

The Old Testament view of life after death

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Introduction

It is not uncommon to encounter statements which suggest that the Old Testament has almost nothing to say on the subject of life after death; and what little it does report is usually assessed in quite negative terms. Indeed, not a few writers give the distinct impression that for the Hebrews the after-life was envisaged as a dull, dreary existence, lacking any of those pleasures which make this present life enjoyable and fulfilling. It was not until the late post-Exilic period that immortality and resurrection became a part of Jewish thinking on life after death.

Yet, does this portrayal do justice to the contents of the Old Testament? Was this really the way in which the Hebrew patriarchs, prophets, priests and people perceived their future? Did the grave represent for them nothing more than an empty, joyless form of existence? Such queries readily prompt the basic question: What was the Old Testament view of life after death?

However, at the very outset we confront another problem: Was there *an* Old Testament view of life after death? Does the Hebrew Bible present a single, uniform picture? Or ought we to look for a variety of positions reflecting, perhaps, different stages in the development of the Hebrew concept of the after-life, or, alternatively, distinctions between 'official' and 'popular' views?

The general trend in recent writings has been to distinguish clearly between pre- and post-Exilic developments in the Old Testament concept of the after-life. The pre-Exilic period is dominated by the belief that death, as a purely natural phenomenon, marked the end of life. The after-life, if one can call it that, consisted of a silent existence in *Sheol*, the realm of the dead, where both righteous and wicked shared a common fate, isolated for eternity from God and the living. After the Exile the Hebrew view of the after-life underwent various transformations due to the influence of other ideas. According to J. Jeremias, three significant changes occurred:¹ (a) the concept of resurrection gave rise to the idea that the dead would not remain in *Sheol* for ever; (b) Greek and Persian views on retribution after death resulted in the division of the underworld into different compartments for the righteous and the wicked; (c) the Greek concept of immortality led to the idea that the righteous went directly to heaven whereas the wicked descended to *Sheol*, which consequently was perceived as a place of punishment.

Although it is now widely accepted that the Old Testament concept of the after-life developed, broadly speaking, along these lines, further considerations suggest that it may be necessary to modify this position somewhat.

The Old Testament view of death

Central to any discussion on the Old Testament view of the after-life is the Hebrew understanding of *death*. How was death perceived? What actually happened to an individual when he died? Did it mean the end of existence? Or was there something beyond death?

Initially it is important to note that the Hebrew term for 'death', *māwet*, has a variety of connotations in the Old Testament. According to W. Brueggemann,² *māwet* is used in three distinctive ways: (a) *biologically*, indicating 'the end of historical life' (e.g. Gn. 21:16); (b) *mythologically*, 'as a power, agent or principle' (e.g. Jb. 18:13; Je. 9:21);³ and (c) *symbolically*, 'as the loss of rich, joyous existence as willed by God' (e.g. Dt. 30:15; Ps. 13:3-4). However, as these last two references reveal, it is not always possible to be completely certain when 'death' is being used in a symbolical or metaphorical sense; in both instances 'death' could be understood in its purely biological sense, 'the end of historical life'. A fourth possibility, not discussed by Brueggemann, is that 'death' refers to the place of existence after biological cessation (e.g. Jb. 38:17; Is. 28:15).⁴ The fact that *māwet* 'death' can convey a variety of meanings creates real difficulties in interpreting some passages. Not surprisingly this can be a significant factor in attempting to appraise the Old Testament perception of the after-life.

A 'good' death or a 'bad' death

In a recent monograph, *Death in the Literature of the Old Testament*, L. R. Bailey suggests that within the Hebrew Bible descriptions of biological death fall into two basic categories: an individual may experience either a 'good' death or a 'bad' death. The account of Abraham's decease in Genesis 25:8 conveys a certain sense of comfort and reassurance: 'Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years; and he was gathered to his people' (cf. Gn. 15:15). A similar appraisal of death occurs in the words of Eliphaz to Job about the fate of the righteous: 'You shall come to your grave in ripe old age, as a shock of grain comes up to the threshing floor in its season' (Jb. 5:26, RSV). Such descriptions, however, contrast sharply with those which refer to a 'bad' death. Jacob, for example, finds no comfort in the death of Joseph: 'Then Jacob tore his clothes, put on sackcloth and mourned for his son many days. All his sons and daughters came to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. "No," he said, "in mourning will I go down to the grave [*Sheol*] to my son." So his father wept for him' (Gn. 37:34-35). Jacob's unwillingness to be comforted arose from the fact that Joseph had encountered a 'bad' death.

