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The Dead in the Underworld

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Summary

The story of Saul and the witch of Endor indicates that the dead are aware of the living and their circumstances. In this episode, Samuel tells Saul what will happen to him in the future. Thus, in this paper, we will examine the faith of the dead in Sheol. Do the dead have any powers? Is there any connection between the dead and the living and do the dead know about the living? The end result will show that the biblical texts are describing the dead as powerless and ignorant of events in the world of the living. All those descriptions come from the Wisdom Literature, whose authors belonged to the social elite. They enjoyed life and were not interested in any changes. However, many people, kings and commoners alike, believed in the potency of the dead. Over successive generations this belief seems to have become more tenacious, making it necessary to devalue it.

1. Introduction

According to Theodore Gaster, “The Old Testament offers no formal doctrine concerning the destination and fate of the dead; all that it says on the subject belongs to the domain of popular lore.”⁷⁶ Oesterley, on the other hand, writes: “We find in the Old Testament a mass of antique conceptions regarding life beyond the grave which the Israelite shared with other peoples, and which had been handed

76. Theodor Gaster, “Dead, Abode of The,” *IDB* 1:787.

down from immemorial.”⁷⁷ Tromp, in *Primitive Concepts of Death and Nether World in the Old Testament*, points that the Psalms contain numerous speculations about the afterlife: “The references to the hereafter in the Psalter are extraordinarily numerous and they seem to imply that the people’s conceptions of after-life were not so elementary and primitive as is often believed. Even if this range of ideas was not originally popular, it must have become so through the Psalter.”⁷⁸

Johnston, however, maintains that the concept of an underworld was not important to the biblical author. All of the biblical descriptions of Sheol—and they are not many—are in the first person, never in simple reportage or general description, and they speak of a dark and dreary place. According to Johnston, the biblical author was not particularly interested in the fate of the dead.⁷⁹ In this paper we will examine the faith of the dead in Sheol. We have to remember that there was a widespread belief in Antiquity that the dead had power in the world of the living; sacrifices were offered to appease them so that they would not abuse this power. Therefore, we will look into the Biblical verses which speak about the condition of the dead and see if indeed they had any powers. In addition, we will notice if there is any connection between the dead and the living, and if the dead know about the living. This study will show that most of the verses which describe Sheol are found in the Wisdom Literature whose authors had a different view as to the faith and power of the dead.

2. The Dead in the Underworld

Reading the Hebrew Bible shows that in the biblical view, the dead are in a condition of utter silence in Sheol and cannot praise the

77. W. O. E. Oesterley, *Immortality and the Unseen World* (New York, 1921), p. 2.

78. Nicholas J. Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament* (Rome, 1969), p. 211.

⁷⁹. Philip S. Johnston, *Shades of Sheol* (Illinois, 2002), p. 85.

Lord. An echo of this can be found in “If the Lord had not been my help, my soul would soon have dwelt in the land of silence” (Ps. 94:17). The psalmist begins with a counterfactual statement about the past. Here *škn* ‘dwell’ means die. *Dumah* ‘[land of] silence’ is also found in Psalms 115:17. Elsewhere in the Bible we find the roots *d.w.m.*, *d.m.m.*, and *d.m.y.*⁸⁰ Sometimes the meaning is silence (Ps. 22:3, 83:2, 131:2, 39:3, 62:2; Job 4:17 and 30:27); sometimes, death (Isa. 15:1; Jer. 47:5–6).

As the parallelism shows—“The dead cannot praise the Lord, nor any who go down into silence” (Ps. 115:17), those who go down into [the land of] silence meaning the dead, who lie mute and motionless in the underworld,⁸¹ where they cannot praise the Lord. Here the psalmist seems to have used *dumah* intentionally to express the contrast between silence and songs of praise. The Egyptians, too, referred to the underworld as the “land of silence.” The Talmud refers to the angel who guards the dead by the name *Dumah*. The

⁸⁰. On the semantic shifts of the root *d.m.m.*, which is close to *d.m.y.* and *d.w.m.*, see Josua Blau, “Über Homonyme und Angeblich Homonyme Wurzeln,” *VT* 6 (1956): 242–243.

