

# RANSOMED FROM THE HAND OF SHEOL: THE HEAVENLY DESTINY OF OLD TESTAMENT SAINTS IN THE AFTERLIFE

by  
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Writing near the end of the 1950s, the renowned dispensational eschatologist and professor of Bible exposition, J. Dwight Pentecost (1915–2014), formulated the standard dispensational understanding of the afterlife in the Old Testament (OT). “[Sheol],” argued Pentecost, “was the Old Testament word for the abode of the dead. It was presented, not just as a state of existence, but as a place of conscious existence (Deut. 18:11; 1 Sam. 28:11–15; Isa. 14:9). God was sovereign over it (Deut. 32:22; Job 26:6). It was regarded as temporary and the righteous anticipated the resurrection out of it in the millennial age (Job 14:13–14; 19:25, 27; Ps. 16:9–11; 17:15; 49:15; 73:24).”<sup>2</sup> Apart from a few quibbles or nuances, the view that Sheol constituted the place for all the departed dead of the OT era, whether righteous or wicked, and that the righteous anticipated deliverance out of it through resurrection in the eschaton, would prove the typical view among dispensational theologians.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Findlay, OH: Dunham Publishing, 1958), 556. A corollary of this view is the compartmental view or two-compartment theory, which holds that, prior to the resurrection and ascension of Christ, Sheol consisted of discrete compartments in which the righteous experienced refreshment in paradise (i.e., the upper compartment or “Abraham’s bosom”), while the unrighteous suffered torment in Hades (i.e., the lower compartment or Tartarus) (Herman A. Hoyt, *The End Times* [Winona Lake, IN: BMH Books, 1969], 36–47; Henry Bultema, “Will There Be Recognition in Heaven?” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 95 [Oct–Dec 1938]: 461–86; David J. MacLeod, “The Third ‘Last Thing’: The Binding of Satan (Rev. 20:1–3),” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 [Oct–Dec 1999]: 473–77). For two recent, confessional defenses of this view, see Matthew Y. Emerson, “*He Descended to the Dead*”: *An Evangelical Theology of Holy Saturday* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2019); Justin W. Bass, *The Battle for the Keys: Revelation 1:18 and Christ’s Descent into the Underworld* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

<sup>3</sup>Alva J. McClain, “Theology Notes: The Intermediate State,” (unpublished course notes, Grace College and Theological Seminary: Winona Lake, IN, n.d.), 2:1–6; Hoyt, *The End Times*, 36–47; Rolland McCune, *A Systematic Theology of Biblical Christianity*, 3 vols. (Allen Park, MI: Detroit Baptist Theological Seminary, 2010), 3:313–21. Charles Hill contends that belief in Sheol as the destination of all the OT deceased was a necessary and logical corollary of the widespread chiliasm or

Not all dispensationalists, however, concurred with this construal. Writing several decades later, Charles Ryrie in his *Basic Theology* outlined Pentecost's view and then disagreed:

I believe that the Old Testament saint at death went immediately into the presence of the Lord. The repentant thief was promised he would be in paradise the day of his death (Luke 23:43), and paradise was the presence of the Lord (2 Cor. 12:4). At Christ's transfiguration Moses and Elijah appeared in His presence talking with him. Are we to understand that this conversation between Christ, Moses, and Elijah took place in the upper compartment of hades where Moses at least would have been until the death of Christ? Are we to understand then that the transfiguration of Christ took place in paradise-hades? Are we to understand that Elijah was taken at his translation to sheol/hades and not heaven? I think not; rather, the Old Testament saint went immediately to heaven to wait for the resurrection of his body at the second coming of Christ.<sup>4</sup>

These distinct conclusions concerning the nature of Sheol and the afterlife underscore the challenges of correlating Scripture.<sup>5</sup> Defining Sheol, not least discerning a clear pattern for the nature of the afterlife across the OT, remains a difficult task. In the past half-century surprisingly few studies of Sheol have appeared. Of these, most scholars have concluded that ancient Israel perceived all the dead as going down to Sheol, a dusty or miry communal tomb brimming with maggots (Job 17:16; Ps 40:2; 140:10; Isa 14:11; Ezek 32:18–32) and shrouded by darkness, a pit where the shades languished in the shadows (Isa 14:10; Ps 143:3; Lam 3:6).<sup>6</sup> In contrast to this understanding, other scholars

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premillennialism of the early church fathers (*Regnum Caelorum: Patterns of Future Hope in Early Christianity* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1992]; idem, *Patterns of Millennial Thought in Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001]). Recently two premillennialists have addressed Hill's argument and counter that there is no necessary nor logical connection between the two-compartment view of Sheol and premillennialism and that, furthermore, Hill has misinterpreted the church fathers, especially Irenaeus of Lyons (ca. 130–202) (Brian C. Collins, "Were the Fathers Amillennial? An Evaluation of Charles Hill's *Regnum Caelorum*," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 177 [Apr–Jun 2020]: 207–220; Craig A. Blaising, "Early Christian Millennialism and the Intermediate State," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 177 [Apr–Jun 2020]: 221–33).

<sup>4</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, *Basic Theology: A Popular Systematic Guide to Understanding Biblical Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1986), 520.

<sup>5</sup>This distinction is more striking due to the fact that Pentecost and Ryrie taught at the same seminary and held nearly identical views in all other aspects of eschatology.

<sup>6</sup>Klaas Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1986); Fred B. Pearson, "Sheol and Hades in Old and New Testament," *Review and Expositor* 35 (Jul 1938): 304–14; Nicholas J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969); Ruth Rosenberg, "The Concept of Biblical Sheol within the Context of Ancient Near Eastern Beliefs" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1981); Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife*; Shaul Bar, "Grave Matters: Sheol in the Hebrew Bible," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 43 (Jul–Sept 2015): 145–53; T. D.

have observed that several biblical passages hold out hope for the deliverance of the godly at death from the unwelcome fate of Sheol.<sup>7</sup> Enoch and Elijah translate immediately to heaven (Gen 5:24; 2 Kgs 2:3–10). Job hopes for a divine deliverance from Sheol even prior to the resurrection (Job 14:13; 17:13–16; 19:25–26). The psalmists anticipate avoiding Sheol by the confident expectation of divine ransom at death (Ps 16:10–11; 49:15; 73:24). Biblical wisdom distinguishes the fool's downward destiny from the wise person's upward destiny (Prov 5:5; 7:27; 9:18; 15:24; 23:14). YHWH promises ransom from the power of death and Sheol (Hos 13:14).

This essay will consider exemplars from these latter passages to propose that ancient Israel, with respect to the biblical text and its socio-cultural practices, distinguished the destinies of the righteous versus the wicked in the afterlife.<sup>8</sup> The righteous would ascend to God for a beatific afterlife with continued fellowship and joy, while the ungodly would descend to the gloomy underworld to await future judgment. I conclude that this understanding better harmonizes the OT data and sharpens an understanding of how the faithful in ancient Israel perceived conscious existence in the afterlife. In the essay's first part, I will discuss OT perceptions of the afterlife and how the nature of one's death established expectations about one's destiny in the next. After this, I will examine those passages that appear to express hope for a blissful afterlife for the godly. In the final part, I will survey a handful of passages that seem to represent Sheol as the destiny for all the dead.

### The Afterlife in the Old Testament

The view that conscious life persisted after death was prevalent not only in ancient Israel but throughout the ancient Near East, where the only questions pertained to the conditions of the afterlife and how one might obtain optimal conditions.<sup>9</sup> Several lines of evidence suggest that belief in the afterlife was common in ancient Israel as reflected both in

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Alexander, "The Old Testament View of Life after Death," *Themelios* 11 (Jan 1986): 44–45; Aron Pinker, "Sheol," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 23 (Jul–Sep 1995): 168–79.

<sup>7</sup>James Barr, *The Garden of Eden and the Hope of Immortality* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 29–30; Philip Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and the Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 81–83; Jon D. Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel: The Ultimate Victory of the God of Life* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), xi–xiii; Stephen L. Cook, "Funerary Practices and Afterlife Expectations in Ancient Israel," *Religion Compass* 1 (Nov 2007): 660–83; idem, review of *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, by Jon D. Levenson, *Review of Biblical Literature* 10 (2008): 257–61.

<sup>8</sup>For the Israelite socio-cultural perspectives in the light of funerary practices, see Cook, "Funerary Practices," 670–83; Saul M. Olyan, "Some Neglected Aspects of Israelite Interment Ideology," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 124 (2005): 601–616.

<sup>9</sup>Sprouk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 234–36; John H. Walton, *Ancient Near Eastern Thought and the Old Testament: Introducing the Conceptual World of the Hebrew Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), 324.

its Scriptures and cultural practices.<sup>10</sup>

(1) Prohibitions against necromancy and allusions to the practice of necromancy appear not because the ancients viewed these practices to be a sham but because they held them to be a means of actually communicating with the dead, implying belief in postmortem existence (Lev 19:31; 20:6, 27; Deut 18:11; 1 Sam 28:3; Isa 8:19; 19:3; 29:4). Consultation of the dead indicates that those who seek the dead believe the spirits of the deceased know more or possess more power than the living. In the case of Saul's consultation with the necromancer at Endor, the best reading suggests that the spirit of Samuel actually returns via the medium to speak with Saul (1 Sam 28:14–19).<sup>11</sup>

(2) Although this practice was likely not widespread in Israel, some ancients venerated the dead and correspondingly held confidence in their soul's continued existence after death (Deut 26:14; Ps 106:28).

(3) The OT idioms “gathered to his peoples” and “slept with his fathers” imply conscious existence after death. These idioms do not entail burial in one's family tomb, as Jacob is gathered to his peoples several months before his burial (Gen 49:33; 50:13). The actual sequence in his case is “died/expired” (גוּעַ), “gathered to his peoples” (Niphal of אָסַף + אָל־עַמּוֹ), and “buried” (קָבַר). Similarly, Abraham, Aaron, and Moses are gathered to their peoples but not buried in family tombs (Gen 25:8–9; Num 20:23–29; Deut 32:50). Likewise, the phrase “slept with his fathers” does not mean burial in a family tomb since the burial often follows death after some length of time. In addition, the phrase is attributed to kings not buried in family tombs,

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<sup>10</sup>On these, see Paul R. Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife: Biblical Perspectives on Ultimate Questions* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 38–44; Spronk, *Beatific Afterlife*, 29–43.

