

THE MEANING OF SHE'OL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

by D. K. INNES

MR. INNES presents a careful study of the usage of the Hebrew term *She'ol* ("the underworld") in the Old Testament writings, and gives consideration to the place which the concept occupies in the unfolding biblical revelation.

THE word *She'ol* is important for Evangelicals because of its bearing on the doctrine of revelation. Evangelicals assert¹ that the term "progressive revelation" is valid only if it is intended to mean that a picture, already given in general outline, is later completed in increasing detail; not if it means that primitive (and therefore erroneous) notions are replaced by notions which are progressively truer. Does the New Testament conception of the after-life *contradict* that of the Old Testament, or merely complete it? If the former, then it would seem that the evangelical doctrine of revelation will not do.

As is usually the case in determining the meaning of Old Testament words, usage is a more fruitful source of knowledge than etymology.² Nevertheless for the sake of completeness we shall first consider the etymological and literary evidence.

I. ETYMOLOGY

There are two principal views concerning the origin of the word *She'ol*. The first connects it with the Assyrian *su'âlu*, the second with the root *sh-'l*.

(a) On the former view, *She'ol* would denote primarily the "place of enquiry," i.e. the place where oracles can be obtained. This view was supported by A. Jeremias, Gunkel, and (formerly) Friedrich Delitzsch. It is pointed out that one of the Babylonian terms for priest is *sâilu* — literally "inquirer"; also that in the Old Testament the verb *sha'al* is frequently used of consulting an oracle (Jg. 1: 1; Hos. 4: 12; Ezek. 21: 21 (26)). However, Jensen, followed by Schwally, asserts that the word *su'âlu* does not exist in Assyrian. George Bertin asserts³ that the error arose through reading a certain cuneiform sign phonetically, whereas

¹ E.g., T. C. Hammond, *In Understanding Be Men*, pp. 18, 37.

² Cf. N. H. Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, p. 21.

³ *Transactions of the Society of Biblical Archaeology*, viii, 269.

analogous cases show that it should be read as equivalent to "ditto", or as a pointer.

(b) The second view suggests that *She'ol* originated from a weakened form of the root *sh-'l*. This root appears in several forms in the Old Testament. The word *sho'al* denotes a hollow hand (Is. 40: 12), or a handful (1 Ki. 20: 10; Ezek. 13: 19); *mish'ol* in Nu. 22: 24 is a hollow way, between vineyards. So Gesenius⁴ defines *She'ol* as "*locum cavum et subterraneum.*" He quotes as analogous cases the German *Hölle*, having the same origin as *Höhle*, and the Latin *coelum* from κοῖλος (hollow). Franz Delitzsch, however, suggests⁵ that the fundamental meaning of the root *sh-'l* is *not* to be hollow, but rather equivalent to χαλᾶν (let sink). Thus *sho'al* is properly a deepening of the hand, and *mish'ol* is a sinking of the ground. Moreover *shu'al* (fox), which is connected by BDB with a separate root, is explained by Delitzsch as coming from the same root as the above words, and meaning a deepener, one who digs himself in. Agreement has never been reached on the etymology. It will be noticed that the second view gains more support from usage, for *She'ol* was universally referred to in antiquity as situated in the depths below the upper world. In the Old Testament at any rate, the idea of consulting oracles does not seem to have figured largely in the conception of *She'ol*.

II. WORDS BEARING THE SAME MEANING AS SHE'OL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

Certain other words besides *She'ol* are used in the Old Testament of the place of the departed. One of these is *'abaddon*, which occurs six times in the Wisdom Literature (Job 31: 12; 28: 22; Ps. 88: 11 (12); Job 26: 6; Pr. 15: 11; 27: 20); in the three last texts it is parallel with *She'ol*. *Bor*, which has the primary meaning of grave,⁶ is also used to refer to the underworld. It occurs in parallelism with *She'ol* in Ps. 30: 3 (4); Pr. 1: 12; Ps. 88: 5 (4); with *'eretz tachtiiyoth* Ezek. 26: 20; 32: 18, 24, and with *'eretz tachtith* in Ezek. 31: 14, 16; in Ezek. 31: 14 also with *maweth* (death). *Shachath* (pit) occurs in similar contexts, and is in parallelism with *She'ol* in Ps. 16: 10.

