

# “HELL” AS A TRANSLATION OF שְׁאוֹל IN THE HEBREW BIBLE: DE-HELLENIZING THE KJV AND NKJV OLD TESTAMENTS

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## INTRODUCTION

Hell is no longer a hot issue for many theologians and Christians. Some evangelicals, however, are fired up over its traditional understanding being replaced by the theory of annihilation in some, even evangelical, quarters and being removed as a doctrine or seldom if ever remarked upon within the Church as a whole in recent history. Liberal theology long ago dispensed with any need for such a negative and non-universalistic notion. Evangelical theologians maintain a belief in an eschatological and eternal punishment of the unrepentant, but are accepting that the way in which the Bible—especially the Old Testament—has been interpreted (usually proof-texted) and translated, in relation to topics like Hell, is ripe for review and reassessment, even reversal of some classic commentaries and conceptions.

A quick look at the major English versions since the KJV or AV (*King James or Authorized Version*), based on revisions since the original version of 1611, to the present will demonstrate a remarkable change in the frequency of “hell/Hell” in the Old Testament. “Hell” occurs thirty-one times in the current editions of the KJV and nineteen times in the *New King James Version* (NKJV, 1982).<sup>1</sup> It does not occur in modern, major English versions; e.g., in the USA, the *New International Version* (NIV, 1978), *New American Standard Version* (NASB, 1960), *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV, 1989), or *New American Bible* (NAB, 1970). In twenty-nine of the thirty-one instances of “hell” in the KJV, the LXX has “Hades” (ᾍδης) and in all thirty-one the Vulgate has some variant of the root infer- (“lower-world/-place”).<sup>2</sup> This demonstrates the KJV’s dependence, at least in this instance, on these traditional and classic works as much as, or more than, on the exegesis of the “original” Hebrew texts.

The topic of the concept of the earthly or eternal punishment of the wicked in the Old Testament is too large for the nature of this presentation; as is also an evalu-

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ation of every occurrence of שאול, even of just the thirty-one verses where KJV translates it as “hell.”<sup>3</sup> The purpose and scope of this paper, therefore, are limited to only a summary examination of those eighteen verses where the NKJV preserves this KJV understanding and the one passage where “hell” for שאול is used by the NKJV alone, of these two versions. Obviously if the NKJV has eliminated thirteen of the thirty-one times “hell” appears in the KJV, then it is clear that scholars who are sympathetic to the KJV find that meaning inappropriate in those cases and, consequently, this study can treat those instances as secondary and supplemental to this discussion and focus on those places where the NKJV maintains the meaning of “hell” for שאול in the Hebrew Bible. It will be demonstrated exegetically that none of these contexts calls for this translation or are concerned at all with the forever fate of the unfaithful. In that sense the KJV and NKJV will be *de-hell*-enized (especially when one remembers that much of what moderns assume about Hell or what the Bible says about it comes from the influence of Greek mythology).

## 1. AN EVALUATION OF THE EIGHTEEN TIMES THE KJV/NKJV RENDER שאול “HELL”

### 1.1 Deuteronomy 32:22

This verse is part of a song which recites the past idolatry of the Israelites not long saved from Egypt (vv. 16-18, 21a) and reveals God’s plan to judge them through the means of a “foolish nation” (v. 21b). Then in v. 22, which begins with “because,” God gives a reason why and further explanation how this chastisement will take place on *these chosen people* who acted unfaithfully: i.e., because God’s anger is red hot, hot enough to burn throughout the earth’s surface and through its crust into the realm of the dead (which was believed to be subterranean).<sup>4</sup> This realm is translated as “Sheol” in the NRSV and “nether world” in the NAB. The former is less of a translation than a transliteration of the Hebrew term, except for the fact that the English rendering is capitalized, which style Hebrew does not employ.<sup>5</sup> The upper case use of the term does provide some meaning since this tends to personify or institutionalize the term and consequently connect it with ideas like the Underworld/Netherworld or realm of the dead. “Hell” is a true translation albeit inaccurate and anachronistic.<sup>6</sup> Why? Because what is meant by “hell” today is not consistent with the immediate historical and linguistic contexts of this passage. The verses that follow (vv. 23-) confirm that the judgment concerned is earthly and temporal not spiritual and eternal, involving arrows, hunger, plague, wild animals, the sword, etc.

### 1.2 Psalm 9:17

The main idea here is that the wicked Gentile nations (i.e., those who forget God by ignoring that he is the God that chose Israel and thus mistreat his people) will be destroyed, as *Yahweh* (יהוה) promised Abraham (Gen. 12:3). Consequently the psalmist concludes with, “Rise up, O LORD! Do not let mortals prevail; let the nations be judged before you. Put them in fear, O LORD; let the nations know that they are only human” (vv. 19-20). In v. 18 (19 in the Masoretic Hebrew Text, MT hereafter)—which immediately follows the use of שאול and the statement about the nations that “forget God”—this psalmist offers a reason why God will punish them; i.e., because God will remember the promise to Abraham regarding those in need of rescue from persecution: “For the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever” (NRSV). “Needy” and “poor” refer to those who are experiencing defeat at the hands of ungodly nations.