<sup>11</sup>These factors include the following: (1) The text straightforwardly affirms that the medium “saw Samuel” (1 Sam 28:12). (2) The medium reacts in genuine terror to the appearance of Samuel's spirit, suggesting an authentic encounter. (3) Samuel alludes to prior conversations between him and Saul, demonstrating his personal knowledge of Saul. (4) Samuel conforms in appearance and garb to the prophet as Saul knew him, prompting the latter to recognize him immediately. (5) Samuel resumes his prophetic role by foretelling Saul's death the next day (see Robert D. Bergen, *1, 2 Samuel*, New American Commentary [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996], 267). Of interest also is that term *Sheol* never appears in this passage, occurring in Samuel only in the poems which open and close the book. These texts emphasize the life-giving power of YHWH over death (1 Sam 2:6; 2 Sam 22:6). The reason that Samuel comes up, I would contend, may be that the medium typically used a “ritual pit” (אֹב) to conjure up spirits or ghosts, which in every other case were likely demons (see Harry A. Hoffner, “Second Millennium Antecedents to the Hebrew *’ōb*,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 86 [Dec 1967]: 385–401; *Dictionary of Deities and Demons*, s.v. “Spirit of the Dead,” by J. Tropper, 806–9; Esther J. Hamori, *Women's Divination in Biblical Literature: Prophecy, Necromancy, and Other Arts of Knowledge* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015], 105–110). YHWH surprises her and the others by allowing Samuel to return briefly from the dead.

such as David, Omri, and Manasseh (1 Kgs 2:10; 16:28; 2 Kgs 21:18).<sup>12</sup>

(4) Depictions of the deceased in Sheol in the OT hint at belief in a conscious afterlife. Sheol's inhabitants are portrayed as self-aware and cognizant of their surroundings (Isa 14:9–10, 15–17; Ezek 32:21, 31). Often they are designated as Rephaim or Elohim, terms which refer to the still-existing and conscious spirits of the dead in Ugaritic cognates (KTU 1.1–6; Num 25:2; 1 Sam 28:13; Job 26:5; Ps 88:10 [11]; Prov 2:18; 9:18; 21:16; Isa 14:9; 26:14, 19).

(5) References to the names of the godly being recorded in a heavenly book suggests a vindication of the faithful after death and thus in the context of a conscious afterlife (Exod 32:32; Ps 69:28; Isa 4:3; Dan 12:1; Mal 3:16). For the OT saint to have his or her name written in God's book implies a special status and remembrance that would continue after death.

(6) A few texts allude to the spirits of the deceased returning to God or being gathered by him, implying conscious life after death (Num 16:22; Job 34:14; Eccl 3:21; 12:7). This reality corresponds with Jesus's later affirmation of the reality of the resurrection by underscoring that God is not the God of the dead but the living (Matt 22:32; Mark 12:27).

(7) The OT prophecies and affirmations of a future resurrection of the dead imply a conscious existence in the intermediate state (Deut 32:39; 1 Sam 2:6; Ps 16:10; 49:14–15 [HT 15–16]; 73:24; Isa 26:19; 53:7–12; Ezek 37:12; Dan 12:2; Hos 13:14).

With this cumulative evidence, the conclusion that the people of ancient Israel believed in life after death becomes clear. Having examined the foregoing evidence, we turn now to Israel's understanding of death and the destination of those who die, whether righteous or wicked.

### Perspectives in Ancient Israel on the Nature of Death

An important corollary to the OT understanding of the afterlife lies in its understanding of death and how one's death affected his or her status in the afterlife. In his study of Sheol, Philip Johnston concludes that ancient Israel distinguished between "good death" and "evil death" and that this distinction affected perceptions of the afterlife.<sup>13</sup> "Good death" was viewed, according to Johnston, as the natural end of human

<sup>12</sup>See also P. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol: Death and the Afterlife in the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002), 34.

<sup>13</sup>Earlier Rosenberg posed this distinction as between natural death and unnatural death: "Whenever death is due to unnatural causes, Sheol is mentioned; whenever death occurs in the course of nature, Sheol does not appear" ("The Concept of Biblical Sheol," 88).

life since humans were understood to be intrinsically mortal, and this kind of death was *not* associated with human sinfulness generally. "Evil death," on the other hand, he argues, was greatly feared because it entailed a premature demise under the shadow of divine judgment, whether through illness, violence, or excessive grief.<sup>14</sup> In the latter case, Sheol was plainly the destination of the deceased, as Sheol related almost universally in Scripture with the death of the wicked.<sup>15</sup>

Despite a few valid points, Johnston's construal runs into several difficulties. T. D. Alexander rightly critiques the notion that ancient Israel distinguished good death from evil death.<sup>16</sup> On occasion a premature death, even by illness or violence, was viewed as a welcome deliverance from a coming calamity, as in the cases of Abijah, Jeroboam's son, and of King Josiah (1 Kgs 14:1–13; 2 Kgs 22:20; Ps 12:1; Prov 14:32; Isa 57:1–2). On the other hand, it is unlikely that the Israelites viewed death of any kind as *natural*. The laws of defilement reveal that death was a decisive factor in polluting an individual, whether in handling a corpse or objects associated with death (Num 19:16). Stricter rules applied to those set apart for service, such as priests (Lev 21:2–3, 10–11) and Nazirites (Num 6:6–12). Unclean animals while still alive could be handled with impunity, but the carcasses of all animals, unless ritually slaughtered, defiled anyone who touched them (Lev 11:39). Alexander concludes that these regulations arose from the understanding that death resulted from divine punishment for man's rebellion and that death was *not* viewed as the natural end of man. Death was associated instead with human sin (Gen 2:17; Deut 24:16; 1 Sam 12:19; 1 Kgs 17:18; Ezek 18:20) and stood diametrically opposed to God as the giver and sustainer of life (Gen 2:7; Deut 30:20; Job 33:4; Ps 16:10–11; 49:15 [HT 16]; 54:4; 73:26; 86:2). YHWH had warned that the day on which mankind transgressed his command he would certainly die (Gen 2:16–17). In the Mosaic Law "bearing sin" resulted inevitably in the death of the offender (Lev 20:20; 22:9; Num 18:22, 32). This character-consequence connection came to be expressed most succinctly by the prophet Ezekiel in the principle "the soul that sins shall die" (Ezek 18:4, 20, 21, 24).

This negative view of death raises questions concerning how ancient Israel understood Sheol in relation to the dead. If death is evil and unnatural, these negative realities would likely attach also to the alien landscape of the underworld, where the dead reside. Sheol, like death itself, would be viewed as evil and unnatural. Thus, the OT believer would want to avoid Sheol at all costs but would understand that he

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<sup>14</sup>Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 40–46; cf. Rosenberg, "The Concept of Biblical Sheol," 234.

<sup>15</sup>Rosenberg, "The Concept of Biblical Sheol," 174; Bar, "Grave Matters," 149. See Num 16:30, 33; 1 Kgs 2:6, 9; Job 21:13; 24:19; Ps 9:17; 31:17; 42:14; 49:14; 55:15; Prov 5:5; 6:5; 7:27; 9:18; Isa 5:14; 14:15; Ezek 31:15; 32:21–22.

<sup>16</sup>Alexander, "The Old Testament View of Life after Death," 42.

could do so *only by divine intervention*. Such a desire for divine ransom to keep the believer from entering the ghastly underworld, I contend, prompts and undergirds the psalmists' frequent cries to God for deliverance, the sages' warnings to avoid Sheol, the near-death survivors' thanksgivings for rescue from Sheol, and the preponderance of evidence linking Sheol to evildoers. If the best hope for the righteous was merely the avoidance of an untimely death in the immediate or even the hope that after languishing for an indeterminate time in Sheol resurrection would follow, this amounts to a rather hollow deliverance in the now and an attenuated hope for the hereafter.<sup>17</sup>

### The Old Testament Concept of Sheol

Defining the Old Testament concept of Sheol remains an interpretive challenge. The term occurs 66 times in the OT, with its synonyms בּוֹר, בְּאֵר, and שְׁחַת ("pit") and אֲבִדּוֹן ("Abaddon") bringing the semantic field to around 100 occurrences.<sup>18</sup> In the Dead Sea Scrolls the term שְׁאוֹל occurs 23 times in biblical manuscripts, 25 times in non-biblical manuscripts, and once in a non-biblical Aramaic text.<sup>19</sup> No cognates for the term outside biblical and post-biblical Hebrew have been discovered, although the term appears as a loanword in a few other languages.<sup>20</sup> Although R. Laird Harris argued that Sheol is simply a metaphor for the grave,<sup>21</sup> the term is understood usually to mean the underworld or the realm of the dead.<sup>22</sup> A person descends to go there

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<sup>17</sup>William Shedd's comment is apt: "To give [Sheol] a meaning that makes it the common residence of the good and the evil is to destroy its force as a divine menace. If sheol be merely a promiscuous underworld for all souls, then to be 'turned to sheol' is no more a menace for the sinner than for the saint and consequently a menace for neither. In order to be of the nature of an alarm for the wicked, sheol must be something that pertains to them alone" (*Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Alan W. Gomes, 3rd ed. [Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2003], 851). Thus if all the deceased descend to Sheol, one might expect threats of descent in the OT would be characterized as descent to the afflicted (lower) compartment of Sheol rather than to Sheol in general.

<sup>18</sup>The etymology of Sheol is highly disputed. The most plausible origins are suggested from the verb שָׁאַל, "to inquire," or from שָׂאָה, "to be desolate." See Christopher B. Hays, *A Covenant with Death: Death in the Iron Age II and Its Rhetorical Uses in Proto-Isaiah* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015), 176–79; *TDOT*, s.v. "שְׁאוֹל," by L. Wächter, 15:240–41; L. Kohler, "Alttestamentliche Wortforschung: Scheol," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 2 (1946): 71–74; Johannes C. de Moor, "Lovable Death in the Ancient Near East," *Ugarit-Forschungen* 22 (1990): 233–45; *HALOT*, 1368–69; *TLOT*, s.v. "שְׁאוֹל," by G. Gerleman, 1279–84.

<sup>19</sup>See Lydia Lee, "Fiery Sheol in the Dead Sea Scrolls," *Revue de Qumrân* 27 (Dec 2015): 256, n. 28.

<sup>20</sup>See Rosenberg, "The Concept of Biblical Sheol," 1–10; Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 78; *TDOT*, 15:240.

<sup>21</sup>R. Laird Harris, "The Meaning of the Word *Sheol* as Shown by Parallels in Poetic Texts," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 4 (Dec 1961): 129–34.

<sup>22</sup>Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 73.

and ascends to escape from there (Gen 37:35; 44:29; Num 16:30, 33; 1 Sam 2:6; 1 Kgs 2:6, 9; Ps 55:15; Prov 5:5; 7:27; 15:24; Jon 2:6). Sheol is cosmologically opposite to heaven (Job 11:8; Ps 139:8; Isa 7:11; Amos 9:2). The earth opens to swallow those who go to Sheol (Num 16:30, 33; Prov 1:12). The region is depicted as a dusty or slimy interment for the shades, full of worms and maggots (Job 17:16; Ps 30:9; 40:2; 140:10; Isa 14:11; Ezek 32:18–32; Lam 3:6). Depictions of the deceased in Sheol in the OT attest to a conscious, remorseful afterlife for its inhabitants. These inhabitants are self-aware and cognizant of their surroundings (Isa 14:9–10, 15–17; Ezek 32:21, 31). Often they are designated as Rephaim or Elohim, terms which refer to the still-existing spirits of the dead in Ugaritic literature (KTU 1.1–6; Num 25:2; 1 Sam 28:13; Job 26:5; Ps 88:10 [HT 11]; Prov 2:18; 9:18; 21:16; Isa 14:9; 26:14, 19). Sheol is a region characterized by lethargy and weakness (Eccl 9:10; Isa 14:10), silence (Ps 31:18), oblivion (Ps 88:13; Eccl 9:5), confinement (Job 40:13), distress (Ps 116:3), and darkness (Ps 143:3; Lam 3:6). Fullness of life within a special relationship to God is absent there (Ps 6:6; 30:10; 88:11–13; Isa 38:18–19), as are distinctions of class or rank (Job 3:17–19; Isa 14:9–10). God's wrath burns to the lowest part of Sheol (Deut 32:22). The wicked and profane are those cast down to Sheol (Job 21:13; Ps 9:17; 49:14; Prov 5:5; 7:27; 9:18; Isa 14:15; Ezek 32:21–22). It is a place where its inhabitants tremble naked before God (Job 26:5–6) and a place of terror and writhing (Job 18:5–14; 27:20).

