

What and Where is Sheol?

Because the etymology of the Hebrew term "Sheol" is uncertain, there has been difficulty in translating it into other languages, which can be seen by comparing various Bible translations. The Revised Standard Version (RSV) and the New American Standard (NAS) do not translate the term "Sheol". The King James Version (KJV) translates "Sheol" as "hell" inconsistently about half the time and the New International Version (NIV) translates the term as the place of burial "the grave".

The term "Sheol" seems to have some common themes associated with it. It is associated with death, and it is a place of dread.

To gain a sense of what and where Sheol is, a survey of the Hebrew term as it occurs in the Bible may provide some clarity to the issue:

Sheol is a place where the dead can physically go to.

Then all his sons and all his daughters arose to comfort him, but he refused to be comforted. And he said, "Surely I will go down to **Sheol** in mourning for my son." So his father wept for him. (Gen 37:35)

But Jacob said, "My son shall not go down with you; for his brother is dead, and he alone is left. If harm should befall him on the journey you are taking, then you will bring my gray hair down to **Sheol** in sorrow." (Gen 42:38)

If you take this one also from me, and harm befalls him, you will bring my gray hair down to **Sheol** in sorrow. Now, therefore, when I come to your servant my father, and the lad is not with us, since his life is bound up in the lad's life, when he sees that the lad is not with us, he will die. Thus your servants will bring the gray hair of your servant our father down to **Sheol** in sorrow. (Gen 44:29-31)

So act according to your wisdom, and do not let his gray hair go down to **Sheol** in peace. (1 Kings 2:6)

Now therefore, do not let him go unpunished, for you are a wise man; and you will know what you ought to do to him, and you will bring his gray hair down to **Sheol** with blood. (1 Kings 2:9)

Sheol is a place located under the surface of the earth.

For a fire is kindled in My anger, And burns to the lowest part of **Sheol**, And consumes the earth with its yield, And sets on fire the foundations of the mountains. (Deut 32:22)

Can you discover the depths of God? Can you discover the limits of the Almighty? They are high as the heavens, what can you do? Deeper than **Sheol**, what can you know? (Job 11:7-8)

As when one plows and breaks open the earth, Our bones have been scattered at the mouth of **Sheol**. For my eyes are toward You, O GOD, the Lord; In You I take refuge; do not leave me defenseless. (Ps 141:7-8)

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Sheol is seen as a pit.

For my soul has had enough troubles, And my life has drawn near to **Sheol**. I am reckoned among those who go down to the pit; I have become like a man without strength, Forsaken among the dead, Like the slain who lie in the grave, Whom You remember no more, And they are cut off from Your hand. You have put me in the lowest pit, In dark places, in the depths. (Ps 88:3-6)

If they say, "Come with us, Let us lie in wait for blood, Let us ambush the innocent without cause; Let us swallow them alive like **Sheol**, Even whole, as those who go down to the pit; (Prov 1:11-12)

that you will take up this taunt against the king of Babylon, and say, "How the oppressor has ceased, And how fury has ceased! The LORD has broken the staff of the wicked, The scepter of rulers Which used to strike the peoples in fury with unceasing strokes, Which subdued the nations in anger with unrestrained persecution. The whole earth is at rest and is quiet; They break forth into shouts of joy. Even the cypress trees rejoice over you, and the cedars of Lebanon, saying, 'Since you were laid low, no tree cutter comes up against us.' **Sheol** from beneath is excited over you to meet you when you come; It arouses for you the spirits of the dead, all the leaders of the earth; It raises all the kings of the nations from their thrones. They will all respond and say to you, Even you have been made weak as we, You have become like us. 'Your pomp and the music of your harps Have been brought down to **Sheol**; Maggots are spread out as your bed beneath you And worms are your covering.' How you have fallen from heaven, O star of the morning, son of the dawn! You have been cut down to the earth, You who have weakened the nations! But you said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, And I will sit on the mount of assembly In the recesses of the north. I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.' Nevertheless you will be thrust down to **Sheol**, To the recesses of the pit." (Isa 14:4-15)

For **Sheol** cannot thank You, Death cannot praise You; Those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Your faithfulness. It is the living who give thanks to You, as I do today; A father tells his sons about Your faithfulness. (Isa 38:18-19)

Sheol is a place where, once there, one cannot return to the realm of the living and is forgotten.

When a cloud vanishes, it is gone, So he who goes down to **Sheol** does not come up. (Job 7:9)

Sheol is perceived as a place that one can be hidden but not from God.