1.3 Psalm 55:15

This is a lament psalm of twenty-three verses. Psalm 55 is about David's fear of death at the hands of an enemy who seems to be on the verge of victory over God's anointed unless a divine rescue occurs (vv. 2-7). The verse with which this debate is concerned (v. 15) must be read in context along with the three verses immediately following (vv. 16-18). That שׂאול in v. 15 is the grave or realm of death is obvious from the preceding colon, which calls for the physical "death" (מִוֹת; v. 16 in MT) of David's enemies. מִוֹת may be pointed as either *māwēṭ* "death" or *môṭ* "one dying; to die." This verse is a combination of a synonymous parallel bi-cola (v. 15a-b) and a synthetic, explanatory monoclon (v. 15c), with the major disjunction coming after the synonymous bi-cola:

A	B	C	[D']
Let-it-come	death	upon them	[by surprise]/
A'-C'	B'	[C']	D
Let-them-go-down	[to] <i>šēḏl</i>	[them]	alive; //
E	F	G	
for-evil [lis]	in-their-homes [and]	in-their-midsts.	(cf. NRSV/NIV)

Consequently שׂאול; and "death" have to be the same ideas, the parallel lines working together like the two speakers of a stereo to produce a blended, harmonious sound. These stereophonics, in linguistic terms, mean that v. 15a-b has one idea: "May they [= my enemies] be slain!" Perhaps David says "go down alive" because he hopes God will create an earthquake so the ground will open and swallow them alive, as God had done in the past with wicked Israelite rebels and traitors (cf. Num. 16:3-35).<sup>7</sup> Colon 15c then adds the reason: they are evil in act and attitude.

1.4 Psalm 139:8

Psalm 139 is one of the best known and loved Davidic psalms of the Old Testament. Verse 8 is where שׂאול is used. The issue of whether to render what in Hebrew is literally "heavens" as "heavens" (the celestial sky) or "H/heaven" (where God "lives") is a crucial matter for understanding the author's intention. Is he really reflecting on the theoretical potential of hiding from God in Heaven or in Hell? God is so obviously unavoidable in Heaven that the writer would seem silly to make such an unnecessary observation. And one of the standard understandings of Hell is that, whatever it is, it is the absence of God's personal presence. The verse under question is brought about by the poet's rhetorical question in v. 7, where can I go where you are not present?—to which the obvious answer is "no where!" Since God is also obviously in Heaven and the psalmist is clearly concentrating on the hypothetical idea of a location where one could hide from God, then the concern of v. 8a cannot be with Heaven but only the seemingly limitless sky above, which means the synonymous and alternative parallelism in v. 8b has to be earthly in orientation. Also the larger and immediate context of vv. 7- 12 is earthly in focus. The text of v. 8 is structured literally as follows:

A		B
If-I-ascend	to-the-[heights of the]-heavens ( <i>šāmayim</i> ) [above] ,	
C		
there-are-You! //		
A'		B'
Or-if-I-descend	to-the-depths ( <i>šēōl</i> ) [of the earth below] ,	
C'		
behold,-You [are there also]!		

For David **שָׂאוֹל** is only the grave, the tomb, the realm of death. He uses it again in Psalm 141, which even the KJV renders “grave” as well as NIV and NKJV. In Psalm 6:5 also the KJV accepts with NIV “grave” as the necessary sense, while NKJV uses “death.” Assonance is also a reason for the employment of *šemayim* (“heights above”) and *sheol* (“depths below”).

### 1.5 Proverbs 5:5

Often individual proverbs stand alone without a context, but this verse is one of the exceptions. Proverbs 5:1-6 is an extended set of maxims about the wisdom of avoiding a prostitute or, as the Hebrew puts it, “strange” woman. The text of v. 5 is easily spotted as a synonymous parallelism with **שָׂאוֹל** and “death” as a standard, stock-in-trade, poetic word pair.

The contextual argument flows like this: My child, listen to my wisdom (v. 1) so that you will obtain prudent and practical understanding (v. 2). This is important because the prostitute can have persuasively sweet words (v. 3); but when all is said and done, her advice is extremely bitter and dangerously sharp (v. 4). The path upon which she will lead you is deadly and dark (v. 5) because in her ignorance she wanders off the path that enhances life (v. 6).

It may be the true that many people who visit prostitutes are also people that are unbelievers and unrepentant and in the next world will be eternally cast away from God’s presence. But one can hardly imagine that the point of the proverbial perspective in v. 5 is that all prostitutes and those who visit them will go to Hell. This is not consistent with the nature of wisdom literature in particular or Scripture in general. Structurally the verse makes it clear that **שָׂאוֹל** is the counterpart to “death”; so as a restatement in a synonymous parallelism it has to mean the equivalent of “death,” i.e. the grave or tomb. The opposite idea is then presented in v. 6: sexual activity like this is anti-(abundant) life. The point must be that prostitution is foolish because there is the real and present danger of physical disease and emotional distress, which diminishes life. The end may well be disease, depression, or even death, i.e., a sooner-than-necessary progression towards or entrance into the tomb or grave world.

### 1.6 Proverbs 7:27

The same is basically true of this passage as the foregoing one. Again the context is an extended discussion of the attractions and distractions but also potential and probable problems with adultery and/or prostitution (sexual license outside marriage). The entire

chapter of twenty-seven verses (of which the one with שׂוֹל is the concluding verse) concerns this topic. That the issue is not the possible (especially certain) loss of eternal life but physical life is seen in vv. 21-23. The similarities with Proverbs 5:1-6 can be seen with the final verses (24-27) of chapter 7. שׂוֹל is again a synonym with "death."

1.7 Proverbs 9:18

In this verse prostitution ("foolish" woman; v. 13) is in view once more, so most or all of what has been said about שׂוֹל in Old Testament wisdom and Proverbs so far is applicable. The parallelism is the same, although the word used for "the dead" is different than the normal one, which, unfortunately, is not apparent in many versions. The word rendered "dead" in both NRSV and KJV is not the usual מוֹת but רפאים (*reṣpā'īm*), which some render "shades," or "spirits of the dead (ghosts)"; but the basic idea is "dead ones." Only the assumption that Old Testament authors shared certain views with the Egyptians or Canaanites about the Netherworld can lead to ideas like "disembodied spirits or souls in *Sheol*." Another use of the same term or a homograph was as the name (*Rephaim*) of some of the pre-Israelite dwellers of Canaan.<sup>8</sup> In this latter capacity the questionable translation "giants" is sometimes given. When the same triconsonantal root is used for a verb it means "to heal," and the feminine noun form means "medicine." But this masculine form, when not used of the *Rephaim*, has to do, seemingly, with "the dead." It functions as an alternative term for מוֹת. The immediate and larger contexts give unambiguous evidence that the liabilities of illicit lust lie intrinsically in this world and not the next (cf. 8:33-36; 9:1-5; 9:10-18).

