

Descent of Christ into Hell

The Scripture use differing terms about the afterlife for the blanket word, Hell, that English uses. The two primary terms will be Sheol and Gehenna. Sheol is usually translated as "Hades" in the Septuagint (the 3rd - 2nd century B.C. Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament). Gehenna comports more with are popular understanding of Hell as a place of eternal torment.

For this study, I want to focus on the first term – Sheol.

To note, the Scripture speak scant little about the afterlife. I strongly believe that this is because God's message is about the urgency of salvation, faith, and repentance in the present:

"Behold, now is the favorable time; behold, now is the day of salvation. (2 Cor. 6:2)." "Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah." (Psalm 95:7) "Now after John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming the Gospel of God and saying, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel.'" (Mark 1:14)

Sheol – Etymology

The etymology of "Sheol" is widely disputed and largely unknown in Near Eastern texts. The Jewish scholar, Nahum Sarna, claims Sheol is:

- "The most frequently used term in biblical Hebrew for the abode of the spirits of the dead. The region was imagined to be situated deep beneath the earth and to be enclosed with gates. There is no concept of 'heaven' and 'hell' in the Hebrew Bible. The underworld received all men – good and bad, great and small – and all are equal there. It was a place of unrelieved darkness and gloom, and of complete silence. None who entered it could return. The etymology of the word 'Sheol' is uncertain, and the term is unknown in other ancient Semitic languages."

- Rabbi Shlomo Pappenheim claimed it was from the root for "To be neglected" or to "Be thrown away". Others have claimed it was from *sheilah*, which implies a question.

- I believe it to be from it's most obvious root – Shin, Aleph, Lamed – which means "to ask". The underworld in the Old Testament is a waiting ground and place of oracular asking.

We see this in 1 Chronicles 10:13 where Saul is condemned for conjuring the dead through the use of a medium.

"So Saul (same root as Sheol) died for his breach of faith. He broke faith with the Lord in that he did not keep the command of the Lord, and also consulted (Qal Infinitive Construct of Sheol) a medium, seeking guidance." (1 Chronicles 10:13)

Saul is from the same root because the people of Israel *asked* for a king to imitate the other nations, betraying the Lord their God in 1 Samuel 8.

Pertinent Passages:

- The term Sheol is used 66 times in the Old Testament. The earliest uses of the word come from Genesis 37:35, 42:38, and 44:31. It is the place of the after life, and is also associated with a fair amount of pain or regret from events in this life.

Genesis 37:35 - "All his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him (Jacob), but he refused to be comforted and said, 'No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.' Thus his father wept for him (Joseph)."

Genesis 42:38 - "But he (Jacob) said, 'But my son shall not go down with you, for his brother is dead, and he is the only one left. If harm should happen to him on the journey that you are to make, you would bring down my gray hairs with sorrow to Sheol.'"

- In the Torah, it is also not a place that is absent of God's agency:

Deut 32:22 - "For a fire is kindled by my anger, and it burns to the depths of Sheol, devours the earth and its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains."

Also see Numbers 16:30-31. Sheol is conceived of as a physical place, and not merely a metaphysical concept.

- The term undergoes a fair amount of expansion in the Wisdom and prophetic literature. With the apostles even quoting certain passages as Messianic.

Psalm 16:10 - "For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol, or let your holy one see corruption." (This is referenced by St. Luke in Acts 2:27 and Acts 13:35.)

- Some other notable instances. Note that there are a number of metaphysical and redemptive aspects conferred to the term.

Psalm 6:5 - "For in death there is no remembrance of you; in Sheol who will give you praise."

Psalm 18: 4-5 - "The cords of death encompassed me; the torrents of destruction assailed me; the cords of Sheol entangled me; the snares of death confronted me."

Job 14:13 - "Oh that you would hide me from Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath be past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me."

Job 16:6 - "Sheol is naked before God, and Abaddon has no covering."

Psalm 49:15 - "But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me."

Psalm 139:8 - "If I ascend to heaven, you are there! If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there!"

Isa. 7:11 - "Ask a sign of the Lord your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven."

Isa 38:18 - "For Sheol does not thank you; death does not praise you; those who go down to the pit do not hope for your faithfulness."

Hosea 13:14:

I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol;
I shall redeem them from Death.
O Death, where are your plagues?
O Sheol, where is your sting?
Compassion is hidden from my eyes.