From this brief survey it will be clear that there are several words very closely connected in their contexts and meaning, all of which approximate in their significance to the word *She'ol*. To

⁴ *Thesaurus Veteris Testamenti*, s.v.

⁵ *Commentary on Isaiah*, on 5: 14.

⁶ Pr. 28: 17; Is. 14: 19.

one of these we shall return later.

III. THE SEPTUAGINT

Under this heading it will be sufficient to notice that LXX translators normally render the word by $\delta\delta\eta\varsigma$, and only once (2 Sam. 22 : 6) by $\theta\acute{\alpha}\nu\alpha\tau\omicron\varsigma$.

IV. USAGE

We may now pass on to the main part of our study, which consists of an examination of the contexts in which the word occurs, in an attempt to discover what characteristics *She'ol* was regarded by the Hebrews as possessing.

(i) Sheol, as we have seen, was below the surface of the earth. The dead are said to "go down to Sheol" (*yarad she'olah*, *yarad she'ol*, Ezek. 31 : 15, 17; Job 7 : 9; Ps. 55 : 16), or to "go down to the pit" (*yarad bor*, Ps. 28 : 1, etc.). Sheol is "beneath"—*tachtiyyah*, *tachtiyyoth*, are used as epithets of *She'ol* and *bor*, e.g. in Ps. 86 : 13; 88 : 7. Similarly, Sheol is "deep" (Job 11 : 8, "deeper than Sheol"). Those who are dead are said to be "beneath the waters" (Job 26 : 5). In Is. 7 : 11 we meet the phrase *ha'ameq she'olah* — i.e. ask a sign in the depths of Sheol; it is in antithetic parallelism with *hagbeah lema'alah*. Similarly Amos declares: "Though they dig into Sheol (*im yachteru bishe'ol*), from there my hand shall take them" (9 : 2). In the last passage, and in Ps. 139 : 8, Sheol is opposed to heaven (*shamayim*).

(ii) *Dust* was a characteristic element of Sheol. '*Aphar* is almost a synonym for *She'ol* in Job 16 : 16; 20 : 11 (10); 21 : 26; Ps. 30 : 9 (10). This may be taken as an example of metonymy in Hebrew thought. (A. R. Johnson draws attention to the same factor in those passages where attributes of personality are attributed to parts of the human body.) That which was a characteristic attribute of Sheol is taken as a synonym for Sheol itself.

This seems to show clearly that Sheol was essentially a place of corruption; cf. Gen. 3 : 19, "Dust thou art, and unto dust thou shalt return."

(iii) *Darkness* is a third characteristic of Sheol (cf. Job 10 : 21, '*eret* *choshekh wetzalmaweth*).

(iv) *Silence* also — to be in Sheol is to "dwell in silence" (Ps. 94 : 17).

It is interesting to note the resemblances between Sheol, and the state of the Universe preceding God's creative acts. Darkness (*choshekh*) was upon the face of the deep, until God said, "Let there be light" (Gen. 1 : 2f.). It was out of the undifferentiated

⁷ In *The Vitality of the Individual in Ancient Israel*.

dust that God made Man, (Gen. 2 : 7). Would it be fanciful to see in the "silence" of Sheol an echo of the silence which must have preceded God's creative Word? It is as if God had withdrawn one stage from His creatures, and allowed them to regress towards the state from which His creative activity had taken them.

(v) This impression is somewhat confirmed by the fact that, while Yahweh is present in Sheol (Ps. 139 : 8) — it is not a separate entity outside His dominion — those in Sheol are in a sense cut off from Him (Ps. 88 : 4f. (5f.)). He remembers them no more, and they are cut off from His hand. Similarly, there is no praise of Yahweh in Sheol (Is. 38 : 18; Ps. 6 : 5 (6)).