1.8-9 Proverbs 15:11; 27:20

These proverbs have no essential or necessary connection to the surrounding verses. In both cases the parallelism is synthetic, so no synonym for שׂוֹל is used but it is paired with אבִדוֹן (*ʿāḇaddōn*, "destruction") as a closely related idea; and this same term is elsewhere used as a structural synonym for שׂוֹל or other terms for "grave." For example in the similar and co-ordinate synonymous parallelism of Psalm 88:11 [88:12 MT], literally portrayed as:

A	B	C
Will-it-be-declared?	in-the-grave [ <i>qēḇer</i> ]	your-lovingkindness //
[A]	C'	B'
[Will-it-be-declared?]	your-faithfulness	in-destruction [ <i>ʿāḇaddōn</i> ].

Another example is Job 26:6, literally rendered as:

A	[B']	C	D
Naked	[is]	<i>šēʾōl</i>	before-Him //
B	A'	C'	[D']
And-there-is-no	covering	for-' <i>āḇaddōn</i>	[before-God].

However קֶבֶר (*qēḇer*, "grave") in the Old Testament never seems to be used in parallel with שׂוֹל ("death; grave," etc.) or מוֹת ("death; one dying"); but often is found with "pit"



away from the grave below.<sup>9</sup> A major theme of Old Testament wisdom is the idea that the wise life is usually a long life because the wise person avoids the type of attitudes and activities that often lead others (foolish people) to an early or untimely death. This verse in its full sense and literal structure as a synthetic (reason-based) parallelism is as follows:

A	B	C	[D']	E	
(The)-path-of	life	[is]	upward	[from š <sup>e</sup> ôl]	for-the-wise; //
F	G	[E]	D	C'	
In-order	to-keep	[the wise]	from-š <sup>e</sup> ôl	below.	

1.11 Proverbs 23:14

That anyone would think לִשְׂאֹל in this verse means "Hell" is utterly amazing and inexplicable. In this case a small context is formed by vv. 12-14. The main theme is that of a parent's discipline of a child.<sup>10</sup> Some important interpretive differences are found when various versions are compared, but the most significant is the meaning given to לִשְׂאֹל. The value of beating a child dramatically—actually infinitely—increases when the result moves from deliverance from mere physical (an early grave) to eternal death (Hell)! In literary terms this is a simple proverb making a simple, practical (but true and trustworthy) observation about a reality of life. It would be an abnormal assessment of this genre of revelation and Scripture to see it as a philosophical puzzle which assumes the following logic: a child must be beaten with a stick because that will cause the child to fear doing evil and in turn make him fear God and the prospects of eternal judgment so he will naturally believe and behave properly and thus be saved from Hell in the end. Proverbs are pithy principles based on experiential patterns. The obvious fact being observed here is the value of discipline. It normally works in bringing about wise behavior, which in turn usually prolongs life, quantitatively and qualitatively. Biblical theology and logic both argue strongly and conclusively against the idea that this verse says physical punishment normally nets a heavenly reward. Spanked children and unspanked children will populate both Heaven and Hell in the end (no pun intended). On the other hand many more disciplined children than undisciplined will make the kind of decisions that increase life; and many more undisciplined children than disciplined will make bad decisions that lessen or lose life.

נַפֶּשׁ in v. 14 should be translated "life" or "him" and not "soul." It seldom if ever means in the Old Testament what the word "soul" does in current, popular usage; especially when, as here, a possessive pronoun is attached. The context shows that discipline saves from physical death, so the emphasis is on the prolongation of the child's physical and earthly health and holiness. The phrase "he will not die" (v. 13) is not an attempt to console the parent with the opinion that "a spanking or beating will not kill someone" (obviously a beating might); but it means "discipline will keep him from an early grave." This argues that the same sense is intended in v. 14. Punishment does not "save an eternal soul from Hell" but "preserves a life from an untimely death."

Also most, if not all, who would want to translate לִשְׂאֹל here as "hell"—or who accept the KJV as the preferred or "perfect" translation—do not believe (or belong to a Church tradition that believes) that one's eternal destiny is determined by how often or not one sins. But to have "hell" in this verse seems to teach this: i.e., you must physically and painfully punish

them (understood: because you will teach them obedience) and therefore they will be saved from eternal damnation. The chief concern of the wise author of Prov. 23 is with the value of discipline, whatever kind is used (although it is fair to say that harsh physical punishment was the norm of that day), to achieve behavior patterns that are healthy, as long as not cruel or crippling.<sup>11</sup> Verse 14 should be read with v. 13, which demonstrates that [š<sup>e</sup>ôl] in the latter is equivalent to מוֹת (“to die”) in the former. Both verses mapped out literally look like this:

A	B	C			
Do-not-withhold	from-a-child	discipline [mûsâr]; //			
	D		E	F	G
	If-you-punish-him [takkennû]		with-the-rod [šēbet]	not	he-will-die.

A	B	C			
You	with-the-rod [šēbet]	punish-him [takkennû]; //			
	D		E	F	
	And-his-life [nepēš]		from-death [š <sup>e</sup> ôl]	you-will-save.	

