

Static Death

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Religions are rarely, if ever, static. Religions often change as human needs do. The religion of the Hebrew Bible was no exception. The Yahwism of Jeremiah differed from that of either Abraham or Moses, which differed from each other as well.

Yet interestingly enough, one aspect of Hebrew thought remained constant all through the ages that span the writings of the Hebrew Bible. Unlike their conception of God, for example, which one could argue changed from the monolatry or henotheism of the early Mosaic period to the fervent monotheism of the Isaianic—the Hebrew concept of death, of what happens when a person dies, remained static. In other words, the basic view taught in the Bible that the dead are asleep in the ground, in *Sheol*, remained the same from the time of Moses up through the Persian period. During such a long period, with so many radical changes in the experience of the people, aspects of

their religion would be expected to change as well.

With the use of *Sheol*, however, no such change, much less an advancement or progression, occurs. The word appears to have kept its same basic meaning throughout the entire time in which the Bible was written, which is that it's a place where people—both the righteous and the unrighteous—sleep until the resurrection of the dead.

Also, even from the earliest times, *Sheol* always had a negative connotation. Nothing in any age ever gave hope or promise. Outside of a few mysterious references to the *Rephaim*, in no age was *Sheol* seen as conscious abode of the dead, either for the righteous or the unrighteous, and never does it appear as a blissful place. Even during the Exilic period, with so much calamity and devastation, *Sheol* didn't evolve into a more hopeful place, one that offered the bliss and happiness not found among the living. Instead, in that period, *Sheol* is clearly linked to hardly a

cause for hope in and of itself. The hope comes only from the resurrection at the end of the age.

Also, in almost all periods, an early departure to *Sheol* was seen as a punishment. It is a place of "destruction" (Proverbs 15:11), a place where there is no praise of Yahweh (Isaiah 38:18), where people are consumed (Job 24:19), where people sleep (Job 14:12), and a place to where people ultimately return (Job 1:21, Jonah 2:3, Psalm 139:8). Again none of these verses teach a progression in the concept of the word; rather they simply confirm and elaborate what was understood about it from the earliest times.

Of course, a study of *Sheol* doesn't give the whole picture regarding the development of the Hebrew concept of the dead from the Archaic to the Persian period. It's merely one piece in a larger mosaic. Nevertheless, it's a large piece, one that helps confirm that the Israelites had no notion of an immediate afterlife, but death was merely a sleep in the grave until resurrection morning.