In assessing its nature in the OT, Johnston proposes three observations that are crucial to a full understanding of Sheol.<sup>23</sup> (1) Sheol is a term associated heavily with personal angst over the specter of imminent death. The term seldom occurs in narrative or legal material but appears frequently in the direct speech of Psalms, in wisdom literature (especially Job and Proverbs), and in the prophets (especially Isaiah). He infers that Sheol is “very clearly a term of personal engagement” and that it “indicates personal emotional involvement, in apprehension of one's own destiny.”<sup>24</sup> (2) The term is not exclusive to any one period of Israel's literature, as references are scattered throughout the OT canon. This distribution limits those who would see Sheol as either an early or late development in Israelite theology—it is a constant, albeit infrequent, designation for the underworld. Thus, it is not likely that OT views of the afterlife evolved as significantly as is often supposed from the inception to the close of the OT canon.<sup>25</sup> (3) The term appears in surprisingly few contexts in the OT. While מוֹת (“death”) occurs nearly 1,000 times, there are only about 100 references to the

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<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 71–72.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 72.

<sup>25</sup>*Contra* Spronk, who argues that Israelite views of the afterlife shifted significantly in later history after the threat of Baalism had receded (*The Beatific Afterlife*, 344–45).



underworld, a smaller frequency than in other ANE literature.<sup>26</sup> The OT does not dwell excessively on or elaborate the picture of the underworld, owing likely to its oppositionality to YHWH as the God of life and to his abode in the heavens.

Perhaps the most pressing question with respect to Sheol concerns whom the ancient Israelites perceived going there after death? Early in the twentieth century, Sigmund Mowinckel laid the lines for the critical view by positing that the psalmists speak of Sheol merely as a metaphor to compare their angst, although clinically still alive, to that of an actual state of death outside God's favor.<sup>27</sup> This view would be consistent with the later critical consensus that the biblical authors were tentative even into the postexilic period about the nature of the afterlife and the possibility of communion with God after death.<sup>28</sup> These scholars would conclude that the metaphorical and vague conceptualizations of Sheol by the ancients would lead in turn to their understanding Sheol as the underworld destiny of all the dead.<sup>29</sup>

If Sheol were conceived as the universal destiny, the proposition follows that OT believers understood themselves to descend to Sheol at death, especially those who faced a premature death hinting at divine judgment. Several OT characters envisage descent to Sheol, including Jacob (Gen 37:35), Hezekiah (Isa 38:10), Job (Job 17:13–16), Jonah (Jon 2:2), and the psalmist Heman (Ps 88:4). While these references appear to provide substantial evidence for common descent to Sheol, it is important to observe that in each circumstance the sufferer speaks of a possible—rather than actual—decline to the underworld due to an untimely death by illness, loss, or seeming abandonment under the shadow of divine disfavor.<sup>30</sup> Significantly in the case of Jacob, when death actually comes later, no mention is made of Sheol or of an

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<sup>26</sup>Levenson concludes that if Sheol were the awaited destiny of all the deceased in the Hebrew Bible, one would expect a much higher frequency for the term, one nearly consonant with the occurrences of מוֹת (*Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 72).

<sup>27</sup>Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas, 2 vols. (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1967), 239–40. Levenson appears also to favor the metaphorical view of Sheol, which he defines as “the prolongation of the unfulfilled life” (*Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 78). For an exposition of the critical view, see Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. D. M. G. Stalker, 2 vols. (reprint ed., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 1:387–91.

<sup>28</sup>A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, New Century Bible, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 535. Cf. the discussion in Philip Johnston, “Psalm 49: A Personal Eschatology,” in *Eschatology in Bible and Theology: Evangelical Essays at the Dawn of the New Millennium*, ed. Kent E. Bower and Mark W. Elliott, 73–84 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 73.

<sup>29</sup>Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife*, 131.

<sup>30</sup>It is noteworthy that in contemplating reunion with the deceased infant conceived by his adultery with Bathsheba, David does *not* say “I will go down to him” (ירד) but simply “I will go to him” (הלך) (2 Sam 12:23). If Sheol were his expected destiny, it seems more likely he would have expressed it in the former sense.

unfavorable destiny (Gen 49:28–33). Rather, he is described as being “gathered to his people” (Gen 49:33). The latter phrase, as argued above, is an idiom for the experience of fellowship in the afterlife rather than burial in a family tomb, for the phrase is used to describe Jacob’s death at least 77 days before his burial in Canaan (Gen 50:1–13). Similarly, Abraham, Aaron, and Moses are gathered to their peoples but not buried in family tombs (Gen 25:8–9; Num 20:23–29; Deut 32:50).

Likewise, after Hezekiah’s death-scare he appears to adopt a strangely cheerful prospect of his own death. He affirms to Isaiah the prophet, who has informed him of the future punishment of his descendants: “‘The word of the LORD that you have spoken is good,’ for he thought: ‘There will be peace and security during my lifetime’” (Isa 39:8). His death is later described with the biblical idiom “[he] slept with his fathers,” which appears also to be a statement about the afterlife since it is used of kings not buried in family tombs such as David (1 Kgs 2:10; 2 Kgs 20:21; 2 Chron 32:33). The suffering sage Job imagines a potential descent to Sheol but holds out hope for a postmortem vindication, longing for God to reverse his decision after an appeal: “Oh that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath be past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!” (Job 14:13 [ESV]).<sup>31</sup> Interesting with regard to Job’s wish is that he appears to hold out hope for deliverance from Sheol *prior to the resurrection* (cf. Job 19:25–27), namely, at a set time that God would remember him. In addition to these are the near-death experiences of Jonah and Heman. In these latter two cases the speaker approaches death but experiences divine deliverance at the last moment. Significantly, while OT believers in some cases feared consignment to Sheol, *no OT believer is designated clearly as going to Sheol after death*. The biblical evidence is thus not clear-cut in the direction of universal descent. These texts leave open the possibility that OT saints distinguished between the destination of the righteous dead (with God) as contrasted with that of the wicked (in Sheol), holding hope for deliverance from the clutches of Sheol.

### Old Testament Passages and Theological Implications Offering Hope for the Righteous in the Afterlife

Several Old Testament passages and theological implications hint at hope for the righteous to experience deliverance from the terrors of

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<sup>31</sup>Job is probably to be understood as a special case. The likely sentiment of this verse expresses Job’s belief that due to his unanticipated and unwarranted punishment by God he will descend to Sheol when he dies. Earlier he lamented that those who descend to Sheol do not come up again (Job 7:9; cf. 1 Sam 2:6, where YHWH can bring up the dead from Sheol). Here, however, he holds out hope that God will relent from this injustice to reconsider Job’s status after a period of languishing in the afterlife (cf. Job 19:25–26). See the discussion in David J. A. Clines, *Job 1–20*, Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 330–31.

Sheol. While space does not permit exegesis of all these texts, we will examine a few key exemplars and draw some conclusions to assess their bearing on our understanding of Sheol.

*Not Abandoned to Sheol (Ps 16:10–11)*

Psalm 16 is a psalm of trust/confidence and a confession of faith.<sup>32</sup> The psalm is attributed traditionally to David.<sup>33</sup> The psalm divides into five short stanzas of about two verses each: (1) Opening statement of faith in YHWH (vv. 1–2); (2) Distinction between the righteous and the wicked (vv. 3–4); (3) Acknowledgement of God's gracious providence (vv. 5–6); (4) Praise of YHWH for his guidance and protection (vv. 7–8); (5) Concluding avowal of trust in YHWH for his deliverance from death and decay (vv. 9–11). The structure of the psalm exhibits a heightening from its initial statement of faith to its climactic confirmation of YHWH's coming deliverance, with a pivot in v. 7 blessing YHWH for his counsel and safekeeping.<sup>34</sup> While the NT writers interpret these verses as a prophetic allusion to the resurrection of the Messiah (Acts 2:25–32; 13:36–37,<sup>35</sup> my focus is more narrowly on the psalmist's intention and the original context.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>Nancy deClaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson, and Beth L. Tanner, *The Book of Psalms*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 176; Allen Harman, *Psalms*, Mentor (Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus, 1998), 101; Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms: Volume 1*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 305.

<sup>33</sup>Peter and Paul attribute the psalm to David (Acts 2:25–32; 13:36), the other psalms bearing the superscription מִלְּדָוִד appear likewise to originate with David (Pss 56–60), and the psalm exemplifies a high concentration of Davidic vocabulary (see Trull, "An Exegesis of Psalm 16:10," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 [Jul–Sept 2004]: 304–5; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "The Promise to David in Psalm 16 and Its Application in Acts 2:25–33 and 13:32–37," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 23 [Sept 1980]: 222–23; Franz Delitzsch, *The Psalms* [reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1955], 1:217).

<sup>34</sup>Trull, "An Exegesis of Psalm 16:10," 305–6.

<sup>35</sup>See Gregory V. Trull, "Views on Peter's Use of Psalm 16:8–11 in Acts 2:25–32," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (Apr–June 2004): 194–214.

<sup>36</sup>A solution to the exegetical crux of v. 10 involving whether the psalmist David refers to himself or to the future Messiah may be found if one understands the psalmist to refer to himself in the first line ("you will not abandon my soul to Sheol") and to his honored descendant, the Messiah, in the second line ("nor allow your faithful one to see the pit"). The latter term מִלְּדָוִד ("godly one," "faithful one") appears in covenant contexts (Deut 33:8; 1 Sam 2:9) and is linked by Solomon to the steadfast love (רַחֲמֵי) promised to David (2 Chron 6:41–42). The psalmist may be picking up a rhetorically-charged term with connections to the Davidic covenant, where YHWH's promise of רַחֲמֵי implies a special relationship to the favored descendant whom God will establish (2 Sam 7:15; 1 Chron 17:11–13). The parallelism would thus function as merismus to denote David and all his descendants to the promised descendant (cf. merismus parallelism in Jer 16:3; Ps 105:26; Prov 1:8; 10:8) (see Wilfred G. E. Watson, *Classical Hebrew Poetry*, JSOTSup 26 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986], 125).