Oh that You would hide me in **Sheol**, That You would conceal me until Your wrath returns to You, That You would set a limit for me and remember me! (Job 14:13)

The departed spirits tremble under the waters and their inhabitants. Naked is **Sheol** before Him, And Abaddon has no covering. (Job 26:5-6)

Where can I go from Your Spirit? Or where can I flee from Your presence? If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in **Sheol**, behold, You are there. (Ps 139:7-8)

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Sheol and Abaddon lie open before the LORD, How much more the hearts of men! (Prov 15:11)

Though they dig into **Sheol**, From there will My hand take them; And though they ascend to heaven, From there will I bring them down. (Amos 9:2)

Sheol is a place where the wicked go to when they die.

They spend their days in prosperity, And suddenly they go down to **Sheol**. (Job 21:13)

Drought and heat consume the snow waters, So does **Sheol** those who have sinned. (Job 24:19)

The wicked will return to **Sheol**, Even all the nations who forget God. (Ps 9:17)

Let me not be put to shame, O LORD, for I call upon You; Let the wicked be put to shame, let them be silent in **Sheol**. (Ps 31:17)

Let death come deceitfully upon them; Let them go down alive to **Sheol**, For evil is in their dwelling, in their midst. (Ps 55:15)

For the lips of an adulteress drip honey And smoother than oil is her speech; But in the end she is bitter as wormwood, Sharp as a two-edged sword. Her feet go down to death, Her steps take hold of **Sheol**. (Prov 5:3-5)

Her house is the way to **Sheol**, Descending to the chambers of death. (Prov 7:27)

Stolen water is sweet; And bread eaten in secret is pleasant. But he does not know that the dead are there, That her guests are in the depths of **Sheol**. (Prov 9:17-18)

Thus says the Lord God, "On the day when it went down to **Sheol** I caused lamentations; I closed the deep over it and held back its rivers. And its many waters were stopped up, and I made Lebanon mourn for it, and all the trees of the field wilted away on account of it. I made the nations quake at the sound of its fall when I made it go down to **Sheol** with those who go down to the pit; and all the well-watered trees of Eden, the choicest and best of Lebanon, were comforted in the earth beneath. They also went down with it to **Sheol** to those who were slain by the sword; and those who were its strength lived under its shade among the nations. (Ezek 31:15-17)

Nor do they lie beside the fallen heroes of the uncircumcised, who went down to **Sheol** with their weapons of war and whose swords were laid under their heads; but the punishment for their iniquity rested on their bones, thought the terror of these heroes was once in the land of the living. (Ezek 32:27)

Behind the door and the doorpost You have set up your sign; Indeed, far removed from Me, you have uncovered yourself, And have gone up and made your bed wide. And you have made an agreement for yourself with them, You have loved their bed, You have looked on their manhood. You have journeyed to the king with oil And increased your perfumes; You have sent your envoys a great distance And made them go down to **Sheol**. (Isa 57:8-9)

What and Where is Sheol? (page 4)

Sheol is a place where both the wicked and righteous go when they die regardless of their age or social status.

It is the same for all There is one fate for the righteous and for the wicked; for the good, for the clean and for the unclean; for the man who offers a sacrifice and for the one who does not sacrifice. As the good man is, so is the sinner; as the swearer is, so is the one who is afraid to swear. This is an evil in all that is done under the sun, that there is one fate for all men Furthermore, the hearts of the sons of men are full of evil and insanity is in their hearts throughout their lives. Afterwards they go to the dead. For whoever is joined with all the living, there is hope; surely a live dog is better than a dead lion. For the living know they will die; but the dead do not know anything, nor have they any longer a reward, for their memory is forgotten. Indeed their love, their hate and their zeal have already perished, and they will no longer have a share in all that is done under the sun. Go then, eat your bread in happiness and drink your wine with a cheerful heart; for God has already approved your works. Let your clothes be white all the time, and let not oil be lacking on your head. Enjoy life with the woman whom you love all the days of your fleeting life which He has given to you under the sun; for this is your reward in life and in your toil in which you have labored under the sun. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might; for there is no activity or planning or knowledge or wisdom in **Sheol** where you are going. (Ecc 9:2-10)

Sheol is a place where God is sovereign; He can free the human soul from the prison of Sheol.