Given that the ancient Hebrews appear to have distinguished between a 'good' and a 'bad' death, what factors separated these two types of death? Bailey, for his part,

suggests three conditions which characterize a 'bad' death: (1) if it is premature (e.g. 2 Sa. 18:32-33; Is. 38:1-12); (2) if it is violent (e.g. 1 Sa. 28:15-20; 1 Ki. 2:28-33); (3) if there is no surviving heir (e.g. Gn. 15:2-3; 2 Sa. 18:18).⁵ On the other hand, those who live to a good old age with children to succeed them have no reason to fear death (e.g. Gn. 25:8; 35:28-29).

While these factors certainly deserve consideration, it is the present writer's conviction that they do not *of themselves* explain why the Hebrews distinguished between a 'good' and a 'bad' death. The rationale for this distinction must be sought elsewhere. An initial reason for suggesting this is the fact that premature or violent deaths are not always viewed as 'bad'. Concerning premature death, we read in Isaiah 57:1-2, 'The righteous perish, and no-one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no-one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.' Here premature death is clearly envisaged as good, bringing deliverance from evil.⁶ An actual case of this is King Josiah, who experienced not only a premature but also a violent death (2 Ki. 23:29-30). Prior to his death he received the following divine assurance: "I will gather you to your fathers, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place" (2 Ki. 22:20; cf. 2 Ch. 35:24). Although these passages may prove to be exceptional, they do raise the possibility that the distinction between a 'good' and a 'bad' death may be due to factors other than those suggested by Bailey.

To appreciate fully Bailey's position it is essential to note that two important premises underlie his approach: (1) death in the Old Testament is viewed as a *natural* consequence of man's mortality; (2) after death a similar fate awaits both the righteous and the wicked. Let us examine both of these assumptions.

Death: natural or punitive

An important passage towards understanding the Old Testament perception of death is the account of its origin. Attention naturally focuses on the early chapters of Genesis where, in the garden of Eden narrative (Gn. 2:4 - 3:24), death is introduced for the very first time. Here discussions have tended to ask whether death is portrayed as *natural*, a consequence of man's mortality, or as *punitive*, a result of man's disobedience. On this issue modern scholarship seems to be almost equally divided.⁷

For his part Bailey follows the suggestion of E. Nielsen⁸ that there are two different conceptions of death underlying the present account in Genesis 2 - 3: (i) 'a Paradise-*hubris* myth that looks upon death as a punishment for arrogance'; (ii) 'a Creation myth that regards death as the natural termination of created life'. Significantly, the first of these etiologies, according to Bailey, 'had no influence upon subsequent OT literature, although there is the related idea that human sin leads to *premature* death'.⁹ However, the second etiology, which portrays death as natural, represents 'the basic perspective of the OT literature'.¹⁰ Because death was natural, there was no need to fear it. 'Death... was not an irrational, intruding enemy but part of an ordered, controlled, harmonious creation. Biological life and death are not

separate phenomena, as if the latter intruded to thwart the Creator's design. They are bound together as part of a singular divine will for his creatures. To accept one is to accept the other; to despise one is to despise the other.'¹¹ This being so, death was viewed as a natural consequence of human existence; it was only 'unnatural' when it occurred prematurely.

This proposal, however, that death was perceived by the Hebrews as natural, runs counter to much of the evidence. Bailey himself acknowledges that the account in Genesis 2 - 3 'can be read as a continuous story rather than as a combination of two earlier and conflicting folk accounts',¹² and, as Nielsen readily admits, these two accounts have been combined with the result that 'death appears unambiguously as a punishment, for man's disobedience as well as for his arrogance'.¹³ If, however, as Bailey suggests, 'the basic perspective of the OT literature' was to view death as natural, would we not have expected this outlook to dominate the final form of the narrative in Genesis 2 - 3? Thus, although a substantial number of writers suggest that death is viewed here as 'natural', there does seem to be a strong case, especially in the light of 2:17 and 3:3-4, for maintaining that death is portrayed as a divine punishment.¹⁴

