



The Nature of Sheol in the Torah*

By Eriks Galeniaks

Nature of Sheol

In order to grasp the nature of Sheol and its significance in the Torah, it is necessary to ask the question, “What is the nature of Sheol?”

Sheol is located in the earth and is equivalent to the grave. In contrast to the dead, the living on this earth mourn for the dead in Sheol (Genesis 37:35); they sorrow (Genesis 42:38), fear, and experience shock (Numbers 16:34).

Concerning the nature of Sheol, it stands for the present state of death or the state of the dead, of which the grave is tangible physical evidence.¹ Jacob believed that his son was dead. Thus, being overwhelmed by intense, heartbreaking grief, Jacob expressed the desire to “go down” to his son, which implies that the sorrow would cause his death and that he would rather die and be

buried next to him than to live. Sheol is never linked with life or the living. Occasionally in the Hebrew Bible it may be personified and depicted as acting and its dead speaking, as sometimes lifeless things are impersonated, especially ground/earth, trees, etc.² However, in the Torah, Sheol is exclusively connected with the dead.³

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Some of the most essential characteristics of Sheol are its association with the pit, ground, earth, and dust which allude to the grave, total dissolution of body, and total termination of any kind of existence.

The nature of Sheol in the Torah is not, as many scholars assert, exclusively the abode of the wicked.⁴ On the contrary, both the righteous like Jacob (Genesis 37:35) and the wicked like Korah, Dathan, and Abiram (Numbers 16:30-33) go



there; therefore, it is better to understand Sheol as referring primarily to the grave. In brief, Sheol as established in the Torah is the place where all the dead are gathered without distinction: both the righteous and the wicked, the young and the old (Qoh 9:2-7, 10). Furthermore, when a patriarch died he was “gathered unto his fathers” (e.g., Genesis 15:8, 17; 35:29; 49:29); to put it differently, he was buried as his fathers were buried, without any allusion to the continued existence of their souls.

Sheol in the Torah has nothing to do with the theologically questionable designations and theories of a mysterious “underworld,” “place of departed spirits,” or “the abode of the dead.” Scholars too often presuppose the terms or expressions from the very outset and then build a corresponding case. For instance, the English word “abode” is a technical term applicable only to the living which has nothing to do with the dead.⁵ Similarly, the words “underworld” and “netherworld” have been presented as the place of some kind of existence, which contradicts their basic meanings.⁶ None of them exist in the Hebrew Scripture as such. Consequently, the nature of Sheol in the Torah, in its narrow or broader contexts, does not support the teaching that the body goes to the grave and the soul goes to Sheol or heaven.

Finally, the Torah alludes to the nature of Sheol as unprotected and vulnerable. For instance, in Deuteronomy 32:22 Moses describes the Lord’s anger which “burns to the depth of Sheol,” thus demonstrating the Lord’s superiority over the deepest grave and at the same time exposing the weakness of its nature. As a mortal being has only one option to live between birth and death, so Sheol has its starting point and its end. However, in the Torah there are no explicit references concerning destruction of Sheol/grave or how long it will preserve its nature and dominion over the dead.

Function of Sheol

The function of the term Sheol springs directly out of its nature and character. One of its functions is termination of humanity’s agonizing grief and suffering. For Jacob, the loss of his beloved son Joseph was real and therefore his grief was genuine (Genesis 37:35). “Going down” to Sheol would put an end to Jacob’s suffering. The same

actual anguish for Joseph and projected heartache for Benjamin are emphasized in Genesis 42:38, and the same motif is reiterated in Genesis 44:29-34 by Judah.

Sheol also functions as the tool of punishment.⁷ In Numbers 16:25-35 the following pattern can be found: (1) accusation, (2) proclamation of judgment, and (3) execution of judgment, which is followed by public reaction. The unit not only describes the rebellion of Korah and his followers but also presents a prototype of the suddenness, totality, and finality of their destruction. In vv. 30-33 various interchangeable elements of personification are used, such as ground/earth, which “opens its mouth,” “swallows them up,” and then “covers them up.” These concise phrases point to the specific aspects of the function of Sheol in times of the Lord’s active intervention and judgments, that is, their burial alive in the grave.