In the final stanza the psalmist anticipates deliverance to YHWH's presence, envisioned as the path of life, rather than abandonment to Sheol. Two concepts are crucial to evaluating the psalmist's understanding of Sheol and the afterlife: (1) the collocation of the Hebrew verb עזב (traditionally "abandon") with the accusative נַפְשִׁי ("my soul") and complement לְשֵׁאוֹל ("to Sheol") and (2) the significance of "the path of life" (אֶרֶץ חַיִּים) which YHWH makes known to the psalmist.

First, the psalmist expresses the hope that YHWH will not abandon his soul to Sheol. The Hebrew term עזב occurs just over 200 times in the OT and means "to leave (behind)," "forsake," "abandon," or "let go."<sup>37</sup> In the OT the term appears only nine times in this type of construction in which the accusative (the entity forsaken or left behind) is placed with the preposition לְ or בְּ signifying the sphere, physical or metaphorical, *in which the entity is left behind* or *to which the entity is left to go*.<sup>38</sup> These uses are arranged in the following chart:

*Collocation of עזב with Accusative and Complement Phrase*

| Verses        | Subj.  | Verb             | Accus.                        | Compl. Prep. | Compl. Object      | Translation                                                                        |
|---------------|--------|------------------|-------------------------------|--------------|--------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Gen 39:12–13  | —      | וַיַּעַזֵּב      | בְּגָדוֹ                      | בְּ          | יָדָהּ             | He left <u>his garment</u> <i>in her hand</i> .                                    |
| Gen 50:8      | —      | עָזְבוּ          | טָפְסִים וְצֹאֲנִים וּבְקָרָם | בְּ          | בְּאֶרֶץ גִּשְׁוֹן | They left <u>the little ones, flocks, and herds</u> <i>in the land of Goshen</i> . |
| Ps 16:10      | —      | לֹא־תַעֲזֹב      | נַפְשִׁי                      | לְ           | שֵׁאוֹל            | You will not abandon <u>my life</u> <i>to Sheol</i> .                              |
| Ps 37:33      | יְהוָה | לֹא־יַעֲזֹבֶנּוּ | יָנּוּ                        | בְּ          | יָדוֹ              | YHWH will not abandon <u>them</u> <i>into his hand</i> .                           |
| Job 39:14     | —      | תַּעֲזֹב         | בִּצְיָהּ                     | לְ           | אֶרֶץ              | She abandons <u>her eggs</u> <i>to the ground</i> .                                |
| Neh 9:19      | —      | לֹא עָזַבְתָּם   | םֹ                            | בְּ          | מִדְבָּר           | You did not leave <u>them</u> <i>in the wilderness</i> .                           |
| Neh 9:28      | —      | וַתַּעֲזֹבֵם     | םֹ                            | בְּ          | יָד                | You abandoned <u>them</u> <i>into the hand (of their enemies)</i> .                |
| 2 Chron 12:5  | אֲנִי  | עָזַבְתִּי       | אֶתְכֶם                       | בְּ          | יַד־שִׁישַׁק       | I will abandon <u>you</u> <i>to the hand of Shishak</i> .                          |
| 2 Chron 24:25 | —      | עָזְבוּ          | אוֹתוֹ                        | בְּ          | בְּמַחֲלִיִּים     | They left <u>him</u> <i>in a wounded condition</i> .                               |

<sup>37</sup>HALOT, 806–8; BDB, 736–38; DCH, 6:326–32; NIDOTTE, s.v. "עזב," by Robert L. Alden, 3:365.

<sup>38</sup>On the spatial uses of these prepositions, see Ronald J. Williams and John C. Beckman, *Williams's Hebrew Syntax*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 97, 105, 107.

A brief overview of these uses leads to some interesting conclusions. In Gen 39:12–13 Joseph flees the failed seduction by Potiphar's wife and *leaves behind* his garment *in her hand*, repeated twice. The verb עזב here governs the accusative בְּגָדוֹ (“his garment”) with the complement phrase בְּיָדָהּ (“in her hand”) denoting where the garment is left. In Gen 50:8 Jacob's family goes up from Egypt to bury Jacob in Canaan, *leaving behind* their little ones, flocks, and herds *in the land of Goshen*. In Ps 37:33 the psalmist proclaims that YHWH will not abandon or allow the godly to pass into the hand of the wicked, who have set an ambush to destroy him. Here the בְּ prepositional phrase signifies *the sphere to which* YHWH will not give over the godly. Job 39:14 provides the closest analogy to our text. Here YHWH caricatures the silly ostrich, who “abandons her eggs to the ground.” The verb עזב heads the accusative בְּצִיֶּהָ (“her eggs”) with לְ governing a spatial complement “to the earth/ground” (לְאָרֶץ). In postexilic Yehud the Levites rehearse the redemptive history of Israel, reminding the assembly that YHWH did not *leave them behind in the wilderness* (Neh 9:19). Due to their persistent evil, however, he gave them over (i.e., *abandoned them*) *into the hand* of their enemies (9:28). In 2 Chron 12:5 the prophet Shemaiah confronts Rehoboam over his foolish disregard of the Mosaic covenant. YHWH promises that, because Rehoboam had forsaken him, YHWH would now *abandon him to Shishak*, the king of Egypt. Here the verb governs the accusative “you” with the complement בְּיַד־שִׁשְׁקָה (“into the hand of Shishak”), denoting the sphere into which YHWH would relinquish Rehoboam. Finally, in 2 Chron 24:25 the Syrian army *leaves behind* Joash, the Israelite king, *in a severely wounded state* after the battle, with the complement בְּמַחֲלָיִים (“in severe woundedness”) signifying the aggravated condition in which he is left. These texts reveal that with respect to the phrases in question the forsaken/abandoned element either is left in a sphere in which it already is or is allowed to enter that sphere as the result of an agent's action.

Key to our discussion is whether the psalmist in Ps 16:10 means that YHWH will not *leave the psalmist behind in Sheol after he is already there* or that YHWH will not *allow him to descend to Sheol at all*. The verses in which this parallel construction occurs are about evenly divided between these senses. In Gen 39:12–13; 50:8; Neh 9:19; and 2 Chron 24:25 the accusative is *already* in the sphere expressed by the complement and is abandoned or left to remain in that sphere. In Ps 37:33; Neh 9:28; and 2 Chron 12:5 the accusative is not yet in the sphere but is released or given over to that sphere (or *not* given over). Job 39:14 is unclear, but the *lamed* preposition may clarify the intent as belonging to the second category.<sup>39</sup> Grammarians define the

<sup>39</sup>Merwe, Naudé, and Kroeze observe that while the preposition לְ indicates a general relationship between two entities without inherent spatial function, the preposition attains this metaphorical meaning so often it nearly subsumes the original sense (Christo H. J. van der Merwe, Jackie A. Naudé, and Jan H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew*

preposition  $\dot{\text{ל}}$  as intrinsically expressing motion toward or unto something.<sup>40</sup> This understanding would favor movement toward the sphere as in view. The parallel “she warms them upon the dust” supports the understanding that in the first stich the ostrich allows the eggs to drop to the ground and will hatch them there. The NIV approximates this sense: “She lays her eggs on the ground.”

With respect to Ps 16:10, while either interpretive option is possible, several lines of evidence favor the latter sense, that the psalmist anticipates that YHWH will not allow him to go to Sheol at all. First, the threat of Sheol is conceptually close to the examples of the second group where in each case a faithful or unfaithful follower is alternatively prevented from falling into or is given over to a menacing enemy. The parallel in Ps 37:33 is particularly suggestive. In that scenario the godly follower of YHWH is kept back altogether from destruction due to divine guidance and protection, a similar concept to that which the psalmist anticipates here. Second, the  $\dot{\text{ל}}$  preposition, as in Job 39:14, suggests that movement *toward* the sphere rather than abandonment *in* the sphere is in view. Third, the *yiqtol* conjugation hints at a future expectation reaching beyond the immediate situation in which the psalmist will be delivered prior to reaching the menacing destination. His hope will be dashed if in spite of his prayer he still descends to Sheol at the end of his life. His confidence, rather, is that YHWH will keep him out of Sheol altogether. Thus, while many commentators see here a hope for deliverance from an untimely death or a hope for future resurrection after an indeterminate period in Sheol, the psalmist’s hope is thin if his consignment to Sheol is merely delayed or shortened rather than avoided.<sup>41</sup>

Second, the psalm ends as it began, with a tricolon extolling here communion with YHWH, which is characterized as *the path of life* replete with divine presence, joy, and pleasures at God’s right hand. Some view the path of life as indicating continued communion with God in the temple<sup>42</sup> or prolonged natural life instead of premature death.<sup>43</sup> Its usage elsewhere in the OT, however, appears exclusively in

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*Reference Grammar* [London: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002], 284).

<sup>40</sup>Williams and Beckman, *Williams’s Hebrew Syntax*, 105; Paul Joüon and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 2006), 458; Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 205–6.

<sup>41</sup>C. Hassell Bullock, *Psalms: Volume 1, Psalms 1–72*, Teach the Text Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 114. Thus Derek Kidner concludes: “Admittedly some commentators see here no more than recovery from an illness (cf. Isa 38:9–22); but the contrast in Psalms 49 and 73 between the end of the wicked and that of the righteous supports a bolder view” (*Psalms 1–72*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary [Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973], 103).

<sup>42</sup>DeClaisé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 181; Bullock, *Psalms*, 115.

<sup>43</sup>Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 207; Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife*, 132.

wisdom contexts focused on the life-or-death significance of observing the warnings of Torah (Prov 2:19; 5:6; 10:17; 12:28; 15:24). In these passages the path of life contrasts consistently with death and descent to Sheol, the domain of the outside woman and of Lady Folly, who each attempt to seduce away the young wisdom-seeker.<sup>44</sup> In Prov 2:18–19 the adulterous woman occupies a house that sinks down to death, where the departed shades reside. Those who consort with her fail to regain the paths of life. In Prov 5:5–6 her feet descend to death and follow the pathway to Sheol, while giving no thought to the path of life. While the path of life is not mentioned explicitly in Prov 7:27, there the abode of the illicit woman lies on “the way to Sheol” and constitutes “the chambers of death.” In Prov 10:17 the path of life is gained by heeding instruction. Those who spurn reproof lead others away from the path. The path of righteousness, parallel to the path of life in 2:19–20, leads also to life in Prov 12:28, a pathway in which death is absent. Finally, in Prov 15:24 the path of life leads upward for the wise to keep him from going to Sheol below. These passages suggest that the path of life forms in biblical wisdom a fixed oppositional pairing to Sheol and the realm of death. The path of life thus leads in the opposite direction from Sheol. Waltke concludes thus that the path of life “refers to the abundant everlasting life that outlasts clinical death, which is only a shadow along the path of life.”<sup>45</sup> He notes that “the movement from ‘below’...to ‘upwards’ fits the biblical teaching that the godly terminate their journey in the presence of God himself (Pss. 16:9–11; 73:23–26; John 14:1–4; 2 Tim. 4:18; Heb. 12:2). Salvation from the grave is more than being spared an untimely death, for otherwise ‘the path of life’ is finally swallowed by death.”<sup>46</sup>

The cumulative evidence suggests that the psalmist here envisions that he will avoid Sheol altogether, that his relationship with YHWH will not end at death, and that he will experience God’s presence with full joy in the afterlife. Based on the foregoing discussion, a better translation of Ps 16:10–11 runs as follows: “You will not *give over my life to Sheol* nor allow your faithful one to see corruption. You reveal to me the path of life; in your presence there is complete joy; at your right hand are endless delights.” David here expresses hope that God will deliver him completely from the destiny of the wicked, namely, from the clutches of Sheol.