Support for the opinion that all deaths were understood as *unnatural* can be deduced from various regulations in Leviticus and Numbers. In Numbers 19:16 we read: "Anyone out in the open who touches someone who has been killed with a sword or someone who has died a natural death, or anyone who touches a human bone or a grave, will be unclean for seven days." Thus corpses and objects closely associated with death defile an individual. This fact is underlined by the preceding verses of the same chapter: verses 11-13 describe the process of purification necessary after touching a corpse, and verses 14-15 indicate that one is defiled merely by entering a tent containing a dead body.¹⁵ Stricter rules limiting contact with corpses are applied to priests (Lv. 21:2-3, 10-11) and Nazirites (Nu. 6:6-12; cf. Jdg. 14:8-9).¹⁶ Finally, Leviticus chapter 11 reveals that unless they have been ritually slaughtered, the carcasses of *all* animals are unclean.¹⁷ That death is the decisive factor here is demonstrated by the fact that whereas a Hebrew might handle with impunity *living* unclean animals (e.g. camels, pigs), he would become temporarily unclean by touching the corpses of these same animals (vv. 8, 11, 24-28). In a similar fashion household objects or utensils were defiled when touched by the carcasses of certain small animals (vv. 29-38).

In all of these examples death is presented in negative terms: death, like sin, defiles and pollutes. If death was perceived by the Hebrews as entirely 'natural', is it not strange that they should have linked it with ritual defilement and uncleanness? Such a connection hardly supports the suggestion that death was 'part of an orderly, controlled, harmonious creation'. Thus Bailey's proposal that death in old age represented the divine intention in creation, and that only premature death was unnatural, is mistaken. On the contrary, the weight of evidence surely favours the view that death was indeed perceived by the Hebrews as a punishment for man's rebellion against God.

The Hebrew perception of 'Sheol'

The second major premise underlying Bailey's position is

that all men, irrespective of their moral character, share a similar destiny after death: all go down to *Sheol*.¹⁸ On account of this any attempt to distinguish between a 'good' and a 'bad' death must be based on events *prior* to rather than *after* death. Thus Bailey focuses on the *circumstances* of death: whether it is premature, violent or childless.

The assumption, however, that the righteous and the wicked share the same fate in the after-life rests upon a particular understanding of the Hebrew concept of *Sheol*: (a) that after death everyone, without exception, descends into the nether world, and (b) that in *Sheol* no distinction is drawn between the righteous and the wicked. However, as we shall presently observe, this portrayal of *Sheol* reflects only one of a number of possibilities.

Before considering these other possibilities we should note that efforts to determine the precise meaning of *Sheol* by appealing either to extra-biblical occurrences or to etymology have so far proved unsuccessful. Whereas the term *Sheol* occurs sixty-five times in the Old Testament, it is found only once in extra-biblical material, in the fifth-century Aramaic papyri of the Jewish inhabitants of Elephantine in Egypt,¹⁹ and apart from the fact that it clearly refers to the place of the dead, little else can be gleaned from this particular reference. Regarding the etymology of *Sheol*, various suggestions have been made to explain its origin. F. Delitzsch proposed almost a century ago that it developed from an Accadian word *šu'alû* which he took to mean 'nether world'. More recently a number of scholars have followed the opinion that it is derived from the Accadian verb *š'il* (to 'ask' or 'enquire'; compare Hebrew *š'il*); initially *Sheol* denoted 'examination ordeal' but through time it came to mean 'nether world'. These proposed etymologies, unfortunately, are not without their difficulties and cannot be relied upon with complete certainty.²⁰ Since its exact meaning cannot be known from either extra-biblical references or etymology, we are left with no choice but to determine from each Old Testament context what *Sheol* was intended to denote. A number of possibilities exists.

Segregation within Sheol

One view with a long history, and which used to enjoy widespread support, is the idea that whereas everyone on dying actually descends into *Sheol*, once there the righteous and the wicked are segregated into different compartments. This idea is found, for example, in the *Hebrew and English Lexicon* of Brown, Driver and Briggs, where the Hebrew words '*ʾābaddôn* 'destruction', *bôr* 'pit' and *šāḥat* 'corruption' or 'pit' are taken to denote a 'place of ruin in She'ol for lost or ruined dead'.²¹ It can, however, be traced back as far as the intertestamental book of 1 Enoch, where it is now generally thought to reflect a later development in Jewish thinking on the after-life. In 1 Enoch 22:1-14 *Sheol* is divided into four sections: '(1) for the righteous — v. 9b; (2) for the wicked who have not been punished in this life — vv. 10f.; (3) for the martyred righteous — v. 12, cf. vv. 5-7; (4) for the wicked who have been punished in this life — v. 13'.²² It has even been suggested that such a belief surfaces in a number of New Testament passages (e.g. Acts 2:27,31; Eph. 4:9; 1 Pet. 3:19).²³

