

# THE FUTURE LIFE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

By the Rev. EDMUND F. SUTCLIFFE, S.J.

## II.

*Description of Sheol.* If the previous article has established sufficiently the truth of the general proposition that for the greater part of the history of Israel ideas about existence after death did not rise above those prevailing in the time of Moses and indeed of the Patriarchs, we may now pass on to consider texts which speak of Sheol and of its inhabitants. What is said of them is, as we shall see, negative. God had not made any positive revelation about the condition of the dead, and men were left to imagine their state in terms of what man loses by departing from this "land of the living."

Sheol, the name of the region where the dead were thought to dwell, is of doubtful etymology. It has been connected by some with the common word for "to ask" and so supposed to reflect the ancient belief in necromancy. Others have preferred a connection with a root meaning a "hole" or "hollow" in accordance with the idea that Sheol was a great subterranean dwelling-place. These, however, are mere guesses. The name is not, it is worth noting, that used by the Babylonians which was *Arâlu* or *Arallu*, itself also of uncertain etymology. Sheol is spoken of as a *bôr* or "pit," as in the words addressed to the King of Babylon, *Isaias* xiv, 15 :

Yet to Sheol shalt thou be brought down,  
To the remotest part of the pit.

Practically synonymous with this is *shachath* which also is used of Sheol, as in *Psalm* xxix (xxx), 10 :

What profit is there in my blood,  
In my going down to the pit ?

There is another word of the same form but different origin which means "corruption" and, as a result, it is not always easy to be certain which of the two words is intended.

Yet another name for Sheol is *Abaddon*, which means "destruction." Thus in *Job* xxvi, 6 we read :

Naked is Sheol before Thee,  
And there is no covering for *Abaddon*.

Just as *Abaddon* ("destruction") is used in a local sense for "the place of destruction", so, as the dead are deprived of the light of day, the word "darkness" is used to designate their abodes as being "the place of darkness." Thus in *Job* xvii, 13 :

If I await Sheol as my dwelling,  
If in the darkness I spread my couch. . . .

The parallelism of the two clauses here shows that by "darkness" is signified the same place as by Sheol. Yet another synonym for Sheol is

“silence,” understood as “the place of silence.” The dead lose their bodies and therefore also their faculty of speech. As in the case of “darkness” the conception is purely negative and reflects only the loss of something enjoyed in this world by the living. To express divine protection in imminent danger of death the Psalmist uses the words, xciii (xciv) 17 :

Were not Yahweh my help,  
In a little my soul had dwelt in silence.

So much for the names or designations of Sheol. Its situation was, naturally enough, pictured as under the solid earth on which we move. To Sheol the dead are said “to go down,” Isai. xxxviii, 18, and at the evocation of Samuel, the prophet was said “to come up out of the earth,” I Sam. (Kings) xxviii, 13. In the following words of Ps. lxxxv (lxxxvi) 13 David gives thanks to God for saving him from death :

Thy loving kindness is great in my regard,  
And Thou hast saved my soul from Sheol beneath.

On account of this position under the earth Sheol is spoken of as lying lower than anything else man can think of just as heaven is higher. Thus, to express the sublimity and the profundity of God’s wisdom utterly beyond the grasp of the human mind Zophar says in Job xi, 8 :

It is higher than heaven ; what canst thou do ?  
It is deeper than Sheol ; what canst thou know ?

As the Babylonians, so the Hebrews thought of the abode of the dead as deep in the earth. In cuneiform inscriptions the foundations of royal buildings are sometimes spoken of hyperbolically as resting on the bosom of the underworld.<sup>1</sup> The gates, Isai. xxxviii, 10, and bars, Jonas ii, 7 (probably), of Sheol are licences of poetic diction and do not represent serious beliefs.

As for the dwelling-place of the dead, so also for the departed themselves the Hebrews had a special name corresponding to the Latin *manes*. This was Rephaim, which, like Sheol, is of unknown etymology and root meaning, so that it does not enable us to say under what aspect it designated the dead. It occurs in Isai. xiv, 9 and elsewhere. The Wise Man gives this warning of the evil consequences of wickedness, Prov. xxi, 16 :

A man who strayeth from the path of prudence  
Shall come to a halt in the company of the Rephaim.