### *Ransomed from the Hand of Sheol (Ps 49:14–15 [15–16])*

Psalm 49 is the final Korahite psalm of Book Two. The psalm is often classified as a wisdom psalm, with its didactic tone and

<sup>44</sup>For similar imagery in the Qumran document *Wiles of the Wicked Woman* (4Q184), see Lee, “Fiery Sheol in the Dead Sea Scrolls,” 260–263.

<sup>45</sup>Bruce K. Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1–15*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), 233.

<sup>46</sup>Waltke, *Proverbs 1–15*, 106.

concentration of wisdom vocabulary.<sup>47</sup> The structure of the psalm consists of four parts and revolves around the psalmist's explanation of a "proverb" and a "riddle" (v. 4): (1) Introduction: invitation to the audience and explanation of the wisdom instruction (vv. 1–4); (2) First response to the riddle: wealth is transitory and the wealthy will perish (vv. 5–12); (3) Pivot: the wealthy wicked are destined for Sheol, while the faithful are delivered (vv. 13–15); (4) Second response to the riddle: do not fear or envy the wealthy (vv. 16–20).<sup>48</sup> The content of the riddle is explained in vv. 5–6 as reckoning with the paradoxical injustice whereby the wealthy prosper although they deride and terrorize the lowly righteous.<sup>49</sup> The psalmist's solution materializes in vv. 12 and 20 with the repetition of the epithet "man in his pomp" (אָדָם בִּיקָר) (ESV). He concludes that this oppressive inequity is powerless to provoke fear in the faithful because wealth is fleeting and because all people die just as the animals. The psalm reaches its climax in v. 15 with the psalmist's confession of confident hope that YHWH will deliver him from the fate of the wicked, viz., from Sheol, by removing him.<sup>50</sup>

In v. 14 the psalmist anticipates that the wealthy wicked will be consumed in Sheol, while the upright will rule over them at the morning, presumably distinguishing the conditions of the two groups in the afterlife: "As sheep they are destined for Sheol. Death will shepherd them, and the upright will rule over them in the morning. Sheol will consume their form, far from their exalted estates" (49:14). The verse presents a number of interpretive difficulties. *BHS* suggests emendation of לְבֹקֶר ("to the morning") to לְקֶבֶר ("to the grave") to confine the interpretation to the final resting place of the deceased. The emendation,

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<sup>47</sup>Simon C. Cheung, *Wisdom Intoned: A Reappraisal of the Genre 'Wisdom Psalm'* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 79–99; J. David Pleins, "Death and Endurance: Reassessing the Literary Structure and Theology of Psalm 49," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 69 (1996): 19; Daniel J. Estes, "Poetic Artistry in the Expression of Fear in Psalm 49," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 161 (Jan–Mar 2004): 61–62; Kidner, *Psalms 1–72*, 199; Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1983), 358; DeClaisé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 439; Wilson, *Psalms*, 746. Cheung defines the criteria for identifying wisdom as encompassing a predominant wisdom thrust (i.e., primary focus on wisdom themes), an intellectual tone, and a didactic intention (*Wisdom Intoned*, 29–37).

<sup>48</sup>Paul Volz, "Psalm 49," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 55 (1937): 251–53; Wilson, *Psalms*, 747–48; Harman, *Psalms*, 195–97; James L. Mays, *Psalms*, Interpretation (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1994), 191; Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary*, Eerdmans Critical Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 388.

<sup>49</sup>DeClaisé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 444; Wilson, *Psalms*, 746. Leo Perdue defines the riddle in this context as "an enigmatic proposition in which a creature, object, or event is obscurely or even paradoxically described in terms of one or more of its characteristic features" ("The Riddles of Psalm 49," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 93 [Dec 1974]: 534).

<sup>50</sup>Bullock, *Psalms 1–72*, 371; Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1–59*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 483.



however, finds no textual support.<sup>51</sup> Delitzsch contends rather that the psalmist speaks here of the eschaton since it is a morning not for individuals but for all the upright.<sup>52</sup> The hope is for the vindication of the upright through continued communion with the God of life so as to triumph over their enemies. The miserable plight of the wicked contrasts with the bold hope of the godly for divine redemption from the power of Sheol: "Surely God will ransom my life from the hand of Sheol because he will take me" (49:15). Although Craigie argues that the psalmist is quoting the spurious hopes of the wealthy, who in their self-confidence boast that God will redeem them from disaster, this is unlikely from the context.<sup>53</sup> The psalmist refers to himself in the first person throughout the psalm, and there are no literary markers, such as a *verbum dicendi*, to indicate that he is citing his opponents.<sup>54</sup> Rather, the psalmist is confident that God will redeem him from the clutches of Sheol. The term פדה occurs 14 times in the Psalter and means "to ransom," "to buy out," or "to redeem," usually in the context of the price paid to free one from the imposed penalty of death.<sup>55</sup> Outside one occurrence in this psalm (Ps 49:7 [8]), the verb in Psalms always links to God or YHWH as the redeemer of Israel and, especially, of his saints.<sup>56</sup>

Divine redemption is assured for the psalmist because God will "take" (לקח) him. The verb לקח is collocated with YHWH or God as the subject some 62 times in the OT.<sup>57</sup> While most of these clauses refer to the taking of an object, in relatively few occasions YHWH takes a *person* or *individuals* for a particular purpose. In Gen 2:15

<sup>51</sup>Another unlikely proposal is that of Pierre Bordreuil, who changes מְזַבֵּל ("from the lofty habitation"; cf. 1 Kgs 8:13; Isa 63:15) in the final line to read instead the interrogative מָה as part of the question "Who is his prince?" (*Mizzēbul lô: à propos de Psaume 49:15*," in *Ascribe to the Lord: Biblical and Other Studies in Memory of Peter C. Craigie*, ed. Lyle Eslinger and Glen Taylor, 93–98 [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988], 98).

<sup>52</sup>Franz Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Psalms*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1871), 2:118.

<sup>53</sup>Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 360.

<sup>54</sup>In quotations that are marked virtually (i.e., absent explicit verbs of speaking or thinking), Fox identifies three criteria in determining their presence: (1) another subject in addition to the primary speaker lies in the vicinity of the quotation; (2) a virtual *verbum dicendi*—a noun or verb that implies speaking; and (3) a switch in grammatical number and person to signal a shift to the perspective of the quoted voice ("The Identification of Quotations in Biblical Literature," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 92 [1980]: 423). While the context might suggest criteria 1 and 3, the lack of a noun or verb to imply speaking renders a quotation unlikely.

<sup>55</sup>HALOT, 912; NIDOTTE, s.v. "פדה," by Robert L. Hubbard, Jr., 3:578–79; DCH, 6:651–52.

<sup>56</sup>Pss 25:22; 26:11; 31:6; 34:23; 44:27; 49:16; 55:19; 69:19; 71:23; 78:42; 119:134; 130:8.

<sup>57</sup>See DCH, 4:565.

YHWH takes the man (עֶבֶד) and places him in the garden to work it and to keep it. The context is fraught with expectations of divine fellowship and sacred charge as the verbs עָבַד (“serve”) and שָׁמַר (“keep”) occur elsewhere in this pattern only in the priestly law governing Levitical duties with respect to the tabernacle (Num 3:7–8; 8:26; 18:5–6).<sup>58</sup>

In two other well-known passages, the term לָקַח describes the divine translations of Enoch (Gen 5:24) and Elijah (2 Kgs 2:3–12), who are miraculously transported into the presence of YHWH.<sup>59</sup> Abraham uses the term to denote that YHWH took him from his homeland and his father’s house to bring him into the promised land so that his destiny and that of his descendants would be linked vitally and irrevocably to the land (Gen 24:7; cf. Josh 24:3). In the priestly regulations YHWH takes the Levites, in the place of the firstborn sons of Israel, to be his unique representatives (Num 3:12; 8:16, 18; 18:6; cf. Isa 66:21). On a few other occasions לָקַח assumes covenantal overtones in expressing God’s election of the nation Israel and his regathering of the people in the eschaton (Exod 6:7; Deut 4:20; Ezek 36:24; 37:19, 21). YHWH also takes David from the sheepfold to be king over his people (2 Sam 7:8; Ps 78:70; 1 Chron 7:17) and takes certain of David’s descendants to fulfill a special role (Jer 33:26; Hag 2:23). Due to the failings of the Davidic kings, however, he occasionally takes other rulers temporarily in their stead: Jeroboam (1 Kgs 11:37) and Nebuchadnezzar (Jer 43:10; cf. Cyrus [Isa 45:1]). In the Psalms YHWH takes the faithful one prior to (Ps 18:16) or at/after death (Ps 49:15; 73:24) to deliver him from his enemies in this life or the next. On the negative side, on a handful of occasions YHWH takes someone in judgment, implying death, destruction, or exile (Ezek 24:16, 25; Amos 9:3; Ps 68:18; Job 1:21). In the case of the latter, the context applies in each situation to divine punishment for corporate sin on the part of the nation. From these passages we may conclude that in the majority of cases YHWH takes the individual as a result of and in confirmation of an existing special relationship. The individual is brought into a realm of blessing and occasionally also of sacred charge whereby the individual sustains a singular responsibility and relationship with God. In the context of Ps 49:15 (cf. also Ps 73:24 discussed below) the taking of the believer, presumably at or after death, implies the continuation of this distinctive relationship into a realm of blessing and fellowship with YHWH in the afterlife.

Although a sizeable nucleus of older commentators similarly

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<sup>58</sup>Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1987), 67; T. D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land: An Introduction to the Pentateuch*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 123–25.

<sup>59</sup>David C. Mitchell, “‘God Will Redeem My Soul from Sheol’: The Psalms of the Sons of Korah,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 30 (2006): 375. Spronk observes that with the paradigmatic “taking” of Enoch and Elijah express an early belief that hope in YHWH is not restricted to this life (*The Beatific Afterlife*, 258).

perceived in this text the psalmist's hope for the survival of death and even for eternal life, more recent treatments have remained tentative.<sup>60</sup> Many instead see the psalmist as anticipating divine rescue from an untimely death.<sup>61</sup> Goulder furnishes three arguments for this latter conclusion.<sup>62</sup> First, the verse is compared with Hos 13:14, which is understood to refer merely to deliverance from an ordinary death.<sup>63</sup> This understanding is then applied to the present context to confine the hope to rescue from premature death.<sup>64</sup> Second, he argues that the act of redemption in vv. 8–10 does not pertain to the afterlife and thus it is unlikely that the afterlife is in view here. In other words, if the redemption pertains to life in the here-and-now, then escape from Sheol must also be confined to the here-and-now. Third, he proposes that the concept of “taking” appears likewise in Ps 18:16 (“He reached down from on high and took hold of me; he pulled me out of deep water”) [17]) with respect to deliverance from death rather than translation to heaven. Goulder concludes that the psalm refers merely to deliverance from premature death.