While it is tempting to suggest, especially in the light of later Jewish thinking, that in Old Testament times *Sheol* was

perceived as consisting of different regions, the biblical texts themselves do not support such a possibility. As has been clearly indicated by a number of scholars the terms '*ʾābaddôn*, *bôr* and *šāḥat* are merely synonyms for *Sheol*, and ought not to be viewed as designating a separate lower region within the nether world'.²⁴ Similarly we may reject all suggestions that certain New Testament passages allude to a compartmentalized nether world. When examined more closely it is quite apparent that they do not presuppose such a concept of *Sheol*.²⁵

Sheol and the grave

More recently a quite different approach has been suggested by R. L. Harris.²⁶ He argues that *Sheol* refers without exception to the grave, the place where the physical body is laid to rest. Significantly, this proposal is motivated by a desire to avoid a difficulty which arises if one accepts that the souls of all men co-exist in *Sheol*: 'Does the OT teach, in contradiction to the NT, that all men after death go to a dark and dismal place where the dead know nothing and are cut off from God?'²⁷ This theological problem disappears, however, if *Sheol* denotes merely the grave, the resting place of the body but not of the soul. For the ultimate destiny of men's souls we must look elsewhere in the Scriptures (e.g. Ex. 3:6; Mt. 22:32).

Several factors, however, argue against this proposal. Firstly, although *Sheol* comes sixty-five times in the Old Testament it never takes the definite article, suggesting that it may well have been used as a proper name denoting the nether world. Secondly, although Harris is correct in pointing out that some descriptions of *Sheol* resemble closely a Palestinian tomb (e.g. Ezk. 32:26-27), this may result from the fact that the Hebrews viewed *Sheol* as an extension of the grave. As O. Keel comments, 'As a land from which no one has ever yet returned (cf. Ps. 88:10; Jb. 7:9-10; 10:21; Akkadian *eršet lā tārī* "land of no return"), the actual realm of the dead is a speculative entity. Its concrete features are derived from empirical observation of the grave. Beyond that, very little can be said about the world of the dead. For that reason, it appears as a prototypical grave raised to gigantic proportions'.²⁸ Thus although Harris demonstrates that some descriptions of *Sheol* do resemble an ordinary grave, these same descriptions may also be equally appropriate for the nether world.

The nether world and the wicked

A third approach is that of A. Heidel who proposes that the term *Sheol* exhibits a broad range of meanings. Whereas on occasions it clearly denotes the subterranean spirit world (e.g. Nu. 16:30-33; Dt. 32:22), elsewhere it may refer to the grave (e.g. Is. 14:11; Ezk. 32:26-27), or even be 'used as a figure of speech to denote extreme misfortune, seemingly inescapable death, the brink of death, or the like (Pss. 30:4; 86:13; 88:4; Jonah 2:3 [= 2:2 in the English translation])'.²⁹ However, as well as suggesting that *Sheol* has a wide range of connotations, Heidel makes another observation of special relevance for our present discussion: 'As regards She'ol . . . we have evidence that it, in the signification of the subterranean realm of the spirits, applies to the habitation of the souls of the wicked only'.³⁰ In saying this Heidel distinguishes clearly

between the destiny of the righteous and the wicked in the after-life; whereas the souls of the ungodly go down to *Sheol*, the souls of the pious ascend to heaven.

Although Heidel's thesis has the advantage of avoiding any theological difficulties created by the co-existence of the righteous and the wicked in the nether world, it may, however, be objected that he interprets the biblical evidence in a somewhat arbitrary manner. If a passage refers to the death of a righteous person, *Sheol* is taken invariably to mean 'grave' (e.g. Gn. 37:35; 42:38; Is. 38:10); but when the wicked are mentioned, *Sheol* usually means 'nether world' (e.g. Nu. 16:30; Is. 14:13-15), although Heidel does allow that it can on occasions merely denote a grave (e.g. Is. 14:11; Ezk. 32:26-27). The question then arises, to what extent is Heidel's view on the fate of the righteous after death dependent upon his reading of *Sheol* as the 'grave'? Is his conclusion still viable if *Sheol* is understood to denote solely the 'nether world'?