(vi) The distinctions of earth continue, though in an attenuated form. In Is. 14 : 9 the kings of the nations are pictured as sitting on thrones in Sheol. The same continuation of earthly distinctions is shown very clearly in Ezek. 32 : 27, which speaks of the condition of the once mighty, but now ruined nations in Sheol : "They shall not lie with the mighty that are fallen of the uncircumcised, which are gone down to Sheol with their weapons of war, and have laid their swords under their heads, and their iniquities are upon their bones; for they were the terror of the mighty in the land of the living." Honour gained on earth has its counterpart in Sheol. The whole oracle (32 : 17-32) is most important as a description of existence in Sheol.

(vii) Sheol was essentially the land of no return; cf. Job 7 : 9-10: "As the cloud is consumed and vanisheth away, so he that goeth down to Sheol shall come up no more. He shall return no more to his house, neither shall his place know him any more." David's words in 2 Sam. 12 : 23 concerning his dead child show the same conviction : "Wherefore should I fast? can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he shall not return to me." In the same way the Underworld in Babylonian religion was called *irsit la tari*, "the land without return."

This notion appears at first sight to conflict with the belief in necromancy, which, though forbidden (1 Chron. 10 : 13; Is. 8 : 19), was practised in Israel. Through a medium Samuel was "brought up" to speak with Saul. Samuel's first words are interesting : "Why hast thou disturbed me to bring me up?" (1 Sam. 28 : 15)— he was stirred up from the comparative inactivity of Sheol, in order to have dealings with those who lived the more vital life of earth. It is to be noted, however, that this was an *abnormal* contact between two beings in spheres normally separate, and *not* a return on the part of the deceased to a real life on earth.

It remains true that once a man had passed from earth to the attenuated existence of Sheol, the process could not be reversed.

(viii) Sheol is also "a land of forgetfulness" (Ps. 88: 12 (13)). "The dead know not anything" (Ec. 9: 5); and of the person in Sheol it is written: "His sons come to honour, and he knoweth it not; and they are brought low, but he perceiveth it not of them" (Job 14: 21). The primary significance of this notion is presumably the separation which exists between the inhabitants of earth and those of Sheol. The person in Sheol is able to experience pain in himself (Job. 14: 22), and to behold the misfortunes of others (Is. 14: 10), but does not normally know what happens on earth.

(ix) Sometimes Sheol is spoken of more figuratively. It is thought of as a craving, gaping monster; e.g. Is. 5: 14, "Sheol enlargeth her appetite, and openeth her mouth without limit." The same idea underlies Hbk. 2: 5; Pr. 27: 20; 30: 15f., where Sheol is proverbial for limitless desire; probably also Cant. 8: 6, "hard as Sheol." It is probable that there is a connexion of thought here with the root *sh'-l* in its sense of "asking for" something; this is not to assert that there is necessarily an *etymological* connexion.

(x) Elsewhere Sheol is spoken of as a city with gates (Is. xxxviii. 10, *be-sha'are she'ol*; cf. *sha'are maweth*, Ps. 9: 13 (14); Ps. 107: 18; Jb. 28: 17) — the "gates" here apparently signifying the point of transition from earth to Sheol.

(xi) Some passages speak of Yahweh as delivering the righteous from Sheol; e.g. Ps. 86: 13, "Thou hast delivered my soul from Sheol beneath"; Pr. 23: 14, "Thou shalt beat him (the disciplined child) with the rod and shalt deliver his soul from Sheol"; Ps. 16:10, "for thou wilt not leave my soul to Sheol, neither wilt thou suffer thine holy one (*chasid*) to see corruption." It is extremely difficult to say in any particular instance whether it is merely deliverance from death which is in the writer's mind (as in Is. 38: 17f.); but the relevant passages taken together suggest also the thought that Yahweh's power is greater than that of Sheol; therefore Sheol cannot ultimately triumph.

