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LIFE AFTER DEATH IN THE PSALMS

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VARIOUS NAMES are given to the abode of the dead in the Psalter. The most common is She'ol, which occurs 16 times. Its etymology is disputed. It may come from a root meaning 'to ask', in which case it could mean either a place of enquiry (and could then be connected with necromancy) or an insatiable monster continually demanding to be fed (cf. Ps. cxii. 7, 'So shall their bones be strewn at the mouth of Sheol'). Or it may come from a root meaning 'the hollow place'.

Second, two of the five occurrences of shachath refer to the after-life (Ps. xxx. 9, ciii. 4). This word comes from a root meaning 'to sink down' and so means a depression or sunken place.

Third, bor, five of whose seven occurrences refer to the after-life (Ps. xxviii. 1, xxx. 3, lxxxviii. 4, 6, cxlii. 7), means a dungeon, well, cistern or pit. It is often used in parallel to Sheol (eg. Ps. xxx. 3, lxxxviii. 4).

Fourth, 'abaddon (Ps. lxxviii. 11) comes from a root meaning 'to destroy'. Fifth, repha'im (Ps. lxxxviii. 10) is derived from a root meaning 'to sink down', 'to lose energy', 'to become weak'.

Other descriptive phrases used include 'the land of forgetfulness' (Ps. lxxviii. 12) and 'the lower parts of the earth' (Ps. lxxiii. 6). The general impression gained from these words is that the abode of the departed is a hollow location of some kind (exact whereabouts unknown, but the general direction is 'down under'), the inhabitants of which are more or less lifeless with the possibility of destruction.
To the psalmist death is inevitable, since no man can ransom himself or give God the price of his life so that he should continue to live on for ever (Ps. xlix. 14). Therefore, it is something to be postponed as in Psalms xlvii. 12; it is a distinct advantage to possess the "life in the midst of the days" (Ps. iv. 23, lxxxix. 40). Life to the psalmist was this life.

The state of those in Sheol is best described as something between a twilight and a dreamland and continual doubt of this fact, because it is not given to us to know the work of God. As in life, so in the other: a kind of subsistence that was neither extinction nor fullness. "A shadowy place, a land of gloom, a place of darkness" (Ps. xvi. 10). Or it was compared to the "shadowy region" of Tartarus (Rom. vi. 16). The withdrawal of God's spirit leaves the person feeble but still existing. The vitality of the person is considerably diminished. i.e. a kind of immortality. To be forgotten is the greatest loss that can happen to a person. To remember is often in parallel with action of some kind. To remember is often linked with action of some kind. The spirit is the motive power of the soul, it is the strength that gives life to the person.

The withdrawal of spirit emanating from it and in its turn reacting upon it. But that which was predicted comes to pass in the life of the psalmist. In Psalms xlvii. 10, xlvii. 11. The significance of this is more evident when it is realized that the withdrawal of God's spirit leaves the person feeble but still existing. The vitality of the person is considerably diminished. For, as Pedersen says, "The spirit is the motive power of the soul, it is the strength emanating from it and in its turn reacting upon it." (Israel, I, p. 194.) But we are not to think of the continuation of existence in Sheol as being just part of the man; on the contrary it was the whole of the man. Samuel returned wearing a robe (I Sa. xxviii. 14), and even Enoch and Elijah, as far as we know, remained as they were. Sheol is also a place of darkness (Ps. lxxxix. 12), since light, which is the opposite of darkness, is synonymous with life and salvation (Ps. lxxix. 10, xcvii. 1). It is also a place of forgetfulness (Ps. lxxxix. 14, 12, vi. 5, xlvii. 11). The significance of this is more evident when it is realized that the act of remembering always implies a greater deal than mere recollection of a mere mental image. Memory is often in parallel with name, i.e. personality (Ps. lxxxix. 17, cix. 12). To remember is in one sense to sustain him, to keep him alive. In the remembrance of a man lies a kind of immortality. To be forgotten is the greatest loss that a man can suffer (Je. xx. 19; Ps. xxxiv. 16, lxxxvii. 5, cix. 15). Again, remembrance is often linked with action of some kind. To remember is to do something about the person. Remembrance is often in parallel with visit, for example (Ps. viii. 4, cxi. 47; cf. Dr. M. Sykes in ET. Jan. 1960). Hence, to go down to Sheol was to be forgotten by God, in a land with no memory of the person. To summarize by saying that Sheol was a place to be feared.

Death must be postponed as long as possible, for death terminates communion with God — the thing most of all to be dreaded. This brings us to the question: what are we to make of the term "immortality" in the Old Testament? How can its limited view of death be explained?

i. The Psalms must be interpreted in terms of their own literary category. This is the hermeneutical principle which must be applied to all Scripture. Now the Psalms are a mixture of didactic and lyric poetry. They contain a certain subjective element comparable to the speeches in Job. For the psalmist is struggling with all the perplexities of this life, and this is the expression of his innermost self. Whom can I trust? Who is my portion for ever? (Ps. lxxiii. 25f.). On this C. S. Lewis writes, "Happiness or misery beyond death, simply in themselves, are not even religious subjects at all. They seem to have no more to do with religion than looking after one's health or saving money for one's old age. God is not in the centre. He is still important only for the sake of something else. Indeed such a belief can exist without a belief in God at all. It is surely, therefore, very possible that when God began to reveal Himself to man His first revelation was not to the highest thing in heaven but to the deepest thing in the human heart — the desire for immortality. . . . my portion for ever" (Ps. lxxiii. 25f.).

By limiting His revelation God was teaching the psalmists the great truth that He and nothing else was their sufficient portion; He alone was their exceeding great reward. It is a mark of spiritual maturity when a man can say from his heart, 'Whom can I trust? Who is my portion for ever?'

iv. "God witheld a fuller revelation in order that they might appreciate Him for His own sake rather than as a dispenser of blessing in a life to come" (Reflections on the Psalms, pp. 39f.).

v. "God wished to prevent His people from dabbling in necromancy. Necromancy was always a danger for a people who had spent long years in Egypt, a land with much emphasis on life after death, and was now settled in Canaan, a land whose inhabitants were well known for their raw text
diviners, soothsayers, mediums and necromancers (Dt. xviii. 9-14). The great Saul had one tragic lapse when he resorted to the witch of Endor in despair (1 Sa. xxviii). It may have been, then, that God purposely restrained Himself to prevent unhealthy interest in and dealings with the world of the spirit.

vi. The psalmists' view of Sheol allows for the possibility of resurrection. Death does not mean extinction and annihilation. There is still a kind of life in Sheol and this very life admits the possibility of resurrection and reawakening. In fact it corresponds well with the New Testament's notion of 'sleep'. It carries the potential of full consciousness. Moreover, it carries the possibility of the raising of the whole man — a complete redemption. Can we expect much more than that which we have in the Psalms until someone actually breaks the bonds of death? The psalmists at least knew that man's true destiny was life and that God was the author of all life. God would see to it that communion with Him, which was life par excellence, would not be eternally discontinued. Now Christ has risen, the first-fruits of them that slept, to deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage (Heb. ii. 15).