The function of Sheol is limited. In highly graphic language Moses describes the universality of the Lord’s burning anger against His disloyal people, so that even the deepest Sheol is powerless to stand against the Lord’s might and protect her dead ones (Deuteronomy 32:22).

The term Sheol is employed to emphasize the contrast existing between the state of “the dead and the living.”⁸ Not even once is Sheol associated with the living, other than by contrast. Moreover, when Moses calls “heaven and earth as witnesses” to testify on behalf of the Lord, he never mentions Sheol or “the realm of the dead.”⁹

Another function of Sheol calls attention to its antithetical aspect which characterizes it as cosmologically opposite of heaven.¹⁰ The formulaic expression “the lowest part of Sheol” (Deuteronomy 32:22) forms the strongest contrast to heaven. However, it is impossible to make any definite observation from the expression as to some existing subterranean region or underworld where the departed souls continue their miserable existence.

Finally, its theological and historical dimensions illustrate that Sheol functions only temporarily. It will suffice to say that Sheol started to operate when, through the disobedience of two individuals, sin claimed dominion over the whole



human family. From that moment on, death and Sheol have exercised their power over all the living (Genesis 3). However, the key to Sheol's total destruction is found in the restoration promises of Scripture.¹¹

Purpose of Sheol

The purpose of Sheol is connected to its nature and function. In order to discover it in the Torah, the last section of this article focuses on the question, "Why is the term Sheol used by the author?"

One of the main intentions of the use of the term Sheol is to remind us that by nature humanity is mortal, and that is true in regard to all human beings. It is obvious that the author's intent was not to provide a detailed description of the nature, function, and purpose of Sheol/grave in the Torah. However, the usage of highly figurative language and imagery in the case of the death of Korah and the others in Numbers 16 clearly indicates that after death, while being in Sheol, a person has no second opportunity to change one's destiny.

Death, both of the righteous and the wicked, is followed by the grave, Sheol. However, the author goes a little further and alludes to the logical conclusion of this observation. If death is the end, then the grave puts down and brings to rest some of the most violent actions against God by human beings (Numbers 16). The striking and refreshing effect of this aspect in the emotion-filled report of the death of Korah and all those who dare to stand against God finds its renewed authority in the number of parallel references.

Sheol is the great leveler. It does not matter who was there—Jacob, Joseph, Korah with all his followers, all those who once lived righteously or led a life of rebellion by murmuring against Moses and God, those who strove for dominance in life—all went down to Sheol.

Its purpose is to point out that the place of the dead, Sheol (grave, pit), is the opposite of the land of the living in which alone the Divine presence can be experienced and its redemptive and life-giving opportunities are found. It means that if one cannot live beyond the grave, the significance of human life as such must be explored for its true and lasting meaning.

Another important aspect of its purpose is to point out that God is the One who indicts and judges. He is able to remove the people who are too wise in their own eyes. It is clear that this is the Lord's great reckoning with all who, "in the land of the living," declare themselves to be "god" and scorn "the Rock of salvation."¹² Against this background God addresses the display of the disobedience of the people of Israel, which in their days dared to defy the Lord's sovereignty (Deuteronomy 32). The indictment and judgment by God echo with the dreadful inevitability of the unavoidable destruction that makes up the covenant curses (Deuteronomy 32:22-24).

