

AN EXAMINATION OF VARIOUS IDIOMS RELATING  
TO DEATH IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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Death in the Old Testament is a subject which has caused many to search desperately to understand how the Old Testament saint perceived the time when he would depart from this earth. Many scholars have said that the saint knew nothing about what was in store for him when he died. Others have said that he only perceived a dismal picture of existence in a place where no activity such as worship of God can take place. However, there are three phrases in the Old Testament that pertain to death which shed some light on the subject. These phrases are "go to your fathers," "gathered to his people," and "slept with his fathers."

There are three major views held in regard to these phrases. The first view presents these phrases as idioms for death. The second view sees these phrases as idioms which describe the burial of the body in the family grave. The final view suggests that the phrases are idioms which describe the gathering of the person's soul to Sheol.

The phrases "gathered to his people" and "go to your fathers" are primarily used of the patriarchs while the phrase "slept with his fathers" is used primarily of the kings. The first two phrases are strongly supported in the context to refer to the gathering of the spirits into Sheol. Each time the phrases are used, the other two views can be explained away. The culture in which the Israelites lived gives strong support to such a view. The Semitic people had within their religion a belief in the netherworld and a conscious existence of the spirits. The language used in these phrases is supportive of this view but cannot necessarily prove it. These phrases can easily be understood to be a reference to Sheol when they are considered in conjunction with the New Testament. The New Testament presents a clear presentation of what Sheol is like. Hebrews 11:13-16 clarifies the Old Testament saints' perspective toward death.

The third phrase is the most questionable in regards to its proper interpretation. In the context, either the death view or the Sheol view are acceptable. However, the lack of the word for death in the context causes one to lean more heavily toward the death view. There is nothing in the culture, language, or theology that would disprove this view. Therefore, the context is the major argument for the death view. This approach would explain why the Old Testament writers used different phrases when writing about death.

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Adviser



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## INTRODUCTION

The subject of death is a matter of much uncertainty in the Old Testament. The writer has been intrigued as he has read the Scripture passages dealing with death. He became quite curious as he noticed the phrases "go to your fathers," "gathered to his people," and "slept with his fathers." Some sources were consulted but did not satisfy the curiosity of the writer. Therefore, he has determined to do an in-depth study of the phrases.

The purpose of this work is to give a general overview of these idioms that pertain to death. In order to do this, it is necessary to do a study of the possible views, the culture, the context, the language, and the theology which is associated with these phrases. A presentation of this nature does not allow for detailed discussion of each minor issue. Therefore, only the major issues involved in this subject will be pursued to any great length.

The writer does not intend to change the views of the reader but does intend to present material that will cause the reader to consider why he believes the position to which he holds.

Chapter I will present the reader with the three major views held by scholars today. These views are those which are the basic interpretations of the three phrases.

The second chapter will consider the issue of context. This area is one that is often mishandled by students of the Word. Therefore, the key passages for a proper understanding of the idioms will be studied in their context. The third chapter will take into account the influence that the surrounding culture had upon these phrases. The fourth chapter will study the language used in the phrases. The final chapter will consider the theology of the phrases. This will include the relationship of the phrases, the Old Testament saints' understanding of the phrases, and the Old Testament's harmony with the New Testament in regard to the phrases.

The writer has done much research on this issue. He has prayed much over its contents. It is now his prayer that this study will adequately show that he has accurately handled God's Word.

## CHAPTER I

### THE VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PHRASES

#### A Presentation of the Views

The issue under consideration directly involves fifty-two passages in the Old Testament. These passages basically include three general phrases. They are: "gathered to his people," "go to your fathers," and "slept with his fathers." However, there are eleven variations of these three phrases. They are: "go to your fathers" (Gen 15:15), "gathered to his people" (Gen 25:8,17; 35:29; 49:33; Num 20:24,26), "gathered to my people" (Gen 49:29), "gathered to their fathers" (Judg 2:10), "gather you to your fathers" (2 Kgs 22:20; 2 Chr 24:38), "gathered to your grave" (2 Kgs 22:20; 2 Chr 34:28), "lie down with my fathers" (Gen 47:30), "lie down with your fathers" (Deut 31:16; 2 Sam 7:12), "sleeps with his fathers" (1 Kgs 1:21), "slept with his fathers" (1 Kgs 2:10; 11:21,43; 14:31; 15:24; 16:6,28; 22:40,50; 2 Kgs 8:24; 10:35; 13:9,13; 14:16,22,29; 15:7,22,38; 16:20; 20:21; 21:18; 24:6; 2 Chr 9:31; 12:16; 14:1; 16:13; 21:1; 26:2,23; 27:9; 28:27; 32:33; 33:20). These phrases, not unlike others, are open to many different views of interpretation. There are three main interpretations

prominent in regard to these idioms; death, burial, and sheol. Each view will be considered along with the major advocates of each.