Alexander has answered these objections by noting that the meaning of Hos 13:14 is difficult to determine, diminishing its usefulness as a cross-reference. If anything, the text speaks rather of being ransomed from the clutches of Sheol. Further, the analogies of vv. 8–10 and Ps 18:16 cannot be applied to the present text as their scope and intent are different.<sup>65</sup> A mere expectation of deliverance from immediate death rings hollow, in any case, if the psalmist's confidence extends only to a delay of death rather than to complete release from the unwelcome and terrible fate of Sheol. While the passage may fall short of developing the full doctrine of personal resurrection that is evident in later texts, it anticipates a distinction in destiny after death and, moreover, the deliverance of the righteous from the consignment to Sheol. The psalmist

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<sup>60</sup>Michael D. Goulder cites Delitzsch, Duhm, Schmidt, Kraus, Weiser, J. van der Ploeg, von Rad, Eaton, Anderson, Rogerson, and McKay as holding some variation of the survival-of-death view, with Delitzsch “a bolder spirit” who sees the “taking” as translation directly to heaven (*The Psalms of the Sons of Korah* [Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1982], 181–82).

<sup>61</sup>See DeClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 445; John Goldingay, *Psalms, Volume 2: Psalms 42–89*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 104–5.

<sup>62</sup>Goulder, *The Psalms of the Sons of Korah*, 182.

<sup>63</sup>Hos 13:14, while relevant to our topic, is a notoriously disputed text and must remain outside the scope of the present study. *Prima facie* the text supports our premise that deliverance from the fate of Sheol is anticipated for the righteous: “I shall ransom them from the power of Sheol; I shall redeem them from Death” (ESV).

<sup>64</sup>Goldingay affirms likewise that the phrase “speaks more of a reversal within this life” and that “the morning is the moment when God acts in this life to deliver” (*Psalms, Volume 2*, 104).

<sup>65</sup>T. D. Alexander, “The Psalms and the Afterlife,” *Irish Biblical Studies* 9 (Jan 1987): 10; cf. Harman, *Psalms*, 256.

remains confident that rather than descending to Sheol, YHWH will take him.

*Taken to Glory (Ps 73:24)*

Psalms 73 is often categorized likewise as a wisdom psalm with affinities to Psalm 49.<sup>66</sup> The psalm opens Book Three of the Psalter with a note of confusion and doubt, given the rampant evil and injustice in the world.<sup>67</sup> Authorship is ascribed traditionally to Asaph, the Levitical choral leader instituted by David (1 Chron 6:39–43; 15:16–17; 2 Chron 5:12). The psalm functions as the “programmatic introduction” to the main Asaph collection (Pss 73–83; cf. Ps 50), with its tension between suffering/temptation and wisdom.<sup>68</sup> The structure of the psalm organizes discernably around the repetition of אָמֵן (“surely”) with a corollary contrast in vv. 1, 13, and 18: (1) Surely God is good but the wicked prosper (vv. 1–12); (2) Surely the psalmist’s righteousness would have been ineffectual had he not experienced God’s presence (vv. 13–17); (3) Surely the fate of the wicked is calamitous but God will care for the upright (vv. 18–28).<sup>69</sup>

Toward the conclusion of the psalm the psalmist Asaph holds out hope for future glory: “But I am continually with you; you grasped my right hand. You lead me with your counsel, and afterward you will take me to glory” (Ps 73:23–24). The prepositional phrase “with you” (אִתְּךָ) is repeated three times in quick succession to stress the psalmist’s new-found confidence in YHWH’s saving presence (vv. 22, 23, 25).<sup>70</sup> The initiative of God, not the psalmist, has effected a stunning reversal of perspective. YHWH is the active subject of three successive verbal

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<sup>66</sup>Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, trans. Hilton C. Oswald, Continental Commentary (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 84; Alexander, “The Psalms and the Afterlife,” 11. Cheung concludes that the psalm is a peripheral wisdom text as other themes and a different speech intention distance it from the marks of a traditional wisdom psalm, drawing comparisons to Job (*Wisdom Intoned*, 121–22; cf. Terrien, *Psalms*, 526). Westermann argues that the psalm is predominantly a lament, while Crenshaw proposes a first-person testimony (Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms*, trans. Keith R. Crim and Richard N. Soulen [Atlanta: John Knox, 1981], 80; James L. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001], 111).

<sup>67</sup>Willem A. VanGemeren, “Psalms,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, volume 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 475; DeClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 584.

<sup>68</sup>Herman Spieckermann, “What Is the Place of Wisdom and Torah in the Psalter,” in *When the Morning Stars Sang: Essays in Honor of Choon Leong Seow on the Occasion of His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Scott C. Jones and Christine R. Yoder, 287–316 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2018), 306, n. 39.

<sup>69</sup>DeClaissé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 585. VanGemeren proposes a chiasmic structure, but the literary criterion of the recurring particle אָמֵן provides a superior method of arrangement (“Psalms,” 475–76).

<sup>70</sup>Terrien, *Psalms*, 532.

clauses summarizing his past, present, and future relationship with the psalmist: You hold my right hand; you guide me with your counsel; you will take me to glory (vv. 23b–24).<sup>71</sup> Some see here an expectation merely of honor in the present life<sup>72</sup> or of a long and fulfilled life.<sup>73</sup> It is more likely, however, that the psalmist awaits glorification with God “afterward” (אַחֲרַיִת), as this term in the context can only denote after the point of physical death since the psalmist anticipates no cessation of YHWH’s support and counsel in the present life. The related term אֶחָרִית, rendered “destiny” or “end” refers earlier in an analogous fashion to the coming demise of the wicked (v. 17), which entails being swept away in death to Sheol (v. 19).<sup>74</sup> The term *take* (לָקַח) as discussed previously pertains primarily to a singular relationship with YHWH through which the faithful is brought to a realm of blessing and/or sacred responsibility. In addition, *glory* (כְּבוֹד) is associated most often with God’s presence, which Moses experiences on Mount Sinai and which indwells the tabernacle (Exod 33:18–23; 34:6–7, 29–35; 40:34–35).<sup>75</sup> In the Psalms divine glory pertains primarily to YHWH’s holy presence and righteous rule (Pss 19:2; 21:5; 24:8; 26:8; 29:3; 57:5; 63:2; 72:19; 97:6; 113:4; 145:12). The psalmist views death not as a cessation or interruption of God’s presence and reign but as an intensification of it. As Kraus summarizes: “A union with Yahweh is awaited which even physical death cannot set aside or even interrupt.”<sup>76</sup> Divine counsel (v. 23) has altered the psalmist’s perspective on death: it is no longer an infernal descent characterized by trouble and woe.<sup>77</sup> Rather, he expresses confidence that he will ascend to God for a share in the full presence and blessing of divine glory.

### *The Path of Life and Deliverance from Sheol in Proverbs*

Earlier we discussed the path of life in Proverbs with respect to its use in Psalm 16. Here we develop a few texts that amplify this theme. The sage of Proverbs consistently envisions the movement of the godly upward to life while avoiding Sheol beneath: “The path of life goes upward for the prudent, in order that he may avoid Sheol below” (Prov

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<sup>71</sup>Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2005), 233–34. See Hossfeld and Zenger for comparative literature and iconography in which the gods take the deceased by the hand to usher him into the blessed afterlife (233–35).

<sup>72</sup>DeClaisé-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, *Psalms*, 592.

<sup>73</sup>Martin Buber, “The Heart Determines: Psalm 73,” in *Theodicy in the Old Testament*, ed. James L. Crenshaw (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983), 116.

<sup>74</sup>Harman, *Psalms*, 258; Anderson, *Psalms 73–150*, 536.

<sup>75</sup>VanGemeren, “Psalms,” 482.

<sup>76</sup>Kraus, *Psalms 60–150*, 91.

<sup>77</sup>Buber, “The Heart Determines,” 115.

15:24). As McKane notes, the “upward-downward” opposition makes sense only in the context of the afterlife. The application of “life” only to present physical life limits the scope of the upward movement and abnegates the contrast between movements, as one refers clearly to postmortem destiny. That is, if the downward path to Sheol is clearly postmortem, the upward path of life should also be considered postmortem; otherwise, the upward path is nullified by the downward path.<sup>78</sup> Elsewhere parental discipline likewise rescues the child from the menacing threat of Sheol: “Do not withhold discipline from a child; if you strike him with a rod he will not die. If you strike him with the rod, you will save his life from Sheol” (Prov 23:13–14). In other passages the path of life or life itself contrasts not to Sheol but to death—the meaning of which transcends the singular, physical event to encompass the end of this life and into the next (11:7, 19; 12:28; 13:14; 14:27, 32).<sup>79</sup> Whybray argues that these passages in Proverbs pertain *not* to a blessed afterlife but to the reward of a blissful life in the present and thereby an avoidance of premature death.<sup>80</sup> Although this view has some merit, the cumulative evidence favors a distinction in the postmortem destination of the righteous as compared with the wicked. Sheol is associated consistently in Proverbs with incorrigible fools and scoffers who repudiate the warnings of Torah and abandon their hope for the blessed afterlife. Proverbs likewise presents the undesirable specter of a conscious, distressful afterlife for the wicked with its references to the forlorn רָפָאִים (“the departed”) whose company the aspiring sage is to avoid (Prov 2:18; 7:26; 9:18; 21:16). It seems likely, then, that deliverance from Sheol entails deliverance from this realm of departed spirits who are suffering remorse and affliction for their foolish and sinful life-pattern.

### *Ascent to God in Worship and in the Afterlife*

Beyond these OT passages, another biblical-theological implication hints at a nascent expectation among the writers of the Old Testament that they would be delivered from Sheol and taken to continued fellowship with God in the heavenly realm. Biblical scholars have increasingly recognized a thematic link between creation and the tabernacle/temple cult, especially in key features of the tabernacle/temple ornamentation

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<sup>78</sup>William McKane, *Proverbs*, Old Testament Library (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 479–80. McKane suggests nonetheless that “upwards” and “downwards” are pious glosses, owing to their apparent absence in the LXX (479). Michael Fox argues for their inclusion, per the MT, on the basis of syntax (*Proverbs 10–31*, Anchor Bible [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009], 601).

<sup>79</sup>See Derek Kidner, *Proverbs*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1964), 50–52.