The judgment pronounced over the living always leaves open the option of discerning evil and turning away from it. Therefore, the author's description of the death of Korah and his group contains a somber note of warning. "These are the same Dathan and Abiram, chosen from the congregation, who rebelled against Moses and Aaron in the company of Korah, when they contended against the LORD; and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up along with Korah, when that company died, when the fire devoured two hundred and fifty men (and they became a warning sign)."¹³ The meaning of the word "sign" is that of conspicuousness, in order to attract attention and constitute a warning. At the same time God in His judgment bestows saving terror on those who see it, in the hope that they will awake and start to fear Him and return to Him.

The reference to Sheol often serves as the affirmation of the Lord's sovereignty as is seen from the descent of Korah and his followers to Sheol. The description of how "God creates a creation..." (Numbers 16:30-33) emphasizes the degree and extent of His sovereignty, as does the "going down alive into Sheol." In fact, it is a part of the background upon which trust and hope are established in the Lord's future actions.

Since God is the Creator of everything, He is also the Lord over human life and history (Deuteronomy 10:17; 32:6). No person or nation is self-created. The people of God, religious leaders, and nations draw their strength and energy from the resources provided by Him, and they receive their high status by Divine appointment.



God not only holds the keys of human history, but also He is in control of the dead in Sheol beneath. Like Moses' contemporaries, the church must recognize the futility of reliance on one's own power, for its confidence should be rooted in God alone. Sheol is not to be confused with such concepts as "abode" or "underworld," which scholars try to associate with continuous existence of the departed spirits. It is quite obvious that, in the Torah, Sheol is equivalent to the place of the dead and contains no allusion to one's after-death survival in the grave in any form.

While evaluating the seven references to Sheol, the reader must remember that the primary aim of the term is not doctrinal, but experiential (Genesis 32, 42, 44), instructional (Numbers 16), and doxological (Deuteronomy 32). The author wants the reader to understand the anguish and love of Jacob toward his son Joseph, which is so deep that he is ready to die, and at the same time by Korah's tragic experience be warned of the dangers of rebellion against God. As another dimension of the given references, the author's intention to inspire faithfulness in the hearts of his people and later generations could be mentioned. It is crucially important to have an understanding of human responsibility before God and the far-reaching consequences in the case of the eventual termination of life, whether of the righteous or the wicked.

Finally, although the seven references to Sheol in the Torah do not provide a straightforward description of a final eschatological judgment, or discuss the final fiery retribution of the wicked or the reward of resurrection for the righteous from their graves, some of them contain allusions to it and function as a prototype of the last events, as, for example, Numbers 16. All of these prophetic developments will be discussed in other parts of Hebrew Scripture and find their fulfillment in later days.¹⁴

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¹Ethelbert W. Bullinger, "Hell," *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible, Explained and Illustrated* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1997), 367-370; also 861-869.

²Compare Numbers 16:30-33; 26:10; Deuteronomy 11:6; Psalm 106:17; Isaiah 5:14; 14:1-11; Ezekiel 31:1-18; 32:21, 27, with Judges 9:7-21.

³Genesis 37:35; 42:38; 44:29, 31; Numbers 16:30, 33.

⁴Robert B. Girdlestone, *Synonyms of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1948), 283.

⁵Bullinger, "Hell," 368; Robert K. Barnhart, ed., *The World Book Dictionary*, 2 vols. (Chicago, IL: World Books, 1995), s.v. "Abode."

⁶Barnhart, *The World Book Dictionary*, s.v. "Nether world" and "Underworld."

⁷E.g., 1 Kings 2:6, 9; Job 24:19; Psalm 9:17.

⁸Numbers 16:46; Deuteronomy 30:15, 19; 1 Samuel 2:6; Acts 10:42; 2 Timothy 4:1; 1 Peter 4:5.

⁹See Deuteronomy 4:26; 30:19; 31:28; 32:1.

¹⁰Compare Deuteronomy 32:22; Job 11:8; Psalm 139:8; Isaiah 57:9; Amos 9:2.