This name was not the exclusive property of the Hebrews as it occurs in two Phœnician inscriptions. These are the inscriptions of Tabnith and of Eshmunazar, both Kings of Sidon and both dating from about 300 B.C. The name Rephaim is here used of the shades of those who have come to rest in the underworld and appears to exclude the shades of those who had the misfortune not to obtain the burial of their bodies, a misfortune greatly dreaded in the ancient Near East. The name Rephaim

<sup>1</sup> Alfred Jeremias, *Hölle und Paradies bei den Babyloniern* (1903<sup>2</sup>) 18 (=Der alte Orient I, 3).

may not have had exactly the same connotation among the Phœnicians and among the Hebrews, as it often happens that the same word differs somewhat in meaning among kindred peoples.<sup>1</sup>

To Sheol all men must come, for, Ps. lxxxviii (lxxxix) 49 :

Who is the man who can live and not see death,

Who can rescue his soul from the power of Sheol ?

And from Sheol there is no possibility of return, Job vii, 9 :

A cloud is consumed and passeth away ;

So he who goeth down to Sheol shall not come up.

The Hebrews loved strong expressions, and tended to paint everything, so to say, in pure black and pure white. Thus David in thanking God for preservation from great peril speaks as if God had actually brought him back from within Sheol, Ps. xxix (xxx), 4 :

Yahweh, Thou hast brought my soul up from Sheol ;

Thou hast given me life that I should not go down to the pit.

This and similar texts show the true meaning of Anna's words, I Sam. ii, 6 :

Yahweh bringeth to death and restoreth life ;

He bringeth down to Sheol and bringeth up therefrom.

Anna does not mean to say that God actually restores life to the dead, though she would not have denied that it was within His power to do so. What she had in mind to say was that God is the supreme lord of life and death, cuts life short, if He sees fit so to do, and restores health and safety to those in imminent danger of death.

Sheol is a mysterious realm hardly known to man and completely inaccessible, but nothing is beyond the knowledge of God.

Sheol and Abaddon lie before Yahweh ;

How much more the hearts of the sons of man (Prov. xv, 11).

Not only the knowledge of God but also His presence extends to Sheol. In a psalm which may well be of late composition, the Psalmist thus expresses his faith in the omnipresence of God, Ps. cxxxviii (cxxxix) 8 :

If I ascend into heaven, Thou art there ;

And if I spread my couch in Sheol, there art Thou.

And if the presence of God extends to Sheol, more manifestly still does His power. The omnipotence of God is taught in striking language in the writing of the eighth century prophet Amos ix, 2 :

Though they should dig into Sheol, thence would My hand seize them ;

Though they should mount to the heavens, thence would I bring them down.

<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Rephaim was also the name of an ancient people of great stature, Deut. ii, 10f, 20f; iii, 11. It appears improbable that there was any direct connection between the two names. In the Vulgate and consequently in the Douay Version allusions to the shades of the dead are sometimes obscured by a confusion with the name of these one-time inhabitants of Palestine and Transjordan. This is the explanation of the unexpected mention of giants in the address to the King of Babylon as given in the Douay Version of Isai. xiv, 9: "Hell below was in an uproar to meet thee; it stirred up the giants for thee." The same confusion occurs in Isai. xxvi, 14, 19 and elsewhere. In one passage, Ps. lxxxvii (lxxxviii), 11 the Vulgate followed by the Douay Version supposes the reading *rophe'im* with the meaning "healers" or "physicians" instead of Rephaim. Hence the Douay rendering, "Shall physicians raise to life and give praise to thee?"

In Sheol all are equal. There are no social distinctions. In the words of Job iii, 17-19 :

There the wicked cease from troubling,  
 And there the weary are at rest.  
 Together captives are at ease,  
 And hear not the voice of the task-master.  
 There little and great are alike  
 And the slave is free from his master.

At first sight there is a discrepancy between this view and that implied in the famous description of the descent of the King of Babylon to Sheol, Isai. ix, 9ff. There we read how all the great ones of the earth were aroused at his coming and all the kings of the nations rose from their thrones to taunt him. But we must not forget the licence of the poet and that his purpose was not to give any teaching about conditions in Sheol but to paint in striking colours a picture of the humiliation of the erstwhile ruler of the world. From such flights of the imagination nothing can be learnt of men's serious beliefs.

The dominating thought about Sheol is the deprivation, which it necessarily entails, of all the benefits and privileges enjoyed during life. King Ezechias expressed his sense of the loss death would mean to him as follows, Isai. xxxviii, 11 :

I thought, I shall not see Yahweh  
 In the land of the living ;  
 I shall not look on man again  
 With those who dwell in the world.

