. We must remember that to "climb up to heaven" need not mean the spiritual abode of God. It is more naturally taken to mean the heights where birds fly. In Jonah 2:2, Jonah's prayer from "the belly of Sheol," is his cry from a living grave. It was not a prayer from the place of departed spirits. He specifies that it was then in the midst of the sea. It is figuratively to an extent, but clearly the figure is based on the meaning "grave." Habakkuk 2:2 says that the proud man enlarges "his desire as Sheol and is as death." The usage is figurative, but the parallel shows that meaning "grave" is intended. In Song of Solomon 8:6, love is said to be strong as death, jealousy (or "vehement desire") as cruel (or "ardent") as Sheol. Here the certainty of the grave is figuratively used. Lastly we have Ecclesiastes 9:10, "There is no work nor device nor knowledge nor wisdom in Sheol." If this means "the grave," it is true. The body is quiescent in death. But if this means "the abode of departed spirits," it is not true. It may indeed be the case that this verse is not the final answer of the preacher and is not presented as the truth. It may be, like some other passages in Ecclesiastes only a view to be considered and denied. But at least, if the meaning be just "the grave," all problems with the verse fall away.

To summarize, we have looked, though briefly, at all 65 instances of the use of Sheol. It is used almost exclusively in poetic passages. Hiedel remarks<sup>7</sup> that all but 8 instances are poetic whereas in prose *geber* is the regular word for "grave." Many times Sheol clearly means just "grave." Its parallels are "death," "pit" (which predominantly means a hole dug in the earth), or "sepulcher." Its accoutrements are worms, dust, armor, etc. Its characteristics are darkness, being forgotten (the phrase "land of forgetfulness" does not mean the deceased forgets, but that he is forgotten), lack of wisdom, lack of work, and absence of praise. The only passages that speak of activity in Sheol are those in Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 31 and 32 which are pretty clearly the "grave" with some figurative treatment. The New Testament usage of Psalm 16:10 and Hosea 13:14 depends on Sheol being interpreted as "the grave." Sheol is not a cavern way below the earth's crust; it is a grave dug into the ground. All go to Sheol without moral distinctions because the grave is our common end. There is no clear case of punishment in Sheol because this is not applicable to the grave.

Appreciation of these points will preserve us from the error of using Old Testament passages on Sheol to establish soul sleep, from the error of picturing the departed saints as shades wandering in a place of gloom, and from a false Babylonian cosmology fastened without warrant on the Biblical text.

It is no argument against this position that the Septuagint uses the Greek Hades to translate Sheol. We should beware of thinking that the Jewish use of Hades would even probably be like the Greek. Surely the Jewish use of the word "God" was vastly different from the Greek use, simply because the Jewish theology bore no resemblance to the mythological ideas of Greece. The Jewish usage of Hades in the Septuagint is to be gathered from the Hebrew original rather than *vice versa*.

The New Testament usage of the word Hades should also be briefly considered, however. It is used 11 times. We have already referred to the three verses (two passages) where the Old Testament Septuagint is quoted and the New Testament sense, like the Old Testament context is "the grave." However, the New Testament terminology more than once shows an advance on the Old and it should not be surprising that in the passages which are not quotations, Hades may well mean more than Sheol, of the Old Testament. Indeed in Luke 16:23, Hades definitely refers to a place of punishment for the wicked. This is not to say that the Old Testament gives us no hints of the punishment of the lost. We have seen that Job does so. But we only argue that this concept is not expressed by Sheol in the Hebrew—Hades in the Septuagint translation. It cannot be that Hades is in two compartments with the righteous delivered at Christ's ascension, for I Corinthians 15:55 teaches that the righteous will be raised from Hades at Christ's coming. This verse is using Hades in the Old Testament sense of "grave." The New Testament terminology goes further and should be expected to go further as more was revealed about the future life.

The other seven instances of the New Testament use of Hades are not conclusive. Matthew 11:23 and Luke 10:15 threaten Capernaum with being thrust down to Hades. This is a figurative usage, but fits well enough with the idea of Hades as a place of punishment for the wicked. Matthew 16:18 uses the "gates of Hades" as a figurative expression for the attacks of Satan. The other four references are in Revelation (1:18; 6:8; 20:13 and 14). In each of these cases, Hades is paralleled with "death." The references are all somewhat figurative and it is difficult to be sure as to their meaning, but the last two especially appear to be used in reference to the last resurrection. They would thus rather naturally mean just "grave." It is quite possible that Revelation, which is so heavily dependent on Old Testament language and symbols, is using the Old Testament poetic pair, "death and Sheol" translating Sheol by Hades as is done in Acts 2:27,31 and I Corinthians 15:55.

Again, we must say that the New Testament meaning of Hades is not to be found by comparing classical Greek, just as the New Testament meaning of "heaven" is not to be found in Greek mythology. Rather, the New Testament context and usage show that the New Testament sometimes reflects the old Jewish usage of Hades for Sheol, the "grave," but sometimes as in Luke 16:18 and probably in Matthew 11:23 and Luke 10:15 it shows an advanced terminology referring to the place of punishment of the wicked dead.

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#### REFERENCE NOTES

1. A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.*, Oxford, 1923. No. 71:15. Note that this passage represents a late Jewish usage.
2. Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1946), p. 180.
3. *Op cit.* p. 184.
4. *Op. cit.* p. 176.
5. *Op. cit.* p. 174f.
6. *Op. cit.* p. 179.
7. *Op. cit.* p. 175n.