⁸¹. The word *dumah* appears in the Bible with three different meanings. (1) Referring to persons, it has an ethnic meaning in Gen. 25:14 and 1 Chron. 1:30. *Dumah* is also one of the sons of Ishmael. (2) As a place, *Dumah* is a city in or epithet for Edom (Isa. 21:11), a town in the hill country of Judah (Josh. 15:32), and a place settled by Caleb’s descendants by his concubine Maacah (1 Chron. 2:49). (3) In Ps. 94:17 and 115:17, *Dumah* is an epithet for Sheol. Dahood, by contrast, thinks it means “fortress” or “citadel.” He notes the Akkadian and Ugaritic *dmt* ‘tower, fortress’ (cf. the Mari place name *dumtan*). Dahood cites Ezek. 37:32 and Ps. 115:17 to buttress his argument. Tromp, too, takes *dumah* to mean “fortress,” noting the Akkadian *damtu*. But this is implausible, because none of the many connotations of the Akkadian word has anything to do with death. See: Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms II* (51–100) (AB 17; Garden City, New York, 1968), pp. 349–350; idem, “Accadian-Ugaritic *dmt* in Ezekiel 27, 32,” *Bibl* 45 (1964): 83–84; F. L. Moriarty, “The Lament over Tyre (Ez. 27),” *Greg* 46 (1965), p. 87; Tromp, *Primitive Conceptions*, p. 76.

soul of one who passes away before his allotted time wanders about until his years are complete, at which time he is finally consigned to Dumah.⁸²

The concept that the dead do not praise the Lord nor extol his name recurs a number of times in the Bible. For example, “For in death there is no remembrance of thee; in Sheol who can give thee praise?” (Ps. 6:6 [5]). Here the worshiper urges the Lord to deliver him so that he may continue to render glory to His name, while expressing his fear of death, after which he will no longer be able to praise the Lord. The notion that the dead do not praise the Lord bothered later commentators, because it contradicts the belief in the survival of the soul. They suggested that the verses refer to praises spoken in the Temple. The dead are no longer part of the congregation of the Lord’s worshipers on earth, but it may be that their souls utter different devotions than those spoken in the world of the living.

Again, “What profit is there in my blood [i.e., death], from my descent into the Pit? Can dust praise You? Can it declare Your faithfulness?” (Ps. 30:10 [9]). The worshiper underscores that there can be no benefit from his death. After death he will no longer be able to thank the Lord, whereas if he lives he will be able to continue to extol His wonders. This may allude to the idea that the deity requires the worship of human beings.

Isaiah 38:9–20 is a lament in which Hezekiah pours out his grief before the Lord and expresses hope that he may recover from his illness⁸³. Verses 10–11 juxtapose the land of the living with Sheol. Hezekiah laments that if he dies he will no longer be able to see the Lord, because He is visible only in the land of the living. The expression “to see [the face of] the Lord” appears in ritual contexts in

⁸². B Ḥagigah 5a; B Berakhot 18b.

⁸³ Both the RSV and NJPS of v.9 understand it to be what he said “when he recovered from the illness he had suffered”(JPS) *mikhtav be-haloto* means the text he wrote when he was sick (*be-haloto*= *be-holyato*); and *vayhi me-holyo* is a parenthetical retrospective.

prayers in the Temple (Ps. 17:15, 27:4 and 13). That is, after death he will be no longer able to pray to the Lord because there is no connection to the deity in Sheol.

Not only will he no longer see the Lord; he will never again look at human beings who reside in this world, referred to as *yošvevei ḥadel*. *Ḥadel* is a metathesis of *ḥaled*, which means life in this word (Job 11:17; Ps. 17:14). The noun *ḥeled* ‘lifetime, world’ has an Arabic cognate *ḥuld* ‘perpetual duration’. According to Ibn Ezra, *ḥedel* and *ḥeled* both mean “life.” Another interpretation is that of *ḥadel* derives from *ḥdl* ‘cease’, and means rather Sheol, the place of the dead, because their lives have ceased.⁸⁴ If so, the verse means that Hezekiah will no longer look at human beings because he is among the inhabitants of *ḥadel* = Sheol. Perhaps, in fact, the metathesis of *ḥaled* into *ḥadel* is not a corruption of the text but an intentional double-meaning. Another possibility is that Hezekiah is referring to his fear that he may cease to exist and used *ḥadel* to refer to the inhabitants of the world precisely because they are mortals who will soon cease to live in it.