The land of the living is this world in which men dwell before death. And Ezechias speaks both of the temporal loss involved in the deprivation of the social pleasure of intercourse with his fellow-men and of the spiritual loss of the privilege of taking part in the worship of God in the Temple. Note the strong and vivid expression " seeing Yahweh " used of His worship in the Temple. In prosaic language, foreign to the Hebrew genius, it meant no more than seeing the place where God had given outward manifestation of His presence.

*Passages which appear to deny all Activity to the Dead.* This negative character of Hebrew conceptions about the state of the dead is the clue to various texts which on the surface appear to deny all activity, even all knowledge, to the dead, to assert that they are incapable of praising God, even that they cease to be objects of God's care. Thus Ezechias in his canticle, Isai. xxxviii, 18-20, says :

Sheol does not give Thee thanks nor Death praise Thee ;  
 They that go down to the pit do not look for Thy loving kindness.  
 He that lives, he that lives, he doth give Thee thanks, as I this day ;  
 A father to his sons tells of Thy fidelity.  
 Yahweh will save me, and with my music we will make music  
 All the days of our lives in the dwelling of Yahweh.

Ezechias did not mean to deny that the dead can praise God in any way. Of that he had no knowledge. He had in mind the public worship of God in the Temple with its accompaniment of sacrifice and songs of praise. Such worship is possible only to the living as it is necessarily bound up with bodily activity. That this is the meaning intended is shown by the promise of Ezechias to use the new span of life allotted to him in giving due thanks "in the dwelling of Yahweh." The meaning was well expressed by a Lapide who wrote as follows on a similar passage in Baruch ii, 17f: "The Old Testament by the praise of God understands external and audible praise, which edifies others and exhorts them to the same. Such is the praise of penitents, of those begging and imploring the mercy of God. . . . Especially does it understand public and solemn praise such as was given in the Temple by the united chant of priests and Levites."

In the same way in saying "They that go down to the pit do not look for Thy loving kindness" (Septuagint) or "fidelity" (Hebrew), Ezechias was thinking of the loving kindness of God as manifested to the living. It was to them that God's promises had been made; God had made no promises to the dead. And it was the living in constant peril who stood in need of God's protecting hand and fatherly care. It is with the same relative truth that a Psalmist speaks of "the slain that lie in the grave"

Whom Thou dost not remember more,

For they are cut off from Thy hand. Ps. lxxxvii (lxxxviii) 6.

We do not know definitely the date at which this psalm was written, but good authorities date it at the time of the exile, about the same time, therefore as the date assigned with probability to Psalm cxxxviii (cxxxix), verse 8 of which has been already quoted: "If I spread my couch in Sheol, there art Thou." If the date assigned to these psalms is correct, there is not time for marked development of doctrine. But in spite of the superficial discrepancy in doctrine, we can see that there is no contradiction between the two texts if we remember the Hebrew characteristic of stating relative truths in an absolute form and the negative content of what is said about the state of the departed, that is, that what is denied of them refers to the benefits and privileges enjoyed by the living and obviously lost at death. The Psalmist, therefore, does not assert in an absolute sense that the dead are removed from the power or the providence of God, but that they do not benefit by them in the same visible and tangible way as those living in the only world of which he has positive knowledge, namely the land of the living.

Finally in this connection I would quote the strongly worded text of Ecclesiastes ix, 10: "All that thy hand findeth to do with thy strength, that do, for there is no work or thought or knowledge or wisdom in Sheol whither thou goest." On the evidence of these words it has been asserted that life in Sheol was conceived as "utter emptiness" and as

“the utter blankness of death without sensation.” Do the words justify this interpretation? Certainly such a conception was not the popular one. That is shown by the practice of necromancy, which supposes knowledge in the dead superior to that of the living men who enquire of the dead. It might, however, be plausibly suggested that the author did not share the erroneous popular belief in necromancy, but, on the contrary, believed it to be absurd for the reason that the dead were utterly unable to help living men on account of their incapacity for any activity or any knowledge. However we should be put on our guard against such an interpretation by our Lord’s words, “The night cometh when no man can work,” John ix, 4. No one will imagine our Lord to have taught that the existence of the dead is torpid and completely inactive. Moreover, many Catholic writers date Ecclesiastes in the third or even in the second century B.C.<sup>1</sup>, and in the second century the prophet Jeremias is described as “One who loveth the brethren, who prayeth much for the people and for the holy city,” II Macc. xv, 14. Further, the context itself shows that the writer has in mind only the contrast to the activities of this life, for, as he says in verse 6, the dead “no longer have part for ever in anything that is done under the sun.” To quote W. T. Bullock, the author of the commentary on the book in the Speaker’s Bible, “It is evident that (the author) here confines his observation strictly to the phenomena of this life, and describes what he sees, not what he believes; there is no reference here to the fact of the mode of the existence of the soul in another world.”