¹¹Deuteronomy 32:29; 1 Samuel 2:6; 1 Kings 17:22; Job 14:12; 19:25-27; Psalms 1:6; 16:10; 17:15; 49:15; 71:20; 73:24; 88:10; Isaiah 25:8; 26:14, 19; 53:11; Ezekiel 37:10; Daniel 12:2; Hosea 6:2.

¹²Deuteronomy 32:15-29; Psalm 52:5.

¹³Numbers 26:9, 10. Compare with Psalm 60:6, "You have set up a banner for those who fear you." Those who "fear" God will find protection from the attacks of the evil one, who is symbolized by the "bow." The confidence of the righteous lies in God, who is the Divine Warrior. See also Isaiah 11:10.

¹⁴See especially Excursus 2 and 3 at the end of corresponding chapters.

Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection?

The Dilemma of the Bible and Jewish-Christian Traditions*

By Jacques Doukhan

The Bible clearly indicates that after death there is nothing until the resurrection and that immortality is exclusively an attribute of God.

“The living know that they will die, but the dead know nothing, and they have no more reward; but the memory of them is lost. Their love and their hate and their envy have already perished, and they have no more forever any share in all that is done under the sun... Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol, to which you are going” (Ecclesiastes 9:5-10).

“The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence” (Psalm 115:17). “The Lord of lords... alone has immortality” (1 Timothy 6:15, 16).

Many theologians, both Jewish and Christian, recognize this biblical fact.¹ Rabbi Michel A. Weil writes in his book *Judaism: Its Dogmas and Its Mission*: “Let us admit that it is an illusion to expect to find in the Scriptures a direct, clear, or precise enunciation of such immortality.”²

The Christian theologian R. de Pury is just as categorical: “The Bible, on which must be based our preaching, has nowhere the smallest trace of a belief in the immortality of the soul.”³

How is it, then, that this idea came to exist in most Bible-based religions? For the *Jewish Encyclopedia* there is no doubt: “Belief in the immortality of the soul came to the Jews after their contact with Greek thought, particularly through Plato’s philosophy, its principal representative.”⁴

The Christian theologian André Lamorte echoes this same opinion. Denying the biblical origin of this doctrine, he calls the concept of the immortality of the soul “a pagan idea and more exactly Platonian.”⁵

A new belief was thus added to the creed of many religions. Do we find here simply the development of an idea already grounded in the revealed Word? Certainly not. Not only is the idea of immortality of the soul foreign to the Bible, it is entirely incompatible with the biblical teaching on the resurrection. What, indeed, could it serve to believe in the resurrection, if in any case the soul is immortal?

Oscar Cullmann, a Christian theologian, was right to say, “Our answer to the question of immortality of the soul or resurrection of the dead in the New Testament, will be clear. This doctrine of the great Socrates and the great Plato is incompatible with the teaching of the New Testament.”⁶

We can understand that Josué Yehouda, initiator of the movement for unity within Judaism, refuses to conceive of immortality separated from





the resurrection: “When the idea of immortality penetrated Judaism, it only meant the resurrection of dead bodies from the dust at the last judgment. Even this idea of resurrection did not separate the soul from the body. That separation is, on the contrary, a classical belief in the Greco-Roman tradition and in that of the Hindus.”⁷

Tradition, then, has brought us to an impasse where we must take a position. A compromise is not possible. Either one accepts the Bible and its faith in the resurrection, or one recognizes the authority of tradition and admits the thesis that claims immortality for the soul. A choice is necessary.

There are numerous examples of contradictions between the Bible and tradition. Many contradictions exist even with the tradition. One rabbi professes to believe that the dead are unconscious.⁸ Another believes in native immortality. And the Talmud even records discussions on this subject between doctors with differing opinions.⁹

Likewise, Christian tradition engages in a sharp controversy on the subject.¹⁰ A church leader like Justin Martyr does not hesitate to say that any Christian believing in the immortality of the soul is guilty of heresy: “If then you encounter people who call themselves Christians,” says he, “who deny the resurrection of the dead and claim that at death their souls are taken to heaven, do not consider them to be Christians.”¹¹

“A house divided against itself cannot survive.” Let each one decide, then, on his or her own.