### 1.12 Amos 9:2

The context of this verse is an oracle about the destruction of Israel. It follows the Lord's frightful introductory statement of his intention to bring death on the entire population through collapsed buildings and the sword (v. 1). Most interesting is the fact that the KJV has a colon at the end of this verse, which means the translators understand the following verse or verses to be explanatory or illustrative of what this verse says. And those verses are about anything but Hell! Of course the parallel line contains “heaven,” which begs the question. The terms are clearly meant to be antithetical linguistically but these cola are synonymous semantically. The same idea being expressed in two different ways is that no one can hide from the death God has declared he will execute on Israel, regardless of which direction one runs, even if one tries to climb into the terrestrial tomb world or into the celestial star world. The directions used are opposites for effect but the intentions of each colon are identical. Verse 2 is meant to reiterate the synonymous parallelism at the end of v. 1: “not one of them shall flee away, // not one of them shall escape” (9:1d; cf. NRSV). Contextually “them” can only refer to ancient Israelites caught in the catastrophic destruction of their cities and countryside. Furthermore the rest of the verses (vv. 3-4), which conclude the opening pericope of chapter nine, are structured as similar restatements of the fact that whatever these Israelites-elected-for-execution try to do to escape will be hopeless. All the parallel cola have a similar style: the protasis colon beginning with “though they [try such and such]” and the apodasis colon following with “I will [stop them].” All these further explicate v. 2 by giving other earthly and temporal examples of impossible escape plans, be they high or low: hide on Mount Carmel or at the bottom of the sea (v. 3; cf. Jonah 2:3, 5-6) or into captivity as a political prisoner (v. 4). Verse 2 is composed of two synthetic parallelisms (second-line completion type) which are similar and alternative synonymous parallels. “Heavens” again has to be understood as “the skies above us” (not “Heaven”), so the poetically paired term, שָׂוּר, has to be seen as the lower counterpart; i.e., “the earth below us.” These may be literally represented as:



A		B	
Though-they-dig-down		to-[thel-depths-of-the-earth [š <sup>e</sup> ôl], /	
	C	D	E
	from-there	my-hand	it-will-take-them; //
A'		B'	
Or-if-they-climb		the-[heights of the] sky [sāmayim], /	
	C'	[D']	E'
	from-there	[I myself]	I-will-bring-them-down.

One other feature of interest in this passage—and one some might try to interpret as another allusion to Hell—is the “sea-serpent” in v. 3b (NRSV), just rendered “serpent” in KJV. In context, however, the idea is that individual Israelites cannot escape God’s inevitable destructive judgment, no matter where they try to hide on, in, or above the earth. The language is hyperbolic. Even if they flee to the bottom of the sea, God will capture or kill them through the instrumentality of a sea-creature. This “serpent” has no connection with the crafty serpent of temptation at the beginning of human creation. But each serpent episode does reflect the ancient religious mentality that understands seas and sea monsters or serpents as representative of chaos or anti-creation in the cosmos. The same Hebrew word for “serpent” (נָחָשׁ; *nāḥās*) is used in Gen. 3:1 and Amos 9:3. The Canaanites viewed the Sea and the Sea Serpent as gods—named, respectively, Yam and Lotan (= Hebrew *Leviathan*).<sup>12</sup> The Old Testament is careful to expose the truth that *Yahweh* the God of Israel is the Creator and controller of all such forceful and fearsome dark features and facts of existence in this fallen and sometimes seemingly undirected and unstable universe.

### 1.13 Isaiah 14:9

This chapter of Isaiah is famous (or infamous) for its traditional and popular interpretation, which identifies the king of Babylon mentioned in v. 12 (if not in vv. 3-11) with Satan—supposedly named “Lucifer” in this passage. In verse 12 the expression “shining one” or “day star” was translated “Lucifer” in the KJV and NKJV, which rendering was a transliteration of the Latin word used in the Vulgate: “lucifer,” which means “light-bearing” or “morning star.”<sup>13</sup> The capitalization of the word as a proper noun in such versions is the only time it is used as a name. No such name for Satan is known outside of this verse and commentaries that take this interpretation.

With this in mind שׂאול in v. 9 could not possibly be about Hell unless the author is saying that such would be the eternal destination of this king. And even if vv. 12-14 were about Satan, this verse 9 (where NKJV has “hell”) is in the section that most do interpret as dealing with the human king of Babylon.<sup>14</sup> The traditional Satan-view usually begins with v. 12 and is often limited to just vv. 12-14. Also interesting is the fact that שׂאול appears again in v. 11 but also in v. 12 in the so-called Satan section. Yet in both instances the NKJV renders it “Sheol” not “hell.” The KJV has “grave” in v. 11 and “hell” in vv. 9 and 15.

The שׂאול of v. 9 should be the same as in vv. 11 and 15 since the destruction and destiny of the same person is in view in each case. But is his eternal destruction in view? None of these contexts supports this idea. Only if Satan is the subject can a case be made

for something like “hell” as the meaning of *שׂאול* in Isaiah 14. In v. 9 it is paired with a synonym *רפאים* rendered “spirits of the departed” in the NIV, “shades” in the NRSV, and (ironically, most accurate) “the dead” in both KJV and NKJV. The basic idea should be obvious to an objective reader: the grave, i.e. the realm of the dead, is anxious to receive this one whose wicked pride is so great that the world longs to be rid of him as quickly as possible. Now he is fallen, so the grave is personified as longing for his presence. This “grave” poetically in synonymous parallelism is first named *שׂאול* (“the place of the dead”) and then *רפאים* (“those in the grave” or “the dead/departed ones”). Adding to this second idea notions like “spirits of” or “shades” reads into them a specificity not required. Contextually these terms just refer to the grave as the place where dead people end up. Even this grave and its inhabitants are poetically and figuratively pictured as being relieved that this king’s time has come. This grave imagery is more explicit in v. 11, which is why neither KJV nor NKJV continue with the meaning of “hell” for *שׂאול* there. In v. 11 worms are said to also inhabit *שׂאול*, such that they become a bed for the corpse of this king. *שׂאול* is simply and straightforwardly the pit or hole in the ground where a dead body is laid to rest. However, in this case, this normal grave is only a potential reality. The actual grave is not a stately sarcophagus, befitting a king, but the bare ground itself, where maggots and worms reside. The king described here is killed and, therefore, is a candidate for a royal burial and grave site; but to add insult to injury, so to speak, his shame is intensified, for he is not only defeated in death but fails to receive the expected honor of a king’s burial. Instead he is left to rot on the ground for a grave. Beyond the disgrace of dying in battle—which kings almost never did and which great kings were never supposed to do—this king also was shamed by not receiving a royal reception for his body or a rich and stately return of it to the earth (see vv. 18-20). In v. 15 the synonymous poetic parallel is between *שׂאול* and *בור* “pit.” The one who sought divine heights as a god or demigod ended up in death like all mortals. Death in this verse is defined as being brought down from pride and power of life to insignificance and indignation (i.e., as existence in the grave, a hole in the ground). But this king ironically and justly does not even get to the grave *per se*; he is left in his ruin and ridicule (vv. 16-17) to decay among the maggots, without proper burial (vv. 18-20a).

