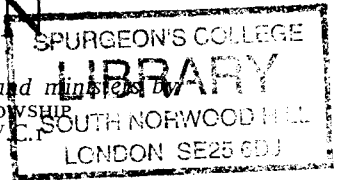


# The Theological Students' Fellowship

## BULLETIN

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Editors:

The Rev. I. Howard Marshall, M.A., B.D., Didsbury College, Bristol  
Hywel R. Jones, B.A., Westminster College, Cambridge

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### CONTENTS

Life after Death in the Psalms	The Rev. J. A. Balchin, M.A., B.D.	1
The Last Supper in Paul and John	The Rev. R. P. Martin, M.A.	4
The Old Testament Doctrine of Revival	The Rev. D. O. Swann, B.A., B.D.	9
The Ground Plan of Evangelism	The Rev. A. Skevington Wood, B.A., Ph.D., F.R.Hist.S.	11
Book Reviews		13

#### LIFE AFTER DEATH IN THE PSALMS

By the Rev. JOHN A. BALCHIN, M.A., B.D.  
*Lecturer in the Bible Training Institute, Glasgow*

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. cxli. 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 *shacath* 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, cxliii. 7), means a dungeon, well, cistern or pit. It is often used in parallel to Sheol (*e.g.* Ps. xxx. 3, lxxxviii. 4).

Fourth, *'abaddon* (Ps. lxxxviii. 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. lxxxviii. 12) and 'the lower parts of the earth' (Ps. lxiii. 9). 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. 7; cf. lxxxix. 48). Therefore, it is something to be postponed as long as possible (Ps. xxxiv. 12); it is a disaster when a man is destroyed 'in the midst of the days' (Ps. lv. 23, lxxxix. 46). Life to the psalmist was *this* life.

The state of those in Sheol is best described as something between annihilation on the one hand and continuance of this life as we know it on the other: a kind of subsistence that was neither extinction nor fullness. Though originally flesh and spirit composed 'a living soul' (Gn. ii. 7), the withdrawal of spirit, the animating principle in man, did not mean cessation of life altogether. Hence, 'the shades' is a place of weakness. 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-II, p. 104). But we are not to think of the continuation of existence in Sheol as being just of part of the man; on the contrary it was of the *whole* man. Samuel returned wearing a robe (1 Sa. xxviii. 14), and even Enoch and Elijah, as far as we know, were translated *in toto*.

Sheol is also a place of darkness (Ps. lxxxviii. 12), since light, which is the opposite of darkness, is synonymous with life and salvation (Ps. xxxvi. 10, xxvii. 1). It is also a place of forgetfulness (Ps. lxxxviii. 4f., 12, vi. 5, xlix. 11). The significance of this is more evident when it is realized that the act of remembering always implies a great deal more than recollection of a mere mental image. Memory is often in parallel with name, i.e. personality (Ps. lxxxiii. 12, cii. 12). To remember a person was 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. xi. 19; Ps. xxxiv. 16, lxxxvii. 5, cix. 15). Again, remembering is often linked with action of some kind. To remember is to do something about the person. Remember is often in parallel with visit, for example (Ps. viii. 4, cvi. 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 moral or religious distinctions.

We may 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 this *terra incognita* of 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 a basic 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 gives rise to the expression of his inmost feelings of sorrow, disappointment and hope. Man is speaking to God as well as God to man.

ii. *There are definite rays of hope and glimpses of real assurance.*

The interpreter must exercise caution here; it is easy to see the Psalms through New Testament eyes and attribute thoughts to the psalmists which were quite foreign to them. Some verses quoted that are supposed to state explicitly the belief in life after death are often quite invalid (e.g. Ps. lvi. 13). But four verses at least should be mentioned.

'But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me' (Ps. xlix. 15). This thought is set in contrast to the earlier part of the psalm which speaks of the inevitability of death, even for the rich. To ransom from death is impossible for the richest of men. But not so with God in whose hands the poor psalmist placed himself. 'For he will receive me' is a phrase used in the story of the translation of Enoch (Gn. v. 24); this may well be significant. A. Kirkpatrick can say of this verse, 'The psalmist's words contain the germ and principle of the doctrine of the resurrection, and for ourselves as we use them they will bear the fuller meaning with which they have been illuminated by Christ's resurrection.'

'As for me, I shall behold thy face in righteousness; when I awake, I shall be satisfied with beholding thy form' (Ps. xvii. 15). When he awakes from what? It can hardly be a night's sleep, even though the psalmist may have composed the psalm before retiring for the night. Is it too much to suggest that this may mean the awakening out of the shadowy existence of Sheol? Cf. 2 Ki. iv. 31.

'Therefore my heart is glad, and my soul rejoices; my body also dwells secure. For thou dost not give me to Sheol, or let thy godly one see the Pit. Thou dost show me the path of life; in thy presence there is fullness of joy, in thy right hand are pleasures for evermore' (Ps. xvi. 9-11). For this, we are on safer ground. The New Testament writers give us authority to refer this to resurrection. But is David's affirmation not realized then? Certainly David was given up to Sheol and did see the Pit. But that which was predicted comes back upon himself. As Delitzsch says, 'Now that his hope has found in Christ its full historical and redemptive realization it becomes through Christ a personal reality for himself.' Is it not significant too that David writes in terms of his whole self — heart, soul and body?

'Thou dost guide me with thy counsel, and afterward thou wilt receive me to glory' (Ps. lxxiii. 24). After what? The psalmist appears to hold no hope that these present distressing circumstances will cease in this life; he has already spoken in terms of death in verses 18-20. Is this not the goal of the divine guidance, having been assured of God's presence throughout this life? So faith breaks right through the night of Sheol. His answer to the problem of the apparent prosperity of the wicked lies in his possession of God as his portion and in faith he sees this communion as never being broken.

Surely these verses contain, if not explicitly, certainly implicitly, the doctrine of resurrection.

iii. *The basic doctrine is that God is the lord of life.*

The main assurance of resurrection rests not, however, on particular verses but on the psalmist's belief that God is the lord of all life. So he can leave the hereafter entirely to Jehovah who is the Lord with whom the faithful live in communion and to whom they cling even in death. Faith in God who performs miracles and who rules everywhere, even in Sheol (Ps. cxxxix. 8), was the root from which afterwards the belief in resurrection could so easily spring. The psalmist found in communion with God a life to which death itself could set no limits.

iv. *God withheld 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.*

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 have I in heaven but thee? . . . God 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 men, to show them that He and nothing else is their true goal and the satisfaction of their needs, and that He has a claim upon them simply by being what He is, quite apart from anything He can bestow or deny, it may have been absolutely necessary that this revelation should not begin with any hint of Beatitude or Perdition. An effective belief in them, coming too soon, may even render almost impossible the development of the appetite for God' (*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

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 (I 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).