

NOTES ON AFTERLIFE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The discussion of this phenomenon encompasses many related terms and ideas, among them those of death, the abode of the dead, Sheol, the pit, Abaddon, and resurrection. Not surprisingly, views surrounding these are varied.

On the one hand, some hold that the OT says nothing at all about an afterlife.¹ More commonly, it is stated that there is a dim awareness in the OT that life -- or, better, existence -- continues in some form beyond death.² This post-life existence is dim and shadowy; it is experienced by the righteous and the wicked alike; and there is no expectation of any rescue from it. If a concept of a good afterlife (including the idea of resurrection) exists in the OT, it is in the latest materials. Other views emphasize that there is a concept of an afterlife throughout the texts, including one in which the righteous one's fate is different than that of the wicked.³

Evangelical and liberal views have not differed radically on the issues here, except that more evangelicals than liberals would affirm the existence of the concept of afterlife in the OT, the conceptions of reward and punishment in the afterlife differ somewhat, and more evangelicals than liberals would see concepts of an afterlife in the earlier texts of the OT. In the main, evangelicals speak of an unfolding of progressive revelation on this matter, and recognize that the OT does not speak as clearly on the subject as the NT. Even here, however, theological labels are not a reliable guide, since the non-evangelical scholar, M. Dahood, strongly defended the idea of an afterlife concept, even a resurrection concept, in the OT (Psalms-III: xli-lii and passim throughout the commentary), an idea that has met with much scepticism and acceptance across the theological spectrum. One evangelical who has cautiously welcomed Dahood's views is E. Smick (in Westminster Theol J 31 [1968]: 12-21).

¹ See, e.g., W. Brueggemann, "Death, Theology of," Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: Supplement [1976]: 220; or a quote such as S. Zandstra's: "The vision of the Old Testament writers was circumscribed by death; and they never allowed their imaginations to leap the chasm of the grave" ["Sheol and Pit in the Old Testament," Princeton Theol Rev 5 {1908}: 631-41; quote fr. p. 640].

² T. H. Gaster, "Dead, Abode of the," IDB-I [1962]: 787-88; L. R. Bailey, Sr., Biblical Perspectives on Death [1979]; and many others.

³ See J. B. Payne, The Theology of the Older Testament [1962]: 443-63, 527-29; D. Alexander, "The Old Testament view of life after death," Themelios 11.2 [1986]:41-46; among many others.

A related question has to do with the translation of Hebrew she'ol "sheol." The term appears 65 times in the OT, 15 in the Psalter, mostly in poetic texts. It often is in poetic parallel with words such as "death" and "the pit." One view is that the word is merely a synonym for "the grave." (There is a common word in Hebrew for "grave" -- qeber -- but it is used mainly in prose texts.)⁴ This is the view adopted in the NIV. Another view is that it can mean "the grave" only in some cases, and that it refers to the afterlife in others.⁵ This is the view adopted in the old KJV, which translates it as "grave" 31x, "hell" 31x, and "pit" 3x. The ASV, RSV, and NASB transliterate the word as "Sheol."

The issue concerning the exact conception of Sheol is difficult to resolve with certainty. While Harris argues in depth for the translation of "the grave," he admits in a number of cases that the case is not clear, and that "hell" might be admitted. Most evangelical interpretations seem to understand it as more than just the grave, whether merely "the nether world" (in the NASB marginal notes) or as "hell" (in the KJV and elsewhere). I am inclined toward one or the other of these latter views.

Fortunately, however, the exact interpretation of "Sheol" does not exhaust the subject of the OT view(s) on the afterlife. Thus, even someone such as Harris, who sees only the grave in view here, does hold "that the future life is affirmed in many places in the OT, although details are not given" (TWOT: 2303).

What follows here, then, are some of the most significant OT texts usually cited in support of the view that the OT indeed did have a view of a life after death, and one that was more than a shadowy semi-conscious (or unconscious) existence. (Quotes are from NIV unless otherwise noted.)

1 Samuel 2:6:

The LORD brings death and makes alive;
he brings down to the grave [sheol] and raises up.

This affirmation in Hannah's prayer, at the very least, shows that YHWH is sovereign over the grave, and that he has power to raise from the dead. Beyond this, it might well be seen as speaking of a consciousness of an afterlife.

⁴ See Zandstra [op. cit.]; R. L. Harris, "The Meaning of the Word Sheol as Shown by parallels in Poetic Texts," Bulletin of the Evangelical Theol Soc 4 [1961]: 129-35; *ibid.*, "she'ol," Theol Wordbook of the OT [1980]: 892-93; *ibid.*, "Why Hebrew She'ol Was Translated "Grave," in The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation [Zondervan].

⁵ See H. Buis, "Sheol," Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible-5 [1975]: 395; Alexander [op. cit.].

2 Samuel 12:22-23:

22 [David] answered, "While the child was still alive, I fasted and wept. I thought, 'Who knows? The LORD may be gracious to me and let the child live.' 23 But now that he is dead, why should I fast? Can I bring him back again? I will go to him, but he will not return to me."

The last part of v. 23 could be taken to mean that David, too, will die, and nothing more. However, the context implies more than this, namely, that David could be with the child when he died in a manner similar to that if the child were brought back to life. Conscious existence after death seems to be in view here.

Job 14:13-17:

13 "If only you would hide me in the grave [^{sheol}]
* and conceal me till your anger has passed!
* If only you would set me a time
* and then remember me!
*14 If a man dies, will he live again?
* All the days of my hard service
* I will wait for my renewal [or ^{release}] to come.
*15 You will call and I will answer you;
* You will long for the creature your hands have made.
*16 Surely then you will count my steps
* but not keep track of my sin.
*17 My offenses will be sealed up in a bag;
* you will cover over my sin."