### 1.14 Habakkuk 2:5

The notion that *שׂאול* means “hell” in this verse can be dispensed with quite readily. The immediate context is God’s reply to Habakkuk’s question about the propriety of God using the wicked Assyrians to judge the chosen, albeit imperfect, Hebrews. This answer involves verses 2-5 of chapter 2 and contains the somewhat controversial and significant statement quoted in the New Testament and applied to Christian soteriology, “but the righteous live by their faith” (2:4b; NRSV). The following verse is the one that uses *שׂאול* and makes the basic point that arrogant nations—i.e., those who abuse others—never stop looking for another victim, but also will not go unpunished. Even v. 4 begins with the subject of proud people (“Look at the proud!” [NRSV]), who are then contrasted with the righteous, who live by faith. They keep trusting God even when they do not understand how the wicked can be allowed to win. In v. 5b the proud powers of earth are described poetically as greedy for the gain of other nations’ goods. This verse presents a continued-

type synonymous and somewhat chiasmic structure, which parallels "the grave" (*šēḏl*) with "death." Literally the text reads:

A	B	C	D	
Because	it-makes-large	like- <i>šēḏl</i>	his-greed //	
D	C'	E	F	
And-it [his greed]	like-the- <i>māweṭ</i>	that-never	it-is-satisfied.	

The parallel and synonymous word pair is *שׂאול* and *מוֹת*, of which the latter means "death"; which is the meaning also given in the NKJV. To be more exact and consistent, if *שׂאול* does mean "hell" here, then *מוֹת* should have been translated "eternal death." But contextually it should be clear that the author's intention was to portray these vicious nations as death personified (Madam Death). No one is excluded from death's design to devour. So *שׂאול* is again used in its most common sense of "the realm of death" or the "grave." The verse says nothing about the eternal destiny of these wicked nations, only that they are characterized by an unquenchable thirst for the wealth of the world. That they will be judged is stated but nothing more is said about the nature of that judgment. Their relationship to *שׂאול* is the same as death: a cavernous capacity. The final synonymous cola of the verse repeat this idea:

They gather	all nations	for themselves //
And [they] collect	all peoples	as their own. (cf. NRSV).

Hell is also hungry for many inhabitants, one could claim; but while that is also true it is not the focus of this verse, since death itself is the twin term with *שׂאול*.

### 1.15-16 Ezekiel 31:16-17

Chapter 31 of Ezekiel continues the pronouncement of judgment against the king of Egypt begun in chapter 30. These chapters sit within and near the end of Ezekiel's proclamations against the Gentile nations in chapters 25-32. In 31:1-9 this doomed monarch is asked to remember the fallen fate of the mighty Assyrian nation, which is compared metaphorically and poetically to a lofty cedar tree. Then in vv. 10- formal verse gives way to poetic prose with some verse interspersed (vv. 13, 14b), wherein Pharaoh's punishment is predicted due to his pride just as the ruler of Assyria. In v. 14, just before vv. 16-17 (where KJV and NKJV translate *שׂאול* as "hell") the statement is made that such godless pride has been and will continue to be answered with "death" (*מוֹת*, *māweṭ*). In the poetic stanzas which occupy the last half of v. 14, "being given over to death" is in synonymous parallelism with "going to the lower ground/earth [*אֶרֶץ*, *'ereṣ*]" and with "going down to the pit [*בּוֹר*]." Then in vv. 15-16 God's felling of the lofty cedar tree (i.e., proud Assyria) is again reviewed and restated as going down (v. 15) or being cast down (v. 16) to *שׂאול*. In v. 16 *שׂאול* is used synonymously with the same "pit" (*בוֹר*) of v. 14. The original narrative text of v. 16*ai-bi* translated literally is:

When-I-brought-down	it [Assyria]	to-[the]grave [š <sup>e</sup> ôl]
with-those-going-down-into		[the]-pit [bôr].
Then-they-were-constoled		in-[the]-earth [‘eres] below . . .

The שׂאול of v. 16 is clearly the same as “the pit,” which is the same as “death,” which is equated in the context with a hole in the ground (“pit”) or the lower parts of the earth; i.e., the grave or realm of the dead. V. 17 continues the flow of thought already established and again uses שׂאול as “the grave,” since going down to it is described in vv. 17 and 18 as being in the same place as those “killed by the sword” (what v. 18 also describes as lying “among the uncircumcised”). The שׂאול of v. 15, logically and contextually, must be the same as that in vv. 16-17; but surprisingly (although completely understandably in light of the immediately preceding verse, 14b) KJV renders it “grave” while NKJV (obviously for the sake of consistency with vv. 16-17; see 2. below) has “hell.”

### 1.17-18 Ezekiel 32:21, 27

Ezekiel 32 continues and concludes God’s proclamation of doom and destruction for Egypt (vv. 17-) and its pharaoh (vv. 2b-16) by shifting to a lament or dirge (קִינָה, *qiyneh* v. 2) over their fate and fall. The term שׂאול is not used until Egypt as a whole is addressed, along with its king, in vv. 21 and 27. The same or similar contextual and exegetical arguments may be made for the meaning of שׂאול as “grave” in these two verses as has just been said about it in chapter 31 regarding Assyria and Egypt. One merely has to read these two verses within the overall and immediate context of vv. 17-28. The same parallel concepts or words are used which depict death or the grave:

The mighty . . . will speak . . . from the midst of š<sup>e</sup>ôl: “They have come down . . . the uncircumcised, killed by the sword” [v. 21, cf. v. 28] . . . lie with the fallen warriors of long ago who went down to š<sup>e</sup>ôl with their weapons of war . . . whose shields are upon their bones [v. 27]. (Cf. NRSV).