Verses 17–18 are a transition to the hopeful section of the psalm, namely, that the Lord will save him because “Sheol cannot thank You, death cannot praise You; those who go down to the Pit cannot hope for Your faithfulness” (Isa. 38:18). The denizens of Sheol cannot thank the Lord because His actions on earth do not touch them. The dead do not praise the Lord. Here death is parallel to Sheol; perhaps *mawet* is to be understood as the place of the dead, like Sheol. Other possibilities are that it means the Angel of Death or

⁸⁴ The word is not found in the Septuagint. According to *BDB*, 293, *ḥadel* means “cessation.” Dahood says that it is “an authentic poetic name” for the underworld, parallel to Sheol. See Dahood, “ חַדֵּל ‘Cessation in Isaiah 38,11,’” *Bibl* 52 (1971): 216. Calderone derives the noun from a different root, meaning “be wealthy or prosperous,” and translates the word as “fruitful land.” See Philip J. Calderone, “HDL-II in Poetic Texts,” *CBQ* 23 (1961): 451–460.

is an abstract noun with a collective sense (“the dead”). The dead, who have gone down to the Pit, cannot hope that the Lord will keep His promise and save them because these promises are given to the living and not to the dead, who have nothing to do with the land of the living. According to Ibn Ezra on this verse, “many are surprised to find here the prophet declaring such things, as if denying the truth of the resurrection of the dead; but the body has no power, no knowledge, when the soul has left it; and why should we be surprised at it? Man has sometimes no understanding when the soul is in the body, much less after his death.”⁸⁵

In Psalm 88 we again encounter the notion that only the living can praise the Lord. This psalm is the entreaty of a person in distress and close to death and deals with the issue of death in detail. Many synonyms are employed to describe the condition and abode of the dead. These include “Sheol,” “the Pit,” “forsaken” (or “released”), “the dead,” “the slain,” “the grave,” “the darkest places,” “the depths,” “breakers,” “the shades,” “the place of perdition (*avaddon*),” “the darkness,” “the land of oblivion,” “fury,” and “terrors.”

In vv. 11–13 the psalmist asks: “Do You work wonders for the dead? Do the shades rise to praise You? Selah. Is Your faithful care recounted in the grave, Your constancy in the place of perdition? Are Your wonders made known in the darkness, Your beneficent deeds in the land of oblivion?” The first in this string of rhetorical questions assumes that the Lord does not work wonders for the dead, who need nothing; hence, He must perform miracles and deliver a person while he is still alive. For the psalmist here, death is final and there is no future resurrection. The parallelism of the dead and the shades is found elsewhere as well (Isa. 26:14, 19).

Similarly, v. 12 clearly posits an answer in the negative: none recite the mercies of the Lord from the grave or underworld. Human beings

⁸⁵ M.Friedländer, *The Commentary of Ibn Ezra on Isaiah* (New York: 1966),p.168 [first edition London,1873].

are duty-bound to “proclaim Your steadfast love at daybreak, Your faithfulness each night” (Ps. 92:3). Indeed they cannot do so from the underworld.

When the sequence is extended to a third question, David Kimhi comments that the poet “repeated it a third time just as those who cry and wail repeat what they say several times.” He adds that “the land of oblivion” means “the grave, the place of oblivion where the dead are forgotten; as it says, ‘The dead do not praise the Lord, nor do any that go down into silence’ (Ps. 115:17). *Nešiyah* ‘oblivion, forgetfulness’ is attested, for example, in “God has made me forget (*naššani*) all my hardship” (Gen. 41:51), and corresponds to v. 6, “those whom You remember no more.” It is interesting that in Greek mythology those who drink of the River Lethe in Hades forget their past lives.⁸⁶

From these passages we can see that the dead do not praise the Lord in Sheol, evidently because it is a void. The idea that the dead cannot praise the Lord is also found in post-biblical literature, for example, Ben Sira: “Who in the nether world can glorify the Most High in place of the living who offer their praise? No more can the dead give praise than those who ever lived; they glorify the Lord who are alive and well.”⁸⁷

3. Do the Dead Know the Living?

The story of Saul and the witch of Endor indicates that the dead are aware of the living and their circumstances, because Samuel tells Saul what will happen to him. In the ancient Near East, people offered sacrifices and libations to the dead to persuade the latter to help them. This may have been the situation among the ancient Israelites, too. But the book of Job, which dates from the fifth century BCE, suggests that there is no link between the dead and the

⁸⁶. Dahood, *Psalms II*, p. 306.

