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Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, and Hell: Concepts of the Afterlife in the Bible

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BELIEFS AND TEACHINGS

Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, and Hell: Concepts of the Afterlife in the Bible—Revelation 20:15

Sheol

This Hebrew word, referring to the grave in the Old Testament, is unique because it does not have any cognate in any other ancient Near Eastern language, and its etymology in Hebrew is unknown. It frequently appears in poetic literature but is also mentioned early on in Scripture (Gen. 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31).

The realm of the dead is a minor theme in the Old Testament. The Hebrew scriptures have only about 100 references to it. Also, the Old Testament contains no accounts of travel to the underworld, remarkable among the other ancient Near Eastern cultures, whose literature displayed great interest in the netherworld and contained many epics about visits to it.

The Old Testament depicts Sheol as deep in the earth (1 Kings 2:6; Job 17:16; Ps. 55:15; Prov. 7:27; Ezek. 31:16) and, therefore, cosmologically opposite to heaven (Job 11:8; Ps. 139:8; Isa. 7:11). Yet, Sheol is still under God's dominion (Job 11:8; 26:5, 6; Ps. 139:8; Prov. 15:11; Amos 9:2). It is a prison from which no one can escape (Job 16:22; Isa. 38:10; Jonah 2:6) and characterized by inactivity and silence (Ps. 94:17; 115:17).

A great leveler, Sheol is the destiny of everyone, from the least to the greatest, whether rich or poor, slave or free (Job 3:13-19; Ps. 89:48; Eccles. 9:10). In a few cases, the Old Testament describes Sheol's inhabitants as *repa'im* ("shades"), a term related to the Phoenician and the Ugaritic roots *rp'm*, which also referred to the dead. However, unlike their pagan counterparts, the Hebrews did not conceive of the *repa'im* as gods or protectors of the living. Nowhere does the Old Testament describe them as engaging in any activity or having any contact with the living.

Furthermore, they are never to be consulted through necromancy, invoked as patrons, or invited to feasts. Lifeless and weak (Prov. 21:16; Isa. 14:9-11), they are poetically and metaphorically portrayed as trembling before Yahweh and unable to praise Him (Job 26:5; Ps. 88:10). The Bible asserts, however, that Sheol is under God's power and that He would rescue the righteous from it (1 Sam. 2:6; Hos. 13:14). God's radical solution to the problem of the righteous in Sheol is not some blissful afterlife but the future hope of physical resurrection (Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2).

Hadēs

The ancient Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint (LXX) almost always used the word *hadēs* to translate Sheol. In the New Testament, Hades, like Sheol, lies deep down in the earth and is conceived as the opposite of heaven (Matt. 11:23; Luke 10:15; cf. Matt 12:40; Rom. 10:7). It is a prison with gates (Matt. 16:18; Rev. 1:18) and locked (Rev. 1:18) from which nobody can escape. All the dead, righteous and wicked alike, are there (Luke 16:23, 26; Acts 2:27, 31). In the end, however, only the wicked are seen in hades (Rev. 20:15) because Jesus has the keys of Hades and rescues His people from it (Rev. 1:18).

Tartaros (Hell)

According to 2 Peter 2:4, the rebellious angels are “cast ... into *tartaros*,” which is a prison of darkness which confines them until the judgment day. It appears to be similar to the place described as “the abyss” (*abyssos*) in Revelation 20:1-3, where Satan remains for a thousand years before the final judgment. Revelation 12:7-12 identifies this prison as the earth. During the millennium, when the depopulated earth would be a wasteland, Satan is bound by a “chain” because he has no one left to deceive.

Gehenna (Hell)

Most of the references to “hell” in English versions of the New Testament are a translation of the Greek word *geenna* (often called Gehenna). It is the Greek form of the Aramaic *gehinnam*, which in turn goes back to the Hebrew *ge ben-hinnom* (Valley of the son [or sons] of Hinnom)—a geographical feature that lies to the south of Jerusalem. (Today, the valley is called *Wadi er-Rabâbi*.) In the time of Ahaz and Manasseh, people offered child sacrifices to Molech—an underworld deity—in that valley. Josiah, during his religious reforms, had desecrated this site (2 Kings 16:2, 3; 21:6; 2 Chron. 28:3; 33:6; Jer. 7:31). The place may have become an enormous pyre to burn the corpses of the 185,000 soldiers of the Assyrian army in the time of Hezekiah (Isa. 30:31-33; 37:36; 2 Kings 19:35). Jeremiah also predicted that the valley would be the place of God’s judgment in which the bodies of wicked Israelites would lay unburied until burned (Jer. 7:32, 33; 19:6, 7; cf. Isa. 31:8, 9; Isa. 66:24). In time, it came to symbolize the place where God would inflict His judgment upon the wicked with an unquenchable fire and an undying worm, two images that describe the corpses being totally consumed (Isa. 66:15, 16, 24). Gehenna does not appear in the Septuagint or the writings of Josephus and Philo.

In the New Testament, the term *geenna* occurs a total of 12 times, all but one of which are in the teachings of Jesus and refers to the place of final punishment for sin (Matt. 5:22, 29, 30; 10:28; 18:9; 23:15, 33; Mark 9:43, 45, 47; Luke 12:5; James 3:6.). The New Testament describes Gehenna as a place of darkness, of unquenchable fire, and where an undying worm consumes the wicked (Matt. 5:22;

Matt. 18:9; Mark 9:43, 48). It is the place of final punishment (Matt. 23:15, 33) and, metonymically, the source of wickedness (James 3:6).

The Bible regards unquenchable fire as kindled by God and what cannot be stopped until it inflicts total destruction (Amos 5:5, 6). Similarly, the image of the undying worm denotes a destructive work that cannot be halted and comes from Isaiah 66:24—a prophetic description of God’s final judgment over His enemies when the righteous would “go forth and look upon the corpses” of their enemies. What the righteous see are dead bodies undergoing destruction, not their unceasing misery. The maggots represent the rotting of the unburied corpses and thus symbolize the eternal dishonor the dead have chosen for themselves (cf. Dan. 12:2). Therefore, the images of the undying “worm” and eternal fire speak of the eternal consequences of the final judgment, not their duration. Similarly, the expressions “eternal judgment” (Heb. 6:2), “eternal salvation” (Heb 5:9), and “eternal redemption” (Heb. 9:12) do not refer to an unceasing duration but to the permanence and irrevocability of the consequences. Thus Jude 7 says that Sodom and Gomorrah suffered the punishment of eternal fire—the results of which would last forever.

The reference to *hades* in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus, rather than describing the ongoing punishment of the wicked in the fires of hell, uses a common fable to teach the importance of making decisions in this life that have eternal consequences based on the message of “Moses and the prophets” (Luke 16:19-31). The rich man should have shown mercy to the poor in obedience to Scripture, while Lazarus was alive. Similarly, John the Revelator uses the prophecy of the total destruction of Edom in Isaiah 34:8-10 to represent the complete annihilation of the wicked in Revelation 14:9-11. The punishment would be without respite until it is complete. Like the fire that God kindles cannot be quenched, His punishment cannot be stopped until justice is fully rendered upon those who have chosen eternal death by clinging to sin (cf. Rev. 15:3-4).

Cortez, “Death and Future Hope in the Hebrew Bible,” 95-106.

Cortez, “Death and Hell in the New Testament,” 183-206.

Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes: A Biblical and Historical Study of Final Punishment*.

Galenieks, *The Nature, Function, and Purpose of the Term מַשְׁכָּוֹת in the Torah, Prophets and Writings: An Exegetical-Intertextual Study*.

Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament*.