## 2. AN EVALUATION OF THE VERSE WHERE THE NKJV AND NOT KJV RENDERS

### שׂאול “HELL”: EZEK. 31:15

Curiously the KJV translators resorted to “grave” instead of “hell” in Ezekiel 31:15, although they used “hell” for שׂאול in 31:16 and 17. Contextually, of course, it is clear why they were compelled to use this meaning in v. 15; but this would seem to raise strong doubt about their practice of using “hell” in other similar contexts. The comments made in 1.15-16 above (regarding Ezek. 31:16-17) are also pertinent to the argument as to why “hell” should not be the translation of שׂאול in 31:15. The descent of Assyria into שׂאול in this verse is described in v. 16 as something that made the surrounding nations shake with fear. This has to refer to the past, historical horror and shock of the ancient Near Eastern nations over the surprising downfall of the great Assyrian empire. If so then Ezekiel has no intention in this passage of saying that the Assyrians went to Hell, especially as that expression would have meaning among believers today. Also v. 16 (immediately after describing this historic effect on the nations) repeats the fact of this same descent into שׂאול, which means that if v. 15 is about death, decay, defeat, and destruction, then so is v. 16, not to

mention v. 17 for similar reasons. Consistently and correctly, either all three appearances of שאול in vv. 15-17 are about the collapse of Assyria or its condemnation, but not both ideas simultaneously or alternately. The logic of Chapter 31:3-17 runs as follows:

Consider Assyria [v. 3] . . . because it . . . was proud [v. 10] . . . Foreigners . . . cut it down [v. 12] . . . For all of them are handed *over to death, [i.e.] to the world below* [v. 14] . . . On the day it went down to *šêôl* . . . I restrained its rivers [v. 15] . . . I made the nations quake at the sound of its fall, when I cast it down to *šêôl* . . . and all . . . were consoled in the world below [v. 16]. They also went down to *šêôl* with it, to those killed by the sword . . . those who lived in its shade among the nations [v. 17]. (Cf. NRSV; emphasis added).

Verse 14b is particularly important because it prepares the reader for the meaning of vv. 15- and also is composed in poetic parallelism, which makes it unarguably clear and certain that death is a synonym in this passage with "the world below" or *šêôl*. The poetic nature of this verse is seen in the NRSV and NKJV, but not in the NIV or KJV. Here it is displayed literally as to its synonymous parallelisms:

A	B	C		
For-all-of-them	they-are-destined	for-the-death, //		
[A]	[B]	C'		
[For-all-of-them	they-are-destined]	for-earth-of below.		
[A]	[B]	C	D	E
[For-all-of-them	they-are]	among	sons-of	humaness
[A]	[B]	C'[-D'-E']		F
[For-all-of-them	they-are]	with-those-down-in		[the] pit.

**CONCLUSION**

None of the nineteen contexts (verses) where שאול is translated "hell" by the NKJV (eighteen of which have "hell" in the KJV also) is supportive of that translation. In each case the flow of argumentation and/or the poetic parallels proves that the author uses שאול for the concept of the grave or death.

**APPENDIX A**

**THE STRUCTURE OF THE VERSES WHERE NKJV RENDERS שְׁאוֹל; AS "HELL"**

Deut 32:22

For a fire is kindled in My anger, // and shall burn to the lowest *sheol*;  
It shall consume the earth with her increase, // and set on fire the foundations of mountains.

Psalms 9:17

The wicked shall be turned into *sheol*, // and all the nations that forget God.

Psalms 55:15

Let death seize them; // let them go down alive into *sheol*, / for wickedness is in their dwellings  
and among them.

Psalms 139:8

If I ascend into heaven, You *are* there; // if I make my bed in *sheol*, behold, You *are there*.

Proverbs 5:5

Her feet go down to death, // her steps lay hold of *sheol*.

Proverbs 7:27

Her house is the way to *sheol*, // descending to the chambers of death.

Proverbs 9:18

But he does not know that the dead *are* there, // that her guests *are* in the depths of *sheol*.

Proverbs 15:11

*Sheol* and Destruction *are* before the LORD; // so how much more the hearts of the sons of  
men.

Proverbs 27:20

*Sheol* and Destruction are never full; // so the eyes of man are never satisfied.

Proverbs 15:24

The way of life *winds* upward for the wise, // that he may turn away from *sheol* below.

Proverbs 23:14

You shall beat him with a rod, // and deliver his soul from *sheol*.

Amos 9:2

Though they dig into *sheol*, / from there My hand shall take them; //  
Though they climb up to heaven, / from there I will bring them down.

Isaiah 14:9

*Sheol* from beneath is excited about you, to meet *you* at your coming; //  
It stirs up the dead for you, all the chief ones of the earth; /  
It has raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations.

Habakkuk 2:5

Indeed, because he transgresses by wine,—he is a proud man,/ and he does not stay at home.//  
Because he enlarges his desire as *sheol*, / and he is like death, and cannot be satisfied, //  
He gathers to himself all nations / and heaps up for himself all peoples.

Ezekiel 31:16-17

I made the nations shake at the sound of its fall, when I cast it down to *sheol* together with those who descend into the Pit; and all the trees of Eden, the choice and best of Lebanon, all that drink water, were comforted in the depths of the earth. They also went down to *sheol* with it, with those *slain* by the sword; and *those who were* its *strong arm* dwelt in its shadows among the nations.

Ezekiel 32:21

The strong among the mighty / shall speak to him out of the midst of *sheol* / with those who help him: //  
"They have gone down, / they lie with the uncircumcised, / slain by the sword."