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¹ Cf. among others: Christian authors such as the Catholic C. Tresmontant, in *Essai sur la pensée hébraïque*, p. 95 and ff.; the Protestant Oscar Cullman, in *Immortality of the Soul or Resurrection of the Dead?*; and Jewish authors such as Josué Yehouda, in *Le monothéisme, doctrine de l'unité*, p. 32 ff.; Henri Baruk, in *Connaissance de l'homme au XX^e siècle*, p. 50 ff.; Robert Aron, *Lettre ouverte à l'Église de France*, p. 107 ff.

² Vol. III, p. 498.

³ *Présence de l'Éternité*, p. 151.

⁴ See the article “Soul, Immortality of” *Encyclopedia Judaica*, p. 176. Robert Aron explains the phenomenon thus: “I know as a historian that in the history of Israel the belief in conscious and individual survival after death

was born in a precise moment of a moral crisis precipitated by the apparent injustice of fate, i.e., about the year 167 B.C., at the moment of the national uprising against the persecutions of Antiochus Epiphanes. Jews had perished in the service of their country and their God—an intolerable scandal, unacceptable to the hearts of the survivors, who sought and sought from the Supreme Being justifications, explanations, excuses. They found them in the belief of the immortality of the soul. *Is facit cui prodest* . . . , as a maxim of the legal profession puts it. That proves that survival after death is a necessity for the human heart, but it does not prove that it is true. . . . Let us be careful not to mistake our wishes, our needs, for realities. *Op. cit.*, pp. 110, 111.

⁵ “La Bible et le Problème de l'au-celà,” in *Revue de Théologie et l'Action évangélique*, p. 42.

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 83. On this subject see also the thesis of Jean Zurcher, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, and that of R. Martin-Achard, *De la morte à la résurrection*. The first author approaches the question by putting it on a philosophical level. The second undertakes a study of the biblical conception and therefore addresses it on the exegetical, theological, and historical levels.

The two methods reach the same conclusion: monistic anthropology such as found in the Bible cannot be compromised with the dualism implied in the idea of the immortality of the soul.

⁷ *Op. cit.*, p. 32. In this connection the psychiatrist H. Baruk notes that the movement of which Jéhouda avails himself is in harmony with the most recent scientific data about personality; it unites the wisdom of the past (the Bible) with that of the future (science). Among the scholars who have given up the dualistic view, we must mention Dr. Alexis Carrel (in *Man the Unknown*).

In fact, one can find in the Bible the modern conception of “psychosomatics.” The human being was considered as quite absolutely indivisible. Note how the physical life influenced the psychic life, and vice versa (cf. Proverbs 3:7, 8; 4:20-22). Hence the importance accorded in the Bible to dietary laws, bodily hygiene, and sanitation (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:16, 17; Leviticus 10:8-11; 11; etc.). The religion of the biblical man had to embrace *all* levels of his being (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 2 Corinthians 7:1). It is the whole human being who is involved in a relationship with God (cf. Ecclesiastes 12:15 in the Hebrew text, *kol haadam* = the whole man).

⁸ Jerusalem Talmud, Shebith 4 (p. 365).

⁹ Jerusalem Talmud, Berakoth 2 (p. 37).

¹⁰ It was not until 1513, under the influence of the Lateran Council, that the dogma of natural immortality of the soul was finally proclaimed officially. The new bull, however, provoked more than one strong reaction—that of Luther being especially notable. The great Reformer relegated this dogma to the list of “the monstrous fables which comprise the Roman dunghill” (cf. Petavel-Ollif, *Le problème de l'immortalité*, II, p. 77, and RHPR 198, p. 496 ff.).

¹¹ *Dialogue with Trypho* 80.3-4.