

WORD STUDY ON THE HEBREW WORD *SHEOL*¹

The Hebrew word translated "Hell" in the Authorized version of the Old Testament is *sheol*. The noun is frequently coupled with "death," "grave," and "the pit" (e.g. Job 17:16; Prov. 23:13-14; Ps. 18:5). However *sheol* should **not** be considered a synonym of "grave" or "death." While grave and death have a primary connotation of a physical place or condition, *sheol* refers to a non-physical, spiritual location or condition.

The Hebrew word translated *sheol* has several shades of meaning, including, **1**) a place, often extremely deep, remote or far away e.g. "deepest," (Dt. 32:22; Job 11:8), lowest place (contrasted with ascending to heaven-Ps. 139:8), **2**) the general place where a person's soul/spirit goes after death (e.g. Ps. 16:10; 55:15; Isa. 5:14), and, **3**) the place where the "wicked" go upon their decease e.g. Ps. 9:17: "*The wicked shall be turned into hell (sheol) and all the nations that forget God.*" (cf. Prov. 15:24; 23:14; Ezek. 32:21, 27). The translation of *sheol* as "grave" 31 times in the KJV is unfortunate, since, while a number of passages draw a parallel between "hell" & "grave," (Prov. 5:5; 7:27), the two are not synonymous. If *sheol* was equivalent to "grave," then statements such as those found in verses illustrating number 3 above (e.g. Ps. 9:17), would not make sense since all people eventually go to the grave, not just wicked people.

Sheol is however roughly equivalent to the English word "Hell" since both refer to the location where the dead go after their decease. Among the definitions for the English word "hell" is "*the place or state of punishment of the wicked after death; the abode of evil and condemned spirits...the abode of the dead.*" (Random House Dictionary, 1973, p. 614). Hebrew meanings 1 & 3 above are seen in the earlier part of the above English entry, while number 2 is seen in the latter excerpt. If *sheol* is transliterated (as it is in the NASV), or translated "hell," or possibly "pit" when it appears, it then communicates to the English reader an accurate reflection of the Hebrew meaning. Translating *sheol* as "grave" would not seem to be justified on the basis of the Hebrew usage in Scripture. "Grave" in English has the meaning of the location where a dead body is buried, "a tomb or place of internment" (RH Dictionary, p. 576). This conclusion is further supported by the Melanesian Pidgin Version of the Bible, etc.

An understanding of the above will aid one in interpreting various Old Testament passages. **(1)** In Psalm 16:10 we thus realize that Christ was not "sleeping" during His three days in the grave. This also gives illumination to New Testament passages such as I Peter 3:18-19. **(2)** It seems quite obvious that there must have been two compartments in *sheol*, since the "wicked" go to *sheol* in a different sense than the righteous do (e.g. Ps. 9:17 cf. Ps. 49:15; 88:3). This aids in understanding the New Testament concept and usage of "*Hades*" (translated "hell") as both a place of conscious existence of all the dead after their decease, as well as the recognition that this spirit world is divided into good and bad compartments (Lk 16:19-33 cf. "*Paradise*" in Lk. 23:43; II Cor. 12:4; etc.). **(3)** Finally, to translate *sheol* as "grave" is to incorrectly and unnecessarily open the door for groups such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh Day Adventists to promote their faulty doctrine of soul sleep.

Reference

TWOT – (Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament)

¹ by Mike Edwards, 16 April, 1996, Goroka, Papua New Guinea (revised 2006, 2011 & 2013)