⁸⁷. Sir. 17:27–28.

living, or even between the dead and their own past, including their family: “You overpower him forever and he perishes; You alter his visage and dispatch him. His sons attain honor and he does not know it; they are humbled and he is not aware of it” (Job 14:20–21). Apparently this argument is advanced to counter the belief that death is not so bad for a person who has died and left behind him many offspring, because his children perpetuate his name. But, according to Job, the deceased does not know whether his children are rich or numerous. Just as a dead person does not know what is happening to his children, so the children do not feel the pain of their dead father, who must bear his suffering alone.

Job does believe, however, that the dead suffer pain and distress on their own account: “He feels only the pain of his flesh, And his spirit mourns in him” (v. 22). The Talmudic sages expounded this verse as follows: “The worm is as painful to the dead as a needle in the flesh of the living? ... They know their own pain, they do not know the pain of others.”⁸⁸ According to the Aramaic Targum, “his flesh indeed suffers from the worms and his soul mourns in the [heavenly] tribunal.” Or, according to another version, “his flesh indeed suffers until his grave is closed and his soul mourns for him in the cemetery for seven days.” This brings to mind: “R. Hisda said: A person’s soul mourns over him all of the seven days that follow his death.”⁸⁹ According to the Talmud, the corpse also hears and understands what goes on in the house of mourning, and continues to have some power until it has been buried or disintegrated.⁹⁰ This is the reason for the custom that one must not speak ill of the dead; for the same reason, mourning customs were followed so as not to arouse the anger of the dead spirit. The idea that a dead person can still feel pain after death

⁸⁸ . B Berakhot 18b.

⁸⁹ . B Shabbat 152a.

⁹⁰ . B Shabbat 152b.

is also found in post-biblical literature, in Judith 16:17: “And they”—meaning the wicked—“will wail forever alive to the pain.”⁹¹

Tur-Sinai understands the verse from Job to say precisely the opposite.⁹² He renders it as “Only with his flesh on him doth he feel pain, and while his soul with him doth he mourn.” To this we should compare “his soul in his life,” meaning “during his lifetime” (Ps. 49:19). Nahmanides, similarly, explains that “the pain and sorrow of approaching death is meant.” This reading does not suit the context, which refers to what happens to a person after death and not during life.

In v. 22, *nefeš* ‘soul’ is parallel to *bašar* ‘flesh’; this is also found in “both soul and body” (Isa. 10:18) and “my soul thirsts for You, my body yearns for You” (Ps. 63:2 [1]). In these verses the *nefeš* is not the *nešamah* ‘soul’, which survives after death, but the entire body. Because Job denies the resurrection of the dead—“man lies down never to rise” (14:12)—we may wonder how he can say that the dead feel? The answer is that the dead do have some degree of sensation, but not the kind that can be considered to be “life.”

As we have seen, Sheol is a void, a place of total disconnection between the living and the dead. The dead know nothing about the living. There is also no connection between the dead and the Lord, which is why they cannot praise Him. These images of the netherworld and of the powerlessness of the dead first emerged during Josiah’s reform in the seventh century, which is found in the book of Kings: “Josiah also did away with the ghosts and familiar spirits, the idols and the fetishes—all the detestable things that were to be seen in the land of Judah and Jerusalem” (2 Kings 23:24). Job, written in the fifth century, continues in this vein: the dead know

⁹¹. In addition to the verse from the book of Judith, Pope cites Isa. 66:24 and Job 18:13. But as Gordis noted, the verses “describe only the physical destruction of the sinners.” See: Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job* (New York, 1978), p. 152; Marvin H. Pope, *Job*, p. 111.