The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to **Sheol** and raises up. (1 Sam 2:6)

Return, O LORD, rescue my soul; Save me because of Your lovingkindness. For there is no mention of You in death; In **Sheol** who will give You thanks? (Ps 6:4-5)

For You will not abandon my soul to **Sheol**; Nor will You allow Your Holy One to undergo decay. (Ps 16:10)

O LORD, You have brought up my soul from **Sheol**; You have kept me alive, that I would not go down to the pit. (Ps 30:3)

As sheep they are appointed for **Sheol**; Death shall be their shepherd; And the upright shall rule over them in the morning, And their form shall be for **Sheol** to consume So that they have no habitation. But God will redeem my soul from the power of **Sheol**, For He will receive me. Selah. (Ps 49:14-15)

For Your lovingkindness toward me is great, And You have delivered my soul from the depths of **Sheol**. (Ps 86:13)

Remember what my span of life is; For what vanity You have created all the sons of men! What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his soul from the power of **Sheol**? Selah. (Ps 89:47-48)

Shall I ransom them from the power of **Sheol**? Shall I redeem them from death? O Death, where are your thorns? O **Sheol**, where is your sting? Compassion will be hidden from My sight. (Hos 13:14)

and he said, "I called out of my distress to the LORD, And He answered me I cried for help from the depth of **Sheol**; You heard my voice. (Jon 2:2)

The path of life leads upward for the wise That he may keep away from **Sheol** below. (Prov 15:24)

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Apply your heart to discipline And your ears to words of knowledge. Do not hold back discipline from the child, Although you strike him with the rod, he will not die. You shall strike him with the rod And rescue his soul from **Sheol**. (Prov 23:12-14)

Sheol is personified as a mouth that swallows people while they are still alive.

"But if the LORD brings about an entirely new thing and the ground opens its mouth and swallows them up with all that is theirs, and they descend alive into **Sheol**, then you will understand that these men have spurned the LORD." As he finished speaking all these words, the ground that was under them split open; and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up, and their households, and all the men who belonged to Korah with their possessions. So they and all that belonged to them went down alive to **Sheol**; and the earth closed over them, and they perished from the midst of the assembly. (Num 16:30-33)

The leech has two daughters, "Give," "Give." There are three things that will not be satisfied, Four that will not say, "Enough": **Sheol**, and the barren womb, Earth that is never satisfied with water, And fire that never says, "Enough." (Prov 30:15-16)

Therefore My people go into exile for their lack of knowledge; And their honorable men are famished, And their multitude is parched with thirst. Therefore **Sheol** has enlarged its throat and opened its mouth without measure; And Jerusalem's splendor, her multitude, her din of revelry and the jubilant within her, descend into it. (Isa 5:13-14)

Furthermore, wine betrays the haughty man, So that he does not stay at home He enlarges his appetite like **Sheol**, And he is like death, never satisfied. He also gathers to himself all nations And collects to himself all peoples. (Hab 2:5)

Sheol is personified as unyielding.

Put me like a seal over your heart, Like a seal on your arm For love is as strong as death, Jealousy is as severe as **Sheol**; Its flashes are flashes of fire, The very flame of the LORD. (Song 8:6)

Sheol is personified as capable of making covenants.

Because you have said, "We have made a covenant with death, And with **Sheol** we have made a pact The overwhelming scourge will not reach us when it passes by, For we have made falsehood our refuge and we have concealed ourselves with deception." Therefore thus says the Lord GOD, "Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a tested stone, A costly cornerstone for the foundation, firmly placed. He who believes in it will not be disturbed. I will make justice the measuring line And righteousness the level; Then hail will sweep away the refuge of lies And the waters will overflow the secret place. Your covenant with death will be canceled, And your pact with **Sheol** will not stand; When the overwhelming scourge passes through, Then you become its trampling place. (Isa 28:15-18)

What and Where is Sheol? (page 6)

Sheol is seen figuratively seen as a snare

The cords of **Sheol** surrounded me; The snares of death confronted me. (2 Sam 22:6)

The cords of **Sheol** surrounded me; The snares of death confronted me. (Ps 18:5)

The cords of death encompassed me And the terrors of **Sheol** came upon me; I found distress and sorrow. (Ps 116:3)

Sheol is seen figuratively as a bed in darkness.

If I look for **Sheol** as my home, I make my bed in the darkness; (Job 17:13)

Sheol is seen figuratively see as an entrance (indicated with gates) to somewhere.

A writing of Hezekiah king of Judah after his illness and recovery: I said, "In the middle of my life I am to enter the gates of **Sheol**; I am to be deprived of the rest of my years." (Isa 38:9-10)

The Hebrew term "Sheol" appears to be a place where dead people, both Believers and non-Believers, went to; it was a metaphorical way (like a poetic device) of describing what happened to people when they died. It was not a term to describe the shadowy region of the netherworld or a temporary place the dead go to before judgment.

The term "Sheol" appears to be best translated as "the grave". If the translation "Hades" or "Hell" is used, the above passages that reference "Sheol" do not make theological sense. For example, it does not make sense that the souls of Believers are "raised up" from hell (see the article: What happens to the spirit or soul when people die? at www.Helpmewithbiblestudy.org/7Humans/DeathWhatHappensSpiritWhenPeopleDie.aspx); however, it does make sense that their souls are "raised up" from the grave.