Unfortunately, space does not permit us to discuss in detail every occurrence of *Sheol*. We must therefore restrict ourselves to several summary observations. Firstly, apart from a few references which are indecisive (e.g. Ec. 9:10; Song 8:6), *Sheol* always conveys negative overtones: for example, it is somewhere fearful and to be avoided (e.g. 2 Sa. 22:6; Ps. 16:10; 30:3; 86:13); it is the antithesis of heaven (e.g. Jb. 11:8; Ps. 139:8; Am. 9:2). Secondly, in a significant proportion of passages *Sheol* is linked unquestionably with evil-doers (e.g. Nu. 16:30, 33; 1 Ki. 2:6, 9; Jb. 24:19; Ps. 9:17; 31:17; 49:14; Pr. 5:5; 7:27; 9:18; Is. 5:14; 14:9, 11, 15; Ezk. 31:15-17; 32:21, 27). Taken together these observations would seem to indicate that *Sheol* does indeed denote the ultimate abode of the wicked alone.

There are, however, a few occurrences of *Sheol* which are generally thought to imply that the righteous were also to be found in the nether world. In mourning the untimely death of his son Joseph, Jacob laments, 'In mourning will I go down to the grave [*Sheol*] to my son' (Gn. 37:35). Similar comments come in Genesis 42:38 and 44:29, 31, this time motivated by Jacob's fear that his youngest son Benjamin will also be killed. Whereas Heidel takes *Sheol* to mean grave in 37:35, Jacob's unwillingness to be comforted following the apparent killing of Joseph by a wild animal could suggest that he considers Joseph to have been divinely punished, and hence with the wicked in the nether world. This understanding of *Sheol* would certainly add weight to the expression of Jacob's grief for his son Joseph. A similar explanation would account for the use of *Sheol* in 42:38 and 44:29, 31.

Another passage which seems to imply that the righteous descend to *Sheol* is Isaiah chapter 38. After the prophet Isaiah predicts that king Hezekiah will suffer an early death, the king pleads that God may remember him. As a consequence he is granted a further fifteen years to live (vv. 1-8). In subsequently describing his feelings Hezekiah writes: 'I said, "In the prime of my life must I go through the gates of death [*Sheol*] and be robbed of the rest of my years? . . . Surely it was for my benefit that I suffered such anguish. In your love you kept me from the pit of destruction; you have put all my sins behind your back. For the grave [*Sheol*] cannot praise you, death cannot sing your praise; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for your faithfulness"' (vv. 10, 17-18). These comments are usually interpreted to mean that Hezekiah viewed the

righteous as going to *Sheol*. However, in the light of Isaiah's prediction against him (v. 1) and the knowledge of his own sins (v. 17), Hezekiah may have had every reason to believe that he was doomed to join the wicked in the nether world. It is thus possible that both Hezekiah and Jacob understood *Sheol* to denote the final abode of the wicked.

Of the alternatives outlined above for understanding *Sheol*, we may now reject as improbable (i) the once popular view that *Sheol* consisted of different compartments, and (ii) the proposal of R. L. Harris that it denotes solely the grave. In choosing between the two remaining possibilities we must decide whether or not the Hebrews believed that all men descended into the nether world, or only the wicked. As far as our investigation of the term *Sheol* is concerned it is difficult to reach a decisive conclusion, although the weight of evidence possibly favours Heidel's opinion that only the ungodly descended there. Moreover there are a number of passages which seem to point in the same general direction.

Firstly, the accounts of the translations of Enoch and Elijah suggest that not all men descend to *Sheol* (Gn. 5:24; 2 Ki. 2:1-18). Whereas the reference to Enoch is brief, in the case of Elijah it is clearly stated that he was taken up by God to heaven (2 Ki. 2:1). In both instances it is implied that God has the power to take to himself those who enjoy an intimate relationship with him (cf. Ps. 73:24). Secondly, the author of Psalm 49, troubled by the prosperity and success of the wicked, finds comfort in the fact that any present imbalance between the fortunes of the godly and the ungodly will be put to rights in the after-life.³¹ The psalmist clearly believes in different rewards in the life to come.

These two ideas: (a) the continuity beyond death of an intimate relationship with God, and (b) the redressing in the hereafter of inadequate temporal rewards and punishments, obviously reflect Hebrew thinking on the after-life. Unfortunately many scholars have tended to play down the significance of these, and other, passages, or have interpreted them in such a way as to remove any reference to the future life.³² Such an approach, however, seems to be influenced more by the assumption that the concepts of immortality and resurrection were late developments in Jewish religion, than by a detailed study of the biblical texts in the light of other ancient Near Eastern documents.³³

The belief that *Sheol* was the final abode of the wicked is in keeping with the idea, discussed above, that the Hebrews perceived death as punitive rather than as natural. Since mankind was considered to be under divine condemnation the normal consequence of dying was imprisonment in a dark, gloomy region from which no one could ever escape. To go down to *Sheol* was to suffer a 'bad' death.