Some hold that the question in v. 14 expects a "no" answer. However, the content of vv. 15-17 suggests that there is (or will be) activity after Job's death.

Job 19:25-27:

25 I know that my Redeemer lives,
and that in the end he will stand upon the earth.
26 And after my skin has been destroyed,
yet in my flesh I will see God;
27 I myself will see him
with my own eyes -- I, and not another.
How my heart yearns within me!

*This passage is much discussed. See, among others, F. I. Andersen's helpful discussion (Job: 193-94). It seems difficult to avoid seeing the hope in a resurrected life of some type here.

Psalm 16:9-11: (A psalm of David)

9 Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest secure,
10 because you will not abandon me to the grave [sheol],
nor will you let your Holy One [or your faithful one]
see decay.
11 You have made [or will make] known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

At the very least, this passage seems to imply more than mere physical death for the psalmist (though this is debated). The NT interprets it even more fully, as referring to the resurrection of Christ (Acts 2:25-28, 31; 13:35).

Psalm 17:15: (A psalm of David)

And I -- in righteousness I will see your face;
when I awake, I will be satisfied with seeing your likeness.

The contrast here is with the wicked, "whose reward is in this life" (v. 14). Thus, the awakening is more than from a mere night's rest. (This passage is difficult to translate, however, and other translations and interpretations are possible here. Note, though, that S. H. Hooke, by no means an evangelical, understood the original import of this verse as speaking of resurrection ["Israel and the After-Life," Expository Times 76.8 {1965}: 238].)

Psalm 49:15 [MT 16]: (A Korahite psalm)

But God will redeem my soul [or me] from the grave [sheol];
* he will surely take me to himself.

NIV here adds the words "to himself" in 15b and smooths over the Hebrew in 15a, which reads "from the hand [=power] of Sheol." Note that the root lqH "to take" is the same one used in Gen. 5:24: "Enoch walked with God; and he was not [NIV: was no more], because God took him" [my translation]. It is also used in Ps. 73:24 (see below).

Psalm 49:19 [MT 20]: (A Korahite psalm)

[The wicked one] will join the generation of his fathers,
who will never see the light [of life].

The context here is the death of the wicked one. "[of life]" is NIV's addition. The implication here is that the righteous will see the light. "Who" here refers specifically to the generation of the fathers, not the wicked one.

Psalm 73:24: (A psalm of Asaph)

You guide me with your counsel,
and afterward you will take me into glory.

Kidner (262) renders 24b as "And in the end you will receive me with glory."
Delitzsch translated thus (II, 309): "And afterward receive me to honour," and he explained it thus (II, 320): "[The psalmist] knows that afterwards ..., i.e., after this dark way of faith, God will kabod [^(to) honour] receive him, i.e, take him to Himself and take him from all suffering."

Hosea 6:2:

After two days he will revive us;
and on the third day he will restore us,
that we may live in his presence.

The context speaks of Israel and YHWH. F. I. Andersen and D. N. Freedman (Hosea, in the Anchor Bible [1980]: 420-21) represent those who believe that this passage refers to resurrection: "Explicit hope for resurrection of the body can hardly be denied in this passage, but commentators have been reluctant to admit it" (420).

Hosea 13:14:

"I will ransom them from the power of the grave [^sheol];
I will redeem them from death.
Where, O death, are your plagues?
Where, O grave [^sheol], is your destruction? ..."

The passage speaks of the future hope for Israel, contrasting it to the death promised it on the immediate horizon.

Isaiah 26:19:

But your dead will live;
 their bodies will rise.
You who dwell in the dust,
 wake up and shout for joy.
Your dew is like the dew of the morning;
 the earth will give birth to her dead.

The chapter is part of what is sometimes called "The Isaianic Apocalypse" (Isaiah 24-27). Looking into the future, the passage clearly speaks of bodily resurrection. E. J. Young (Isaiah-II: 227) quote W. Gesenius, by no means a conservative, as saying "That this passage actually contains the doctrine of the resurrection of the body, appears without doubt from the words."

Ezekiel 37

This well-known passage about the valley of the dry bones speaks of the restoration of Israel after the Exile. It does not specifically teach resurrection from the dead. However, the fact that the language used here is clearly couched in terms of resurrection shows that the idea of resurrection was known to Ezekeil and his audience. It was a given.

Daniel 12:1-2:

1 At that time Michael, the great prince who protects your people, will arise. There will be a time of distress such as has not happened from the beginning of nations until then. But at that time your people -- everyone whose name is found written in the book -- will be delivered. 2 Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.

All concede that this passage teaches resurrection of the dead. It is among the latest books in the OT, dating to the post-exilic period (and some place it much later, in the 2nd century B.C.).

Concluding Note: There are many more passages that are adduced in favor of seeing an afterlife concept in the OT. However, these are among the ones most frequently cited.⁶

⁶ A work that also supports the thesis that the idea of life after death existed early in Israel's history is N. J. Tromp, Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament (1969) (unavailable to me at this writing, but referred to in many

places, and so described by Andersen and Freedman [Hosea: 420]). See also the helpful treatment on "Death and the Afterlife," pp. 137-223 in A. Heidel's classic The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels (1949), where he shows how Israel's conceptions of afterlife differed from those in Mesopotamia, and J. D. Davis, "The Future Life in Hebrew Thought During the Pre-Persian Period," Princeton Theological Review 6 (1908): 246-68.