⁹². N.H. Tur-Sinai, *The Book of Job*, p.244.

nothing about the living. Hence it is not surprising that Job offers graphic descriptions of the netherworld as a dark and repulsive place.

According to Psalms, as we have seen, the dead in the netherworld cannot praise the Lord. Lang holds that Josiah's reform led to the decline in the importance of the netherworld and dead ancestors.⁹³

From Josiah's time onward, the focus was on this world and the reward that human beings merit. Consequently, it is in his lifetime, and not in the hereafter, that God gives Job double what he had had before, providing him with health, family, and wealth (Job 12:10).

4. Enjoy this Life

If the underworld is a void, human beings must enjoy this life: "Whatever it is in your power to do, do with all your might. For there is no action, no reasoning, no learning, no wisdom in Sheol, where you are going" (Eccles. 9:10). Qohelet counsels human beings to live an active and vigorous life because the property and wisdom that attend them in life do not exist in the netherworld. In vv. 7–10 he stresses the importance of enjoying life, which is all there is; whereas, in death there is only void and emptiness. He enumerates five aspects of this enjoyment: food, drink, clothing, bathing and anointing the body, and married life. Elsewhere he castigates the pursuit of pleasure (2:1–12) and encourages human beings to fill their lives with enduring value. But a reading of 1:14–15 and 3:1–11 suggests that he doubts whether human beings have the power to change anything, because all is preordained.

The idea that one must enjoy life and live it to the fullest can also be found in the Epic of Gilgamesh. The innkeeper whom Gilgamesh encounters as he searches for the secret of immortality attempts to deter him from continuing his quest:

Thou, Gilgamesh, let full be thy belly,

⁹³ Bernhard Lang, "Afterlife: Ancient Israel's Changing Vision of the World Beyond," *BibRev* 4 (1988): 19.

Make thou merry by day and by night.
Of each day make thou a feast of rejoicing,
Day and night dance thou and play!
Let thy garments be sparkling fresh,
Thy head be washed; bathe thou in water.
Pay heed to the little one that holds on to thy hand,
Let thy spouse delight in thy bosom!
For this is the task of [mankind]!⁹⁴

The same five elements of the good life noted in Ecclesiastes appear here, too, and in the same order.⁹⁵ The lesson for Gilgamesh is that human beings do not live forever and that the gods created human beings to be mortal. Hence they must enjoy life and extract the most from it because life is transitory.

The Egyptian “Song of the Harpist,” also calls on human beings to enjoy life until death arrives:

Follow thy desire, as long as thou shalt live.
Put myrrh upon thy head and clothing of the fine linen upon thee,
Being anointed with genuine marvels of the god’s property.
Set an increase to thy good things;
Let not thy heart flag.
Follow thy desire and thy good.

⁹⁴. “The Epic of Gilgamesh,” *ANET*, Tablet X, iii: 6–14, p.90.

⁹⁵. Seow mention only four elements (1) feasting, (2) fresh clothing, (3) washing one’s head, and (4) family. See C. L. Seow, *Ecclesiastes* (AB 18c; New York, 1997), p. 306.

Fulfill thy needs upon earth, after the command of thy heart,
Until there come for thee that day of mourning.⁹⁶

The inscription in a late Hellenistic-period tomb found in Jerusalem instructs the living to enjoy their life: “You who are living, enjoy!”⁹⁷

Since the underworld is a void and human beings must enjoy this life, not surprisingly we find in the Wisdom Literature rejection of the resurrection concept. In his reply to Eliphaz, Job bids him “remember that my life is a breath; my eye will never again see good. . . . As the cloud fades and vanishes, so he who goes down to Sheol does not come up. He returns no more to his house, nor does his place know him any more” (Job 7:7–10). A person who descends to the underworld will never return to his house. The verb here is *s.w.b*, the same found in the Lord’s curse that Adam will return to the ground. The denial of resurrection does seem to be clear in “so man lies down and does not rise [again]; they will not awaken until the heavens are no more, will not be aroused from their sleep” (Job 14:12).⁹⁸ Job believes in the eternity of the heavens; thus death is forever. Two verses later, Job asks a rhetorical question: “If a man dies, can he live again?” (v.14). Job knows the answer: the dead do not live again. If they could look forward to resurrection, there would be some hope for him. According to Robert Gordis, Job wants to accept the doctrine of resurrection, but ultimately realizes that he

⁹⁶. “A Song of the Harper,” trans. John A. Wilson, *ANET*, p. 467b. On this and other harper’s songs, see Miriam Lichtheim, “The Songs of the Harpers,” *JNES* 4 (1945): 178–212.