The righteous in the after-life

Although the wicked encountered a 'bad' death, the righteous, in contrast, were perceived as experiencing a 'good' death. The question arises, however: What happened to the righteous after death?

Surprisingly perhaps, the Old Testament contains no detailed account of the fate of the righteous immediately after death. As a result the best that one can do is piece together

various snippets of information in the hope of producing a clear picture. One factor, however, which is especially significant in this regard is the concept of resurrection.

As noted earlier many modern writers consider the concept of resurrection to be a relatively late development in Jewish thinking on the after-life.³⁴ Two main arguments are forwarded in support of this position. Firstly, those passages which refer explicitly to the resurrection of the dead can all be dated to the post-Exilic period (*i.e.* Is. 26:19; Dn. 12:2).³⁵ Secondly, the Jewish concept of the resurrection appears to have been influenced by the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism, and this probably occurred during the early post-Exilic period when the Jews and Persians were in close contact.

In a recent study, however, L. J. Greenspoon has challenged the view that the belief in a resurrection was a post-Exilic development.³⁶ Rejecting the influence of both earlier Mesopotamian and Canaanite myths and rituals concerning 'dying-and-rising gods', and later Zoroastrian beliefs regarding the 'reconstitution of the body', he suggests that the Old Testament belief in bodily resurrection developed 'out of themes associated with YHWH as Divine Warrior'. In this capacity Yahweh is perceived as having the power to overcome death and release those under its control. Further, from a survey of relevant passages he concludes that the 'concept of bodily resurrection of the dead is expressed in biblical material that ranges in date of composition from the ninth to the second centuries B.C.E.'³⁷ Although Greenspoon's arguments are unlikely to reverse the present consensus favouring a late date for the introduction of the concept of resurrection into Jewish thinking on the after-life, he does present reasonable grounds for believing that the idea of bodily resurrection can be traced back to the pre-Exilic period.

An important implication of the doctrine of resurrection is that the righteous remain in the realm of the dead until divinely raised to life again.³⁸ This suggests that there must be some form of intermediate state between the time of death and resurrection. If, as many writers maintain, all men irrespective of their moral character descend to *Sheol*, then we must view the righteous as being resurrected from there. However, if *Sheol* is understood to be the abode of the wicked alone, then the righteous must have existed elsewhere prior to being raised to life again. Unfortunately the Old Testament reveals little regarding the precise nature of the intermediate abode of the righteous.

One of the few indications of what became of the righteous after death is the expression 'to be gathered to one's people' (Gn. 25:8, 17; 35:29; 49:33; Nu. 27:13; 31:2; Dt. 32:50) or 'to be gathered to one's fathers' (Jdg. 2:10; 2 Ki. 22:20; 2 Ch. 34:28). 'That these figures of speech do not refer to the interment in the grave of the fathers, or the ancestral tomb, as has been maintained, is clear from the fact that Abraham, Aaron and Moses were not united with their fathers in the grave. Nor do they have reference to burial in general, for in the stories of the "gathering" of Abraham and Isaac it is expressly added that they were buried (Gn. 25:8-9; 35:29); moreover, Jacob was "gathered to his people" (Gn. 49:33) several months before his body was committed to the ground (50:1-13).'³⁹

Significantly, in their use of the expression 'to be gathered to one's fathers' (or 'people') the biblical writers seem to convey a sense of optimism regarding death (*cf.* Gn. 15:15). Although death may separate an individual from his family and kin in this life, the righteous are reunited with those members of their families who have already died.

That death is sometimes described as falling asleep (*e.g.* Ps. 13:3; Dn. 12:2) and the resurrection as reawaking⁴⁰ (*e.g.* 2 Ki. 4:31; Jb. 14:12; Is. 26:19; Dn. 12:2) suggests possibly that the intermediate state of the righteous is one of comparative tranquillity and peace. Even so, they are still perceived as being in the realm of the dead. Perhaps for this reason the Old Testament focuses attention not on the intermediate state of the righteous but rather on their eventual resurrection.