<sup>80</sup>R. N. Whybray, *Proverbs*, New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 234. Cf. Richard J. Clifford, *Proverbs*, Old Testament Library (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999), 154; Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 207; P. Williamson, *Death and the Afterlife*, 132.

and structure and in the purpose of the latter to provide a holy habitation for God to dwell in the midst of his people.<sup>81</sup> In his study of the theology of Leviticus, L. Michael Morales highlights a key theme in the Pentateuch that develops across the OT as a type-pattern, beginning with Eden and extending to the tabernacle and temple.<sup>82</sup> He proposes that, in terms of its topography, Eden was situated as the elevated summit on which God resided as king reigning over creation and in fellowship with humanity. The garden of Eden was the adjacent land in which he placed mankind to “serve” and to “work” (Gen 2:15) both to enjoy fellowship with him and to extend divine dominion over the created earth for his glory. In the garden Adam had access to God and a venue in which to worship, work, and serve as priest and vice-regent. The fall, however, disrupted mankind’s task and his relationship to God, leading to human death and exile. The relationship between God and the created order would be later reprised to a degree by the tabernacle/temple structure and cult: God took up residence as king in the midst of his people and could be approached in fellowship only through his prescribed means. Such an understanding corresponds to the prevailing conceptualization in the ANE that a sacred temple served as the “vertical bond (between heaven and earth) and the horizontal bond (bond of the land).”<sup>83</sup> Morales outlines this thematic continuity:

All of these parallels find their explanation within the temple ideology that was common throughout the ANE, whereby a temple was understood to be the architectural embodiment of the “cosmic mountain”; for our purposes, the tabernacle represents the holy mountain of God.

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<sup>81</sup>The literature is vast. See Gordon J. Wenham, “Sanctuary Symbolism in the Garden of Eden Story,” in *I Studied Inscriptions from before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11*, ed. Richard S. Hess and David T. Tsumura, 399–405 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994); John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 148–53; *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, s.v. “Creation,” by John H. Walton, 164–65; G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church’s Mission: A Biblical Theology of the Dwelling Place of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 60–66; T. D. Alexander, *From Paradise to the Promised Land*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012), 123–26; L. Michael Morales, ed., *Cult and Cosmos: Toward a Temple-Centered Theology* (Leuven: Peeters, 2014); J. Daniel Hays, *The Temple and the Tabernacle: A Study of God’s Dwelling Places from Genesis to Revelation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2016), 20–27. For a constructive critique of the cosmic temple imagery idea, see Daniel I. Block, “Eden: A Temple? A Reassessment of the Biblical Evidence,” in *From Creation to the New Creation: Biblical Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Daniel M. Gurtner and Benjamin L. Gladd, 3–29 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2013). Some of these parallels between creation/Eden and the tabernacle/temple include entrance from the east, guardian cherubim, YHWH “walking about” in its midst, the tree of life (cf. the menorah), God’s representatives “serving” and “keeping” (Gen 2:15; Num 3:7), and the outflow of life-giving water.

<sup>82</sup>L. Michael Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord? A Biblical Theology of the Book of Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2015).

<sup>83</sup>Eric Burrows, “Some Cosmological Patterns in Babylonian Religion,” in *Cult and Cosmos*, ed. L. Michael Morales, 27–47 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 33.

The garden of Eden, then, would have been understood as resting upon the summit of the mountain of God. The prophet Ezekiel (28:13–14) makes this precise connection: “You were in Eden, the garden of God.... You were on the holy mountain of God.” Furthermore, Genesis 2:6, 10–14 describes a spring-fed river that runs through the garden and then flows *down* from Eden, branching out into four riverheads to water the rest of the earth, suggesting a high locale that corresponds well with a mountain summit.... In sum, then, “Eden is thought to be a cosmic mountain upon which Adam serves as priest.” Or to reverse the point, the later high priest of Israel serving in the tabernacle must be understood fundamentally as an Adam-figure serving on the (architectural) mountain of God.<sup>84</sup>

Morales demonstrates that this pattern of human movement from the depths/waters (taken to have metaphorical links to Sheol) to ascend to a lofty place of service and communion with God occurs repeatedly in the narratives of the Pentateuch. A few of these episodes include Adam’s ascent from uncultivated creation (originally made by the separation of land from “the deep” [תְהוֹם] and “the waters” [הַמַּיִם] [Gen 1:2]) to Eden, the mountain of God (Gen 2:5–15); Noah’s ascent from the waters of the flood to Mount Ararat, where he sacrificed to God (Gen 7:13–8:22); Abraham’s ascent from Ur to his culminating sacrifice on Mount Moriah, where he offered up Isaac (Gen 12:1–4; 22:1–19); Jacob’s ascent in a dream from Bethel to God’s abode, through his vision of the stairway leading to the heavenly realm where God was present (Gen 28:1–5, 10–19); and Moses’s ascent from Egypt to Mount Sinai, where he met with God and received the Law (Exod 24:1–18).

This pattern likewise correlates with the frequent movement of worshippers in Israel’s later history to “go up” (עלה) to Jerusalem in order to worship God at the temple, a rising movement that appears to carry physical as well as spiritual dimensions (2 Sam 19:34; 1 Kgs 12:27–28; 1 Kgs 3:15; 8:1; 23:2; 1 Chron 15:3; 2 Chron 2:16; Ps 24:3; 68:18; 137:16; cf. the psalms labelled as “Songs of Ascents” [Pss 120–134]). Moreover, ancients conceptualized the temple as an earthly incorporation or model of the celestial abode of the god in both proximity (in an elevated sacred place close to heaven) and likeness (patterned after the true celestial palace).<sup>85</sup> Thus Moses is commanded to build the tabernacle according to the precise blueprint YHWH shows him on Mount Sinai (Exod 25:9, 40; 26:30; 27:8; cf. Heb 8:5). The temple served then as the prototypical “cosmic mountain” where God dwelt. I would contend that this notion may well have set expectations for the OT believer to ascend to the “mountain of God” in the afterlife so as to continue fellowship with YHWH. Worship consistently

<sup>84</sup>Morales, *Who Shall Ascend the Mountain of the Lord*, 52–53.

<sup>85</sup>Burrows, “Some Cosmological Patterns,” 39; Richard J. Clifford, “The Temple and the Holy Mountain,” in *Cult and Cosmos*, ed. L. Michael Morales, 85–98 (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 95.



required the worshipper to *ascend* to meet with God. This expectation would likely continue for the faithful believer at death. This correlation appears to fit well with the NT perception of the writer of Hebrews regarding the afterlife: “But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Heb 12:22–24, ESV).

*Jesus’s Descent to Sheol Follows His Resurrection,  
Not His Death*

Some scholars contend that viewing Sheol as the destiny of all the deceased of the OT era follows from the reality that Christ descended to Sheol during the three-day period between his death and resurrection.<sup>86</sup> If Jesus descended to Sheol, they argue, then all people—including OT believers—descended there prior to Christ’s triumph over death. There are several passages, however, that cast some doubt on this conclusion. Jesus’s statement to the Father at his death—“Into your hands I commit my spirit” (Luke 23:46)—is likely an affirmation that he is ascending to the power and realm of God rather than to Sheol. Jesus affirms to the believing criminal crucified with him that “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43). These statements correlate well with paradise being in the third heaven (2 Cor 12:2, 4). In addition, the parable of the rich man and Lazarus hints at an ascent for the righteous at death. Lazarus is “carried away” (ἀπενεχθῆναι) by the angels to Abraham’s side (Luke 16:22), suggesting an upward rather than downward movement. The rich man in torment “lifts up” (ἐπάρας) his eyes to see Lazarus (v. 23), suggesting a vertical rather than horizontal configuration. While this could be conceived as parallel in the sense of an Upper Sheol and Lower Sheol, we could also understand this to be the distinction between heaven above, which is paradise, and Sheol below.

Likewise several New Testament passages affirm that Christ descended to the underworld, but these passages likely point to a post-resurrection descent rather than to a descent at death (Rom 10:6–8; 1 Pet 3:18–20; 4:6; Eph 4:7–10; Rev 1:18).<sup>87</sup> Key texts among these suggest that a preferable reading to understanding Christ as entering Sheol during his *triduum mortis* is that Jesus descended to the

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<sup>86</sup>Hoyt, *The End Times*, 36–47; MacLeod, “The Third ‘Last Thing,’” 473–77; Emerson, *He Descended to the Dead*, 22–65; Bass, *The Battle for the Keys*, 62–96; Mark Snoberger, “If Jesus Descended to Sheol, Then OT Saints Also Descended to Sheol,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 26 (2021), 48–56.

<sup>87</sup>Another passage, Matt 12:40, is perhaps a reference to Jesus’s burial rather than to his descent to the underworld.

underworld *after his resurrection to proclaim his triumph over death and the spiritual forces hostile to God*. The sequence, for example, of 1 Pet 3:18–22 implies this. Here the descent appears to take place *after* the resurrection and prior to the ascension in order to proclaim victory over the fallen angelic hosts exemplified in the utterly wicked angels that were confined in Tartarus for their sin in Genesis 6:1–4 (1 Pet 3:18–22; 2 Pet 2:4; Jude 6).<sup>88</sup> The phrase “put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit” (1 Pet 3:18) refers likely to the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.<sup>89</sup> The NT elsewhere pairs Christ’s crucifixion with his resurrection in a similar manner (Rom 4:25; 8:34; 14:9; 1 Thess 4:14). The term ζωοποιέω (“made alive”) customarily refers to bodily resurrection from the dead (John 5:21; Rom 4:17; 8:11; 1 Cor 15:22, 36, 45). The phrases “put to death in flesh” and “made alive in spirit” would refer then not to individual parts of Christ but to the whole person of Christ: i.e., put to death as a person, resurrected as a

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<sup>88</sup>This view was pioneered somewhat by Friedrich Spitta (*Christi Predigt an die Geister* (1 Petr., 3,19ff.): ein Beitrag zur neutestamentlichen Theologie [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1890]; Spitta’s contribution was the *audience* [fallen angels], not the *setting* [he followed Augustine with a preincarnate oracle]). A more influential source in the English-speaking world was Edward G. Selwyn’s commentary (*The First Epistle of St. Peter* [London: MacMillan and Company, 1952], 197–201). Selwyn held that human beings may be included in the πνεύματα. Building on this work (and that of Reicke), William J. Dalton championed this view with some modifications in *Christ’s Proclamation to the Spirits* (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1965), 13–57 (cf. Bo Reicke, *The Disobedient Spirits and Christian Baptism* [Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1946], 7–51). Other proponents following the basic contours of this view include Robert Mounce, *A Living Hope: A Commentary on 1 and 2 Peter* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 57; Eugene Boring, *1 Peter*, Abingdon New Testament Commentaries (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 139; Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 240–41; R. T. France, “Exegesis in Practice: Two Samples,” in *New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Principles and Practices*, ed. I. Howard Marshall (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 271; J. N. D. Kelly, *The Epistles of Peter and Jude*, Harper’s New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 154–55; I. Howard Marshall, *1 Peter*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1991), 128; Donald P. Senior, *1 Peter*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2003), 103; Scot McKnight, *1 Peter*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 216; Richard B. Vinson, Richard F. Wilson, and Watson E. Mills, *1 & 2 Peter, Jude*, Smith & Helwys Bible Commentary (Macon, GA: Smith & Helwys, 2010), 175–76; D. Edmond Hiebert, “The Suffering and Triumphant Christ: An Exposition of 1 Peter 3:18–22,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (Apr–Jun 1982): 146–58; idem, *First Peter: An Expositional Commentary* (Chicago: Moody, 1984), 224–31; Peter H. Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 140; Simon Kistemaker, *Peter and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), 145; John H. Elliott, *1 Peter*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 650–662; Edwin A. Blum, “1 Peter,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 241–43; Thomas R. Schreiner, *1, 2 Peter, Jude*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 185.