⁹⁷. P. Benoit, “L’Inscription grecque du tombeau de Jason,” *IEJ* 17 (1967): 112–113.

⁹⁸. The singular ³*iš* in the first half of the verse is a collective noun, whence the plurals in the second half. Orlinsky claims that “be aroused from their sleep” is a gloss on *yaqīšu* ‘awaken’ and that *yaqīšu* here is an Arabism. See Harry M. Orlinsky, “The Hebrew and Greek Texts of Job 14.12,” *JQR* 28 (1937–1938): 57–68.

cannot believe in it.⁹⁹ The doctrine of resurrection is also denied in Ecclesiastes (3:17–22). Ecclesiastes speaks of the injustice that prevails in the world and incidentally notes that there is no difference between human beings and animals; their destiny is identical, for all die in the end. According to Ecclesiastes, everything comes from the dust and returns to dust (cf. Gen. 3:19). As we mentioned before the authors of the Wisdom Literature belong to the social elite of their times, they enjoyed life and were not interested in any change. Thus, not surprisingly, we found out that they even rejected the notion of resurrection. More so in the Book of Job the focus was on this world and the reward that human beings merit. God is the God of the living and not the God of the dead. Therefore, some passages in the Bible certainly do personify Sheol as a lethal power, a demon. “Like Sheol, let us swallow them alive; whole, like those who go down into the Pit” (Prov. 1:12). What is more, “Sheol and Abaddon cannot be satisfied, nor can the eyes of man be satisfied” (Prov. 27:20).

5. Popular cult of the Dead

As we have seen, the Hebrew Bible says that the dead have no power and don't know the living. On the other hand, we read in the story of Saul and the witch of Endor that the dead are aware of the living and their circumstances. Thus, how can we explain this contradiction? Reading the Hebrew Bible shows that the Bible mentions various ways of making contact with the dead, such as *'ov*, *yidde'oni*, and “inquiring of the dead.” These techniques are employed to gain knowledge of the future and thus to know what should be done to avert undesirable consequences. Another method for learning about the future is to offer sacrifices to the dead, in the belief that the dead know what the living do not. The dead are offered food because of the belief that they can influence events in the world of the living. The dead will help the living if the latter provide for their needs, but will hurt them if they are neglected. A popular cult of the dead,

⁹⁹ . Robert Gordis, *The Book of Job*, p. 150.

employed mainly to gain foreknowledge of future events, seems to have existed in ancient Israel, alongside the official and established Yahwist tradition. The popular cult was family-centered; only the family offered food and drink to its own dead ancestors. By contrast, the official cult served the political and historical needs of the monarchy.

The Bible is clearly antagonistic toward inquiries of the dead or providing them with food and drink. The prohibition of magic and necromancy, in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, is motivated by the fact that these were among the abhorrent rituals of the Canaanites, whom the Israelites dispossessed. The Bible does not deny that it is possible to communicate with the dead; but it totally proscribes the practice. It mentions sacrifices to the dead (Ps. 16:4; 106:28; Lev. 19:26; 1 Sam. 14:32–35; Ezek. 33:25), but always rejects them. Providing the dead with food was not part of Israelite culture, and when it did penetrate, was rebuffed by official circles.

Another ritual that the Bible associates with the worship of the dead and will not tolerate is the cult of Molech. It too was considered to be a Canaanite abomination and linked to the cult of the dead and of the chthonian gods, which biblical texts warn against.¹⁰⁰ In Deuteronomy this cult is associated with divination, soothsaying, augury, sorcery, and the various forms of necromancy (18:10–11). Even kings took part in it—Ahaz (2 Kings 16:13) and his grandson Manasseh, who, in addition to consigning his own son to the fire, “practiced soothsaying and divination, and made an *’ov* and *yidde’onim*” (2 Kings 21:6).