Taking these factors into account we may now be in a better position to appreciate the somewhat ambivalent attitude, noted above, of the Old Testament writers towards *Sheol*. Although all men may have been viewed as initially descending there on dying, the fact that the righteous would subsequently be resurrected, leaving behind the wicked, possibly explains why *Sheol* is generally presented in quite negative terms. Whereas the righteous would eventually enter into God's presence the wicked continued to languish in the depths of *Sheol*. Thus, in spite of the temporary sojourn of the righteous there, *Sheol* represented for the Hebrews the ultimate and lasting abode of those who were excluded from the divine presence.

Conclusion

While some of the evidence is ambiguous, and questions remain to be answered, we are perhaps now in a position to clarify certain fundamental issues regarding the Old Testament perception of the after-life. Firstly, we may reject the currently popular belief that in the pre-Exilic period death was viewed by the Hebrews as a natural legacy of man's mortality and that, as a consequence, little interest was shown in the after-life. Secondly, it seems probable that the term *Sheol* frequently, if not always, designated the nether world, and that as such it represented the continuing abode of the ungodly. Thirdly, whereas the wicked were thought to remain in the dark, silent region of *Sheol*, the righteous lived in the hope that God would deliver them from the power of death and take them to himself (*cf.* Ps. 49:15).

¹ J. Jeremias, 'hades', *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), vol. 1, p. 147. Various writers, however, question the extent of foreign influences upon Jewish thinking regarding the after-life; *cf.* G. Nickelsburg, *Resurrection, Immortality, and Eternal Life in Intertestamental Judaism* (Harvard Theological Studies 26, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972); J. J. Collins, 'Apocalyptic Eschatology as the Transcendence of Death', *CBQ* 36 (1974), pp. 21-43; W. Wifall, 'The Status of "Man" as Resurrection', *ZAW* 90 (1978), pp. 382-394.

² 'Death, theology of', *IDB Supplement* 1976, pp. 219-220. This threefold division is developed more fully by L. R. Bailey, *Biblical Perspectives on Death* (Overtures to Biblical Theology) (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), pp. 39-47.

³ Brueggemann comments, 'Israel's environment sustained a mythology which presented Death (Mot) as an active personal agent in combat with Yahweh' (*IDB Supp.*, pp. 219-220).

⁴ Cf. A. Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2nd edn 1949), p. 177; R. L. Harris, 'māwet', *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Chicago: Moody, 1980), p. 497.

⁵ Bailey, *Biblical Perspectives*, pp. 48-51.

⁶ Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 150; cf. F. Delitzsch, *Isaiah* (Edinburgh), pp. 368-369.

⁷ Cf. C. Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (London: SPCK, 1984), pp. 266-267.

⁸ 'Creation and the Fall of Man', *HUCA* 43 (1972), pp. 1-22.

⁹ *Biblical Perspectives*, p. 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 57-58; cf. J. B. Burns, 'The Mythology of Death in the Old Testament', *SJT* 26 (1973), pp. 327-340.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 38; cf. U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), pp. 92-94. Nielsen's proposal that two earlier and quite distinct accounts have been combined to form the present account is questionable: see J. T. Walsh, 'Genesis 2.4b-3.24: A Synchronic Approach', *JBL* 96 (1977), pp. 161-177.

¹³ 'Creation', p. 17.

¹⁴ H. Blocher, *In The Beginning* (Leicester: IVP, 1984), pp. 184-187; cf. Rom. 5:12; 6:23.

¹⁵ G. J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 290-291.

¹⁶ These indicate that death and holiness are incompatible; cf. Wenham, *Leviticus*, p. 20; E. Feldman, *Biblical and Post-Biblical Defilement and Mourning: Law as Theology* (New York: Ktav, 1977), pp. 13-30.

¹⁷ Wenham, *Leviticus*, pp. 176-177; cf. R. K. Harrison, *Leviticus* (Leicester: IVP), pp. 129-130.

¹⁸ Cf. T. H. Gaster, 'Dead, Abode of the', *IDB*, vol. 1, pp. 787-788; A. Dagan, 'Olam Ha-ba', *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 12, p. 1356.

¹⁹ A. Cowley, *Aramaic Papyri of the Fifth Century B.C.* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1923), lxix.15.

²⁰ Cf. R. Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life: A Study of the Development of the Doctrine of the Resurrection in the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1960), p. 37; J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (Biblica et Orientalia 21) (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), pp. 21-23.

²¹ *BDB*, p. 2; cf. pp. 983, 1001; see also L. J. Afonso, 'Netherworld', *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 12, p. 996.

²² M. A. Knibb, *The Ethiopic Book of Enoch*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), pp. 110-111; cf. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, XVIII:14.