Ezekiel 32:27

They do not lie with the mighty—*who are* fallen of the uncircumcised, /  
who have gone down to *sheol* with their weapons of war; //  
they have laid their swords under their heads, / but their iniquities will be on their bones, because of the terror of the mighty in the land of the living.

Ezekiel 31:15

Thus says the LORD GOD: "In the day when it went down to *sheol*, I caused mourning. I covered the deep because of it. I restrained its rivers, and the great waters were held back. I caused Lebanon to mourn for it, and all the trees of the field wilted because of it."

**APPENDIX B**  
**THE USE OF שְׁאוֹל IN ANCIENT AND MODERN VERSIONS**

"hell" in KJV 1611-	NKJV 1982	NIV 1978	NRSV 1989	NASB 1960	NAB* 1970	LXX* 200BC	Vulgate* 400
Deut 32:22	hell	death	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	infernī
2 Sam 22:6	<i>Sheol</i>	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	"death"	inferi
Job 11:8	<i>Sheol</i>	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferno
Job 26:6	<i>Sheol</i>	death	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferus
Psalms 9:17	hell	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	infernum
Psalms 16:10	<i>Sheol</i>	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	infero
Psalms 18:5	<i>Sheol</i>	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferi
Psalms 55:15	hell	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	infernam
Psalms 86:13	<i>Sheol</i>	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferno
Psalms 116:3	<i>Sheol</i>	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferni
Psalms 139:8	hell	depths	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferno
Prov 5:5	hell	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferos
Prov 7:27	hell	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferi
Prov 9:18	hell	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferni
Prov 15:11	hell	death	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	infernus
Prov 15:24	hell	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferno
Prov 23:14	hell	death	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	"death"	inferno
Prov 27:20	hell	death	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	infernus
Isa 5:14	<i>Sheol</i>	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	infernus
Isa 14:9	hell	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	infernus
Isa 14:15	<i>Sheol</i>	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	infernum
Isa 28:15	<i>Sheol</i>	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferno
Isa 28:18	<i>Sheol</i>	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferno
Isa 57:9	<i>Sheol</i>	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferos
Ezek 31:15 "grave"	hell	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferos
Ezek 31:16	hell	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	infernum
Ezek 31:17	hell	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	infernum
Ezek 32:21	hell	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	"pit"	inferni
Ezek 32:27	hell	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	infernum
Amos 9:2	hell	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	infernum
Jonah 2:2	<i>Sheol</i>	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	inferni
Hab 2:5	hell	grave	<i>Sheol</i>	<i>Sheol</i>	nether world	<i>Hades</i>	infernus

\*versification may differ; usually + or - one verse



## NOTES

1. However the NKJV uses "hell" for Heb. *šə'ol* in one extra verse where KJV does not (Ezek. 31:15). KJV renders it "hell" 31 times. *TWOT* says 30 times but I count 31 as does the OED.

2. Plus the extra passage where the NKJV uses "hell" (Ezek. 31:15), in relation to the KJV and LXX. For the Latin Vulgate: infer- i, os, ni, no, num, nus. It should be recognized that the theology or interpretation of some or all of these verses may or may not be the same among these translators. The KJV translators may have read their theology into the Vulgate or based their approach—regardless of Jerome's doctrinal beliefs—on the fact the Vulgate consistently employed the root infer- and chose to interpret and translate שאול as "underworld" (realm of the dead; Hell?) rather than merely transliterate it, as now is often favored by modern translation committees.

3. This term appears in the Hebrew Old Testament over 60 times and only appears in other Semitic languages as a loan-word from Hebrew. Cf. Smith, *Old Testament Theology*, p. 382, citing T. H. Gaster, "The Abode of the Dead," *IDB*, vol. 1 (NY: Abingdon, 1962), p. 787. See also R. Laird Harris, "she'ol" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, eds. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), pp. 892-93. This work is a very recent evangelical contribution to Old Testament lexicography and theology. The KJV is described as having the two-meaning theory of "grave" in general for שאול but later specialized as "hell"; however, KJV has "hell" very early in the Old Testament. Harris believes that "hell" is probably at times the point in passages later than the Pentateuch; but KJV has "hell" as early as Deut. 32:22 and Harris later in the article is quite attracted to the meaning of "grave" or "tomb" for שאול in most if not all places. Harris mentions the royal tombs of Ur which were thirty feet deep.

4. While God would know the truth that people do not go to a place under the earth after death (except for the grave—which is why the connection to subterranean worlds along with the influence of other ancient mythologies of that time and Greek mythology on later times), the writer only knew what had been revealed up to that point in history and could only use שאול according to its then current Hebrew meanings, apart from strict copying of Egyptian mythology, which in light of the other usages in the Pentateuch suggests "grave" or "death" or "realm of the dead" (grave-world). The writer has to use and mean the term in a way that communicates to his audience. So the best explanation is an allusion to the grave or subterranean death-world as people perceived it then. "Hell" as we know the term from progressive revelation would not be understood or assumed by anyone reading שאול then. God makes the point by using images and language with which the audience is familiar. This does not mean their perception of reality is correct or sanctioned by God as real and true, just that it is how they thought and good communication has to start with where people are at and use language they understand. "Hell" as we know it has not been revealed in Scripture yet, so it cannot be the intended meaning here or the verse has no validity in its historical and literary context.

5. "Sheol" of course is in a way unfair to the reader because it is a non-translation. It tells the reader what Hebrew word is used but not what it means. At least the KJV made a stab at a meaning the reader could understand, even if misleading. The same problem occurs with a number of biblical words. Various factors and forces make individual translators or translation committees merely transliterate a difficult or controversial word (e.g., Greek *baptizo* becomes English baptize). This allows the reader to give the word whatever meaning desired in line with one's tradition, and allows the translation to escape from forcing a meaning on readers and be charged with sectarianism or bias of some sort. Thus the translation is neutral on such an issue and stays out of trouble with the majority of readers.