*Conclusion.* As Pope Pius XII has reminded us in his recent Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu* the ways of thought and modes of speech of the ancient Israelites were very different from our own. If we try to interpret the books of the Bible, which are ancient and eastern by the same standards that we bring to the reading of our own literature, our efforts are predoomed to failure. Among the unfamiliar modes of speech important for a right understanding of our present subject are the absolute form in which relative truths are announced, the absence of qualifying clauses and phrases, the concentration on one aspect of a subject to the exclusion of all others, as if, indeed, there was only one possible aspect to be considered. If these peculiarities of thought and style are borne in mind, many difficulties of interpretation disappear. In addition due consideration must be given to the possibility of development of doctrine in the imperfect revelation of the Old Testament. As regards the future life, however, as far as the existing literature allows a judgement, the development appears to have come late and almost suddenly. In the previous centuries there was not so much a development of doctrine as a preparation of mind for such development. And this preparation of mind seems to

<sup>1</sup> Condamin and Zapletal assign the book to about 200 B.C., Peters to c. 145-135, Podechard to 240-190, Goettsberger to 300-150, Vaccari to the turn of the second century; H. Höpfl, O.S.B., *Introd. Comp.* II (1935<sup>4</sup>) 272f.

have lain in the growing appreciation of the fact that the justice of God does not appear to be fully worked out in this life and that consequently the moral balance must be adjusted after death and also in a growing conviction among the holy men of Israel that the loving union established between God and His faithful servants in this life cannot come to an abrupt end at death but must reach its consummation in a future mode of existence. Such considerations led on to belief in judgement after death, in the efficacy of prayer and sacrifice for the departed, in future rewards and punishments, and even in the resurrection of the body. The evidence of this developed belief we find in some of the latest books of the Old Testament, as in *Wisdom* and *II Maccabees*, and in more or less contemporaneous apocryphal books, that is *The Book of Enoch, or I Enoch, The Book of Jubilees, The Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs, The Psalms of Solomon, and The Fourth Book of Maccabees*. Together these form a bridge between the greater part of the Old Testament on the one hand and the New Testament on the other and show the background of belief prevalent among the Jewish people when Christ our Lord came.<sup>1</sup>

## ENGLISH CATHOLIC NEW TESTAMENTS SINCE CHALLONER

By the Rev. SEBASTIAN BULLOUGH, O.P.

These notes represent a talk given at a Scripture Day, held on 12th January, 1947, at St. Dominic's Priory, N.W.5.

The intention was to provide a counterpart to Fr. Fuller's paper on Bishop Challoner and the Douay Bible, read at the previous Scripture Day held at Ealing in September, and published in *SCRIPTURE*, January 1944.<sup>7</sup>

The annexed scheme was drawn out on the blackboard, and the talk (as these notes are also) was no more than an explanation of the scheme.

In course of the meeting, especially in answer to questions, many examples were given from the various versions, which would take up too much space to quote here. Many actual texts were available for inspection.

It should be observed at the outset that the scheme cannot claim to be (i) entirely complete, since in such a multitude of texts, revisions, re-editions and reprints, a few may well have escaped the notice of the lecturer and the writers from whom he drew his information, or (ii) infallible, especially in the matter of the derivation of one text from another, since in hardly any of the editions is it clearly stated what the basic text is, and many are conflation of various texts with almost random alterations, so that they have been placed under what appears to be the principal source.

In the scheme the phrase "for Dr. Troy, for Dr. Gibson," etc., indicates that the edition was undertaken for, on behalf of, and with the authority of, that bishop. A plain name indicates the translator, revisor or editor himself.

THE first thing that strikes anyone who looks at this scheme is the enormous amount of work done by Catholics in editing the Bible, especially in the two hundred years since Bp. Challoner's time. In all there are at least twenty-three different English texts of the New Testament since the original Rheims text of 1582, and of these no less than fifteen are ultimately dependent on Rheims. But what is

<sup>1</sup> The whole matter is treated more fully in the writer's book *The Old Testament and the Future Life* (Burns Oates) 1946.