²³ Cf. J. Jeremias, 'hadēs', *TDNT*, vol. 1, p. 147; Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life*, p. 40.

²⁴ Cf. E. F. Sutcliffe, *The Old Testament and the Future Life* (Bellarmine Series VIII) (London: Burns Oates and Washbourne, 1946), pp. 43, 57-59; Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 177; Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, pp. 66-71, 80-81.

²⁵ For a detailed discussion of 1 Peter 3:19 see R. T. France, 'Exegesis in Practice: Two Samples', in I. H. Marshall (ed.), *New Testament Interpretation* (Exeter: Paternoster, 1977), pp. 268-272. He concludes, 'Christ went to the prison of the fallen angels, not to the abode of the dead, and the two are never equated' (p. 271).

²⁶ 'The Meaning of the Word *Sheol* as Shown by Parallels in Poetic Passages', *JETS* 4 (1961), pp. 129-135; cf. R. L. Harris, 'She'ol',

Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, pp. 892-893.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 892. This position has been adopted in the NIV where *Sheol* is usually translated in the text by 'grave' or 'death', with a footnote referring to 'Sheol'.

²⁸ O. Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World* (London: SPCK, 1978), p. 63; cf. Martin-Achard, *From Death to Life*, p. 38: 'Sheol is, in fact, a sort of vast grave of which the individual tombs are merely particular manifestations'; W. H. Schmidt, *The Faith of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 270.

²⁹ Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic*, p. 177. This would seem to be the view adopted by the translators of the AV: *Sheol* is translated 31 times 'hell', 31 times 'grave', 3 times 'pit'.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

³¹ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 184-186; Sutcliffe, *OT and Future Life*, pp. 99-102; S. Woudstra, 'The Old Testament on the Afterlife', *Vox Reformata* 20 (1973), p. 13. Psalm 73 reveals a somewhat similar position. Balaam's comment, 'Let me die the death of the righteous, and may my end be like theirs' (Nu. 23:10), also implies that there was a distinction between the death of the righteous and the wicked.

³² Sutcliffe, *OT and Future Life*, pp. 81-108, sees them as having had a major influence in the formulation of the doctrines of immortality and resurrection in the last centuries of the pre-Christian era. Alternatively, however, these passages may presuppose the existence of such beliefs.

³³ This point is forcefully made by M. Dahood, *Psalms III* (Anchor Bible 17A) (Garden City: Doubleday, 1970), pp. xli-iii; cf. E. Smick, 'The Bearing of New Philological Data on the Subjects of Resurrection and Immortality in the Old Testament', *WTJ* 31 (1968), pp. 12-21. However, note the response of, among others, B. Vawter, 'Intimations of Immortality and the Old Testament', *JBL* 91 (1972), pp. 158-171.

³⁴ Cf. T. H. Gaster, 'Resurrection', *IDB*, vol. 4 (New York: Abingdon, 1962), p. 39.

³⁵ This assumes, however, a 2nd cent. BC date for Daniel and a late Exilic or post-Exilic date for the Isaiah Apocalypse (chs. 24-27).

³⁶ 'The Origin of the Idea of Resurrection' in B. Halpern and J. D. Levenson (eds), *Traditions in Transformation. Turning Points in Biblical Faith* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1981), pp. 247-321.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 319.

³⁸ In only one of the passages examined by Greenspoon is the concept of resurrection applied to the wicked (*i.e.* Dn. 12:2). Dating the book of Daniel to the 2nd cent. BC, Greenspoon considers this passage to be the very latest Old Testament reference to resurrection, and significantly, it contains an important innovation: 'not only the righteous, but also the wicked are reawakened from the sleep of death' (p. 282). It may, however, be, as B. J. Alfring has suggested ('L'idée de Résurrection d'après Dan. XII, 1.2', *Biblica* 40 (1959), pp. 355-371), that v. 2 ought to be interpreted as saying, 'Many of those who sleep in the land of dust will reawake, these to everlasting life, those (who do not reawake) to disgrace and everlasting contempt'. Apart from bringing this verse into line with other Old Testament passages which restrict the resurrection of the dead to the righteous alone, this proposal also has the advantage of explaining why the first part of the verse restricts the scope of the resurrection to 'many'.

³⁹ Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic*, pp. 187-188.

⁴⁰ Cf. J. F. A. Sawyer, 'Hebrew Words for the Resurrection of the Dead', *VT* 23 (1973), pp. 218-234.