(xii) Is there in the Old Testament any trace of the idea which meets us in the inter-testamental literature, of a distinction of condition *within* Sheol between the good and the evil? There are some passages which appear at first sight to suggest this. Is. 24: 22, speaking of those who experience Yahweh's judgement, says, "They are gathered with a gathering (as) captives (?) (*we'ussephu*

'*asepah* 'assir) in the pit (*bor*), and shall be shut up in the prison, and after many days shall be visited." This appears to suggest that Sheol is a place of punishment for the wicked beings, probably both spiritual and earthly, referred to in the previous verse. In reality, however, the "prison" is not a place of punishment, but of awaiting judgement. Plumptre⁸ draws attention to the custom of Eastern kings, "who, after leaving their enemies in prison for an appointed time, came to inspect them, and to award punishment or pardon according to their deserts." The idea is, therefore, quite neutral.

Pr. 5 : 5 says of the harlot :

Her feet go to death,
Her steps take hold on Sheol.

So also 7 : 27 :

Her house is the way to Sheol,
Going down to the chambers of death.

This, however, merely asserts that death is the issue of judgement — a well-known Biblical doctrine. Pr. 9 : 18 is more striking : "Her guests are in the depths of Sheol" (*be'imeqe she'ol qeru'eha*). Here there does seem to be the suggestion of a gradation within Sheol, the furthest depths being assigned to the greatest sinners. This is, however, poetical language, and it is very doubtful whether the doctrine was consciously formulated. This passage must be interpreted in the light of the above.

Somewhat similar is Is. 14 : 15, "Thou shalt be brought down to Sheol, to the uttermost parts of the pit (*yarkethe bor*)." This phrase, however, is in antithesis to *yarkethe tzaphon*, a reference to the Babylonian holy mountain, in the previous verses, and again it must be questioned how far the phrase is to be taken literally. All in all it can be stated that there is no explicit formulation of such a doctrine in the Old Testament writers.

In this connexion it is necessary to return to the consideration of the term Abaddon (*'bd* = perish), which is thought by some to be a place of destruction *within* Sheol. The term occurs only in the Wisdom Literature, in Job 31 : 12, ([Lust] is a fire that consumeth unto Abaddon); 26 : 6 (Abaddon hath no covering); Pr. 15 : 11 (Sheol and Abaddon are before Yahweh), 27 : 20 (are not satisfied); Job 28 : 22; Ps. 88 : 11 (12). In all but one of these the word is parallel with *She'ol*, *maweth* or *qeber*, and in none of them is anything predicated of Abaddon which is not also predicated of Sheol. Any distinction of meaning between the two, therefore, rests on very slender foundations. The thought of death

⁸ *A Bible Commentary for Bible Students*, ed. C. J. Ellicott, *in loc.*

as the issue of judgment, in the removal of earthly honour and prosperity, is a common Old Testament doctrine, as we have seen. It is not clear that the meaning of 'abaddon goes beyond this.

(xiii) What connexion is there between a dead body, and the person in Sheol? There is no suggestion that a person's passage to Sheol could be hindered by what happened to his body. However, it was still the person's body, and just as death was the issue of judgment, so an ignominious death — e.g., when the corpse was not buried — was a retribution on one's sins. Is. 66:24 — "their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched" — has this meaning; the fact that Christ endorsed a basic principle of Old Testament exegesis, that its physical truth can be given a spiritual application, by applying this verse to the punishment of sinners in Gehenna (Mark 9:48), does not alter the fact that in its original application it referred to the fate of the physical corpse.

V. CONCLUSION

We shall attempt to draw together the threads of our study, and to draw some conclusions from them.

Generally speaking, Sheol is characterized by a deprivation of that which constitutes life on earth — light, solidity, vitality. It is in some respects an essentially *negative* conception. On the other hand those in Sheol are not without hope, for God is fully able to rescue from Sheol. It is the picture of death, unrelieved by the resurrection hope, but also without the idea of final judgment. With a very few exceptions, the Hebrew writers did not see beyond the grave. Because of the concreteness of Hebrew thought, the state of death was thought of as a place — and since the dead were buried beneath the surface of the ground, this place was naturally thought of as subterranean. As death came into the world by sin (Gen. 2:17), those who are dead are cut off from God; but they are not under final condemnation. They await the consummation of their life at the Judgment Day. Thus to the Old Testament writers was revealed the reality of death, while the world awaited the revelation of Jesus Christ as the Resurrection and the Life, and the Judge of the Living and the Dead.

Romford, Essex.