<sup>89</sup>Leonard Goppelt, *Commentary on First Peter*, trans. and augmented by John E. Alsup (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 253; Hiebert, “The Suffering and Triumphant Christ,” 150.

person. The terms therefore emphasize quality and denote the two modes or realms of existence of Christ before and after the resurrection. Christ was put to death in the physical (mortal) mode of existence but raised to life in the spiritual (immortal) mode of existence, echoing the concepts of 1 Corinthians 15:44–45: “It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, ‘The first man Adam became a living being’; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit.” If this is the case, then the resurrection preceded the proclamation and was the circumstance or occasion in which he went to make the proclamation (v. 19).<sup>90</sup> The spirits are in prison (φυλακη), which is used synonymously with “abyss” (αβυσσος) in Rev 20:1–7. Satan is confined to the abyss in v. 1 and released from his prison in v. 7.

This described sequence would relate, then, also to Rom 10:6–8 and Eph 4:7–10. In Rom 10:6–8 Christ has both descended to the abyss, the lowest depths of Sheol, and ascended to the right hand of the Father. The fact that Paul uses the term for the lowest region of Sheol makes unlikely that Christ was there during the time between his death and resurrection, as most scholars of this view propose that Christ was in the upper chamber or paradise rather than in the lower chamber. Another possibility is that Paul uses this citation from Deut 30:12–13 rhetorically to affirm that one need not descend into the underworld to find the ability to follow God’s commands, as Christ is near us and has demonstrated his power by overcoming death. In any event, this event fits just as readily during the 40 days after the resurrection as in the three days before it. Paul’s mention of bringing Christ back from the dead would relate to the underworld itself as the realm of the dead: the destination of the unrighteous in the OT as well as the confinement chamber of evil angels.

Similarly, in Eph 4:7–10 Christ descends to the underworld but not in his human spirit at death. Rather, he goes down to the lowest parts of the earth following his resurrection, and in a way consistent with 1 Peter 3, to announce his victory over the spiritual forces of evil in the nether realms.<sup>91</sup> There are other questions related to the latter text, including the identity of the captives and the rationale for Paul’s change of receiving gifts from men in Ps 68:18 to giving gifts to men. Rather than referring to the release of detained saints in Sheol, the former phrase could be understood as a further reference to Christ’s triumph over the angelic realm. Arnold argues that these principalities, powers, and authorities hold a prominent place in Ephesians as the enemies of Christ and of God’s people and that they are the foes Christ has defeated and subjected by his resurrection (Eph 1:20–22), stripping

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<sup>90</sup>Achtemeier, *1 Peter*, 252–53.

<sup>91</sup>See Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 252–54.

them of their power (2:15).<sup>92</sup> Christ's triumph over all the created order forms the basis by which he gives gifts to the church. In summary, Christ's cosmic victory extends to every realm of the created order. He descended to the underworld in his glorified, resurrected body to announce that triumph over the demons.

### Passages Potentially Depicting Sheol as the Universal Destiny of the Dead

In conclusion, several scholars have noted the tension between the many texts associating Sheol with the wicked and a handful of texts that appear to link Sheol to all the deceased of the OT era.<sup>93</sup> We turn now to a brief examination of these latter texts.

#### *Descending to Sheol in Peace (1 Kgs 2:6; Job 21:13)*

Two texts speak of the possibility of going down to Sheol in peace. The possible implication of descending to Sheol in peace is that Sheol is the destiny not merely of bloodthirsty evildoers but of all people, whether they die by violence or in tranquility. In the case of the latter, one may assume that this entails death at the conclusion of a long, prosperous, happy life. In 1 Kgs 2:6 David warns Solomon to act with wisdom by not letting the gray head of Joab "go down to Sheol in peace" but to take vengeance so that he descends to Sheol "with blood" (2:9). John Gray thus concludes from this text that "Sheol is the shadowy, insubstantial underworld, the destination of all, good and bad without discrimination."<sup>94</sup> Along similar lines, in Job 21:13 Job laments that the wicked "fully enjoy their days in prosperity and in tranquility go down to Sheol." From the implication of these texts, some infer that the kind of death by which a person dies—in peace or in violence—matters not, for the destination is the same for all: Sheol. This meaning stands in contrast, however, with clear indications to the contrary in these texts. Joab (1 Kgs 2:6) and the wicked (Job 21:13) are consigned to Sheol in retribution for their violent deeds. This retribution is hollow recompense if they simply descend to the same destiny as those whom they oppressed and murdered. The point seems rather to be that these wicked are headed to Sheol anyway; the plaintive hope of the righteous is that these evildoers will be judged and dispatched to their unwelcome destiny sooner rather than later. The texts furnish little proof that the dead universally descend to Sheol in OT thought.

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid., 251.

<sup>93</sup>Rosenberg attempts to reconcile these distinct perspectives, while admitting that her conclusions are suggestive rather than normative. Levenson, on the other hand, concludes that the two groups of texts evidence competing ideologies about the afterlife that are left unreconciled in the Hebrew Bible. See Rosenberg, "The Concept of Biblical Sheol," 234–44; Levenson, *Resurrection and the Restoration of Israel*, 75.

<sup>94</sup>John Gray, *I & II Kings*, Old Testament Library, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 102.

*Who Can Deliver from Sheol? (Ps 89:48)*

In Ps 89:48 the psalmist asks: "What man can live and not see death? Who can deliver his life from the hand of Sheol?" While this text may be interpreted as depicting that everyone who dies descends to Sheol, this meaning is not unequivocally clear. Instead, the psalmist emphasizes that all humans are sinful and mortal and thus in need of divine deliverance (v. 47). No human in his own strength can escape death nor ransom his life from the clutches of the threatening underworld; only God can. There are likely corollaries here to the themes expressed in Ps 49:14–15. As suggested above, outside one occurrence in Psalms the verb פדה always links to God or YHWH as the redeemer of Israel and of his saints. Although the term here is מלט ("escape," "be delivered") rather than פדה, the sentiment is probably parallel. Only God can redeem and deliver a sinner from Sheol because no human possesses such power. No human can singlehandedly effect a change in his or her destiny in the afterlife apart from the operations of the divine realm. This stark reality grounds the psalmist's plea for divine intervention. The text thus appears then as a rhetorical request for divine salvation rather than identifying Sheol as the destiny of all.

*Sheol: "The Place Where You Are Going" (Eccl 9:10)*

The final text is perhaps the most difficult. In Eccl 9:10 Qohelet appears to designate Sheol as the fate of all his readers: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for there is no activity, planning, knowledge, or wisdom in Sheol, the place where you are going." While this text is on the surface the strongest support for Sheol as the universal destiny of mankind, there are clues that Qohelet is likewise speaking rhetorically. Qohelet is unique among the biblical writers in giving vent to a heightened angst over the sickening menace of death.<sup>95</sup> All death is evil and unnatural for Qohelet because it is inescapable and utterly destructive, reducing righteous image-bearers to a status no better than animals or fools (2:16; 3:19; 7:2; 9:3). While death offers some respite from the future misfortunes of fallen life (4:2) and seals one's reputation (7:1), in the end it is a bitter and gloomy fate characterized by weakness, forgetfulness, and loss (2:16; 7:26; 9:4–5, 10). Death strips people of rank and privilege (5:15–16), nullifies any advantage in one's labor (2:18–19), renders the deceased to a forgotten legacy (2:16), and deprives them of the enjoyment of God's gifts (6:2–3). Beyond this, there are grim realities about death and the afterlife that the living simply cannot know, such as how the spirit of man goes

<sup>95</sup>On the nature of death in Ecclesiastes, see Shannon Burkes, *Death in Qoheleth and Egyptian Biographies of the Late Period*, SBL Dissertation Series, no. 170 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1999), 48–80; David M. Clemens, "The Law of Sin and Death: Ecclesiastes and Genesis 1–3," *Themelios* 19 (1994): 5–8.

upward: “Who knows regarding the spirit of the man that rises upward, and the spirit of the animal that descends into the earth?” (3:21). Although the text is disputed, Qohelet likely questions *not* the reality of life after death but the timing of death and the nature of the spirit’s ascent to YHWH, its Creator.<sup>96</sup> Elsewhere he acknowledges clearly that after death “dust returns to the ground as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it” (12:7).

In the context of Eccl 9:7–10, Qohelet appeals to common ANE themes related to joyful living in view of human mortality (e.g., festive garments, feasting, cosmetics, and spousal love). Qohelet emphasizes the need to enjoy life in the face of encroaching death. It seems best then to read his statement in 9:10 as expressing a measure of uncertainty about the timing and nature of death along the lines of similar statements elsewhere in the book (e.g., 2:16 3:21; 9:4–5). Qohelet concludes in 9:7–10 that his readers must enjoy life while they can because for all he knows they may be headed to Sheol: a somnolent, gloomy existence for sinners and a realm where none of the vigorous activities of life on earth is possible. In view of this threatening specter of death, Qohelet commends the wholehearted enjoyment of life as God’s gift.

### Conclusion

In this essay I have argued that the Old Testament envisions distinct destinies for the righteous and the wicked in the afterlife. I contend that the righteous were understood to ascend to God for a blissful afterlife replete with continued fellowship and joy, while the ungodly were understood to descend to the sorrowful and gloomy underworld known as Sheol to await future judgment by God. I examined several passages that support such a view, including Pss 16:9–10; 49:14–15; 73:23–24; Prov 15:24; 23:14. I also examined theological implications that support this, including the customary ascent to worship and fellowship with God in the OT and the likelihood that the NT references to Jesus’s descent to the underworld place this activity after his resurrection rather than his death (Rom 10:6–8; 1 Pet 3:18–20; 4:6; Eph 4:7–10; Rev 1:18). Disputed passages were also briefly considered, including 1 Kgs 2:6; Job 21:13; Ps 89:48; and Eccl 9:10. I concluded that these admit of a differing interpretation and are not fatal to the view presented here. To determine clear principles and dogmatic tenets on the nature of the afterlife for the deceased of the OT is difficult in that it necessarily involves exegesis at the margins of the text, discerning theological and exegetical implications. While the OT falls short of

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<sup>96</sup>Daniel C. Fredericks, *Ecclesiastes*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010), 123; Craig Bartholomew, *Ecclesiastes*, Baker Commentary on the Old Testament Wisdom and Psalms (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009), 178; James Bollhagen, *Ecclesiastes*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing, 2011), 153, 156; Graham Ogden, *Qoheleth* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 62.

achieving the clarity and fuller understanding of the afterlife presented by the NT, one should not conclude that the OT believer had no hope nor confidence that he would continue to experience blessing and fellowship with God in his glorious presence in the afterlife. His hope, rather, was anchored in the goodness and faithfulness of the covenant God YHWH, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; the God of the living, not the dead; the God of life.