6. Especially for the NKJV because the modern sense of "hell" is clear, and for the KJV if

their sense of "hell" was the same as today. The *OED* shows that "hell" in English has the usage of a place of torment and the abode of devils in literary works dated at 1522 (Skelton, *Why not to Court*, p. 590: "as ferce and as cruell as the fynd of hell") and 1667 (Milton, *Paradise Lost*; 230 times; e.g., "Within the Gates of Hell sate Sin and Death"). Naturally the question arise as to what people in 1611 meant when they used the word "hell." Did they mean what we mean or something like Hades or Underworld? If the latter then they cannot be accused of reading New Testament theology anachronistically back into the Old Testament. But if they mean something akin to "eternal, conscious retributive punishment of the unbelieving sinners after death" then their rendering becomes hermeneutically and exegetically and translationally open to great doubt in terms of accuracy. Only if the Bible is lifted out of history and spiritualized can such an approach—where the same meanings can apply to Old Testament and New Testament regardless of progress of revelation and historical, cultural, and grammatical contexts—be possible and defended with consistency—yet it is doubtful with any credibility.

7. Interestingly these Koraites who were swallowed alive in the earth for their rebellion had relatives who were not killed at that time and whose descendants included the Sons (= children, not just males, most likely) of Korah known for their musical abilities and, hence, became responsible for many psalms for generations, along with David as the "sweet singer of Israel," the author ostensibly of *Psa. 55*, et al.

8. Cf. Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985), p. 904.

9. E.g., many of those that contrast the righteous and the wicked such as *Prov. 10:1-11*. The non-absolute nature of proverbial truth must be kept in mind and accepted to avoid misunderstandings and misapplications (which may be very harmful at times) of these scriptures in day-to-day life. This does not mean that truth is relative because absolute truth, like "You must not commit murder," cannot ever be relativised; however, another type of truth—wisdom, experiential, horizontal—is relative and conditional. This is why one proverb can tell us to "answer a fool" (*26:5*) and another command just the opposite "answer not a fool" (*26:4*), without being a contradiction. Both are true although opposites because the truth involved is that of practical, earthly advice (not direct, propositional and heavenly affirmations like the Ten Commandments). Old Testament wisdom truth usually (though not always) deals with the circumstances of life, which means the guidance can be different in various situations. Sometimes a foolish person needs to be corrected with information, so it is right to confront them; but at other times a foolish person is best handled with silence. It would be a waste of time and energy (and thus wrong) to seek to convince him or her. The danger of making Old Testament proverbs into inflexible promises rather than flexible principles is that of absolutizing a relative, which is just as problematic as the reverse, relativizing and absolute. The fact that this latter must be carefully avoided with the Bible is no reason to go to the other extreme. Both abuses will cause much damage and division in the body of Christ. Many have been discouraged by thinking a certain verse offered them in theory an iron-clad promise only to find out in practice that the expected guaranteed outcome did not materialize as other Christians had sworn it would. The result has been often to make the person feel as if their faith was the problem, when all along the problem was a faulty interpretation of Scripture. God's promises are absolute; but we must not mistake a principle for a promise or we can hurt people. We need to be very sure about what we claim is absolutely true. God's Word is true but it includes absolute commands (Law; vertical and propositional) and relative guidance (Wisdom; horizontal and experiential). The former is direct revelation from God; the latter is indirect revelation that comes from life (but the life which God created with certain physical and moral laws humans can observe through common sense and rationality apart from God's voice through a prophet). This is why one of the themes of wisdom is the question "why do the righteous suffer?" or "why do the wicked prosper?"

Since it seems God promises success for good people and poverty and peril for bad people, the fact that experience teaches that the opposite happens frequently leads to questions about God's fairness and consistency and faithfulness. The Bible shows wise people wrestling with such issues, but overall the testimony and teaching of Scripture is that no such absolute promises have been made. Wisdom does not say that good people are absolutely guaranteed riches, long lives, godly offspring, etc. What it says is that righteousness is the best pathway in life even though pain, perplexity, poverty, and problems may plague the faithful believer and even though health and wealth may be had by someone very evil and unfaithful. The point is that experience teaches and God's Word supports that "crime does not pay" often enough to make the risks of disobedience and depravity worth taking. In the end the wise life is the righteous life and the foolish life is the wicked one. Exceptions only prove this rule.

10. I originally attributed this indicated by the use of "my" and "his" in the surrounding context, and a son is described by the use of the term for "young man" (נער) and the 3ms pronoun; but the overall sense must relate to all children, male or female, and must be applicable to whomever dispenses the punishment in a given case, father or mother, although the ancient, cultural context would emphasize the father's responsibility.

11. Cf. Eph. 6:4, where Paul warns parents to be careful not to "provoke anger" in children but rather "bring them up in the *discipline and instruction of the Lord*" (italics added; cf. NRSV).

12. These terms are both the Hebrew and Ugaritic words for "sea" and "sea monster." Ugaritic is the language of Canaanite religious poetic texts, and is a northwest Semitic dialect like Hebrew. Cf. Ugaritic *lōtan* (= לֹתַן) with Old Testament Hebrew *liwyātān* (לִיּוֹתָן).

13. However the NKJV adds a footnote that the term literally means "Day Star." In Holland, matches are called "lucifers."

14. The text says "king of Babylon" (see vv. 4, 22 e.g. but cp. v. 25) but the time period concerned (Isaiah's) is Assyrian. It has been demonstrated that Assyrian kings sometimes were called kings of Babylon (before the rise of the neo-Babylonian empire) because Assyria dominated the region that once was the old Babylonian kingdom, centered around the city of Babylon and its glorious history. Therefore Assyrian kings saw themselves in the grand tradition of being rulers of Babylon or Babylonia, even though their capital was elsewhere. An exact identity of this Assyrian king is difficult but Sargon II fits the time period and did die a disgraceful death on the battlefield as the text describes (vv. 18-20).