¹⁰⁰ In Akkadian texts, Malik appears on a list of deities along with Nergal the god of the world of the dead. The *mlk* of Ugarit, too, is a chthonian deity, whose residence is at *’ttrt*, which is also the abode of the god Rpu, who parallels the biblical Rephaim (shades of the dead). See: George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment* (Sheffield, 1985), pp. 118-141; J. Day, *Molech A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge, 1989), pp. 46-52.

Clearly many people, kings and commoners alike, believed in the potency of the dead. Over successive generations this belief seems to have become more tenacious, making it necessary to devalue it; it may also have been viewed as a rival to prophecy. The reforms of Hezekiah and later of Josiah sought to eradicate pagan abominations from Israel and to centralize the cult in Jerusalem. They promulgated a ban on necromancy, which had to be eliminated because it was considered to be impious. Now, as we saw, the biblical texts began describing the dead as powerless and ignorant of events in the world of the living. These reforms aimed to extirpate pagan abominations and to guide the people toward strict adherence to the path of the Lord and His Torah. A direct consequence was the reinforcement of the priesthood and prophecy as the sole channels for communications with God.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, the cult of the dead seems to have held out for some time. Ezekiel voiced harsh criticism of the religious and ritual transgressions of those who remained in Judah, including the cult of Molech (16:20–21) and eating meat with its blood (33:25). Even in the Second Temple period we read of sacrifices to the dead, in Tobit's advice to his son Tobias: "Pour out your bread and wine in the tomb of the just, and give not to sinners" (Tob. 4:17). Similar

¹⁰¹. Bloch points out that the reform had underlying political and economic motives—to strengthen the priests and prophets as the sole source of contact with God. A ban on the competing channel of inquiring of the dead would guarantee the economic basis of the priests and prophets, who, among other things, would be sure to receive their tithes. Bloch adds that the reform was in the political interests of the regime, because inquiring of one's own dead ancestors, an activity that reinforced the tribal structure, was replaced by consultation with the national god, whose emissary was the king. See: Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead* (JSOTSup 123; England, 1992), p. 131; Smith and Bloch-Smith, "Death and Afterlife in Ugarit and Israel," p. 282; For similar view see: Rachel Hallote, *Death, Burial, and Afterlife in Biblical World: How the Israelites and Their Neighbors Treated the Dead* (Chicago, 2001), p.62; Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Deuteronomy and the Politics of Post-Mortem Existence," *VT* 45(1995):1.

advice is offered in the Book of Ben Sira: “Give graciously to all the living, and withhold not kindness from the dead.”(Sir 7:33). In the book of Ahiqar the sage says: “My son, pour out your wine on the graves of the righteous rather than drink it with evil men.”(Syr 2:10)

6. Conclusion

Many people, kings and commoners alike, believed in the powers of the dead. Even in the Second Temple period we read of sacrifices to the dead. On the other hand, in the Wisdom Literature Sheol is a void. The dead know nothing about the living, the dead have no power. There is no connection between the dead and the living. The dead are in a condition of utter silence in Sheol and cannot praise the Lord. By contrast we encounter the notion that only the living can praise the Lord. This negative description is a direct co of the ritual reforms introduced by Hezekiah and later of Josiah against the cult of the dead. They sought to eradicate pagan abominations from Israel and to consolidate the cult in Jerusalem. They promulgated a ban on necromancy, which had to be eliminated because it was considered to be sinful. All those negative descriptions of Sheol come from the Wisdom Literature, whose authors belonged to the social elite. They enjoyed life and were not interested in any changes. They rejected the idea of resurrection and believed that the focus should be on this world and the reward that human beings merit. We must enjoy life now, they insist, because it is transitory. Hence they viewed the underworld as the final station of life. Thus, not surprisingly we read in the Book of Ecclesiastes: “For he who is reckoned among the living has something to look forward to—even a live dog is better than a dead lion—since the living know they will die. But the dead know nothing; they have no more recompense, for even the memory of them has died. Their loves, their hates, their jealousies have long since perished; and they have no more share till the end of time in all that goes on under the sun.” (Eccles. 9:4-6).

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