### Death

Some biblical scholars propose that the writers of Scripture were just using an euphemism to express the fact that the person died. Francis Nichol, a Seventh-day Adventist and a strong supporter of this view, uses these phrases as an argument for his theology:

Most commentators explain this text as implying the immortality of the soul and its disembodied existence in some haven of departed souls. Such an interpretation, however, ignores a common Hebrew figure of speech and forces a literal meaning from figurative words. To "go to" one's fathers (Gen. 15:15), to be "gathered to" one's people (ch. 25:8,17) or to one's fathers (Judges 2:10), and to sleep with one's fathers (2 Kings 10:35) are common Hebrew euphemisms meaning simply "to die." To imply from these expressions the immortality of the soul apart from the body is to assume to be true that which the Scriptures elsewhere specifically deny (see, for example, Ps. 146:4; Eccl. 9:5,6, etc.).<sup>1</sup>

Bush, in agreement with Nichol, suggests that a strict philological induction is not enough to affix any other sense to the phrases other than adding to the number of

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Nichol, ed., The Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary, 7 vols. (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1953), 1:315.

those already dead.<sup>1</sup> Some of the other advocates of this view include Greenstone,<sup>2</sup> Keil and Delitzsch.<sup>3</sup>

This view as a whole is not all bad, but there are some major problems that must be taken into consideration. Nichol has stated, as shown above, that these phrases are common Hebrew figures of speech, but he does not in any way support his statement with evidence. Since such a figure of speech is so common, he should give some evidence in support of his view. Nichol only gives other Scripture references without consideration of context, culture, language, or history. Nichol continues to state that Scriptures deny the immortality of the soul apart from the body. His statement is made in error as he has improperly interpreted those verses. Psalm 146:4 does not deny the immortality of the soul apart from the body. This passage of Scripture is commanding men not to put their trust in other men. All men die; God is the only one who is eternal. Therefore, He is the only one in whom man should put his trust. Verse 4 says in reference to man:

His spirit departs, he returns to the earth;  
In that very day his thoughts perish.

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<sup>1</sup>George Bush, Genesis, 2 vols. (New York: Mark H. Newman & Co., 1848), 1:57.

<sup>2</sup>Julius Greenstone, The Holy Scriptures: Numbers (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1939), p. 218.

<sup>3</sup>C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, I and II Kings, vol. 3, trans. James Martin in Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1949; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978), p. 481.

Perowne suggests that the word "spirit" would best be understood as breath.<sup>1</sup> The idea is that men eventually die. When they die, the breath goes out of their body and their body returns to dust (cf. Gen 3:19). On the day of a man's death, his thoughts, plans, and schemes die along with him.

Nichol also uses Ecclesiastes 9:5,6 to support his idea that the soul is non-existent after departure from the body. These verses say:

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.

These two verses cannot be used as proof texts for mortality of the soul. Leupold suggests that these two verses cannot be used to express the state of the dead in the other world.<sup>2</sup> Rather, the idea in the context is the relation of the dead to this world. Leupold expands on this thought by stating:

One arrives at the same result when one keeps applying the limitation expressed in v. 3, which is still in force here, namely, the phrase "under the sun." How else can death appear if higher values and possibilities are disregarded? The dead "have no reward." "They are neither loved, nor hated, nor envied any more" (v. 6) as far as this life is concerned. They are out of it all: "all this has long perished; neither have they any portion any more in anything that is done under the sun."

Taking isolated utterances like this one and insisting that they must be pushed to the limit of possible negative interpretation is not satisfactory exegesis,

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<sup>1</sup>J. J. Stewart Perowne, The Book of Psalms (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1978), p. 473.

<sup>2</sup>H. C. Leupold, Exposition of Ecclesiastes (Columbus: The Wartburg Press, 1952), p. 211.



especially when there are other weighty statements, like 12:7, to the contrary. Against such misconstruction the author has apparently erected a double barrier, for he repeats that he had in mind the possibility of dead persons' having a share in what goes on in this world after they are dead by again adding the phrase as a conclusion-- "in anything that is done under the sun."<sup>1</sup>

A third major problem with this view lies in the context of the passages under consideration. If one were to take these phrases to be an euphemism for death, he would be requiring the writers of Scripture to be stuttering in their writings. An example of this would be found in Genesis 25:8, "And Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people." If the phrase "gathered to his people" were to be taken as an euphemism for death, the writer would be saying, "Abraham died and he died." The writer cannot understand why in the context of the verse, the author would mention that Abraham died and then add on to the end of the verse an idiom that means the same thing. The only alternative would seem to be that the author was using the phrase as an idiom to suggest that Abraham was buried. In light of this, the writer would prefer to reject this view for the phrase "gathered to his people." However, this view seems to be the best interpretation of the phrase "slept with his fathers." This will be dealt with in greater detail at a later time.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., pp. 211-12.

### Burial

A second interpretation of the phrases is that of burial. This view suggests that the phrases are idioms which refer to an honorable burial in a family burial ground. The bodies are supposedly gathered together in the same burial place with other members of the family clan. Among those who hold this view are Pedersen<sup>1</sup> and Rickards.<sup>2</sup> Oesterley and Robinson<sup>3</sup> partially hold to this view, as well as to the Sheol view.

This view has very little support. The interpretation could be acceptable if it were not for a couple of inconsistencies. These inconsistencies are seen in the death of Abraham and Moses. Abraham was buried in the cave at Machpelah (Gen 25:8). The only other person buried at Machpelah was Sarah, while the rest of Abraham's ancestors were buried back in his homeland. His father, Terah, died in Haran and was probably buried there as well.

The Lord commands Moses in Deuteronomy 32:48-52 to go up to Mount Nebo to die and be gathered to his people. The construction of the sentence seems to indicate that his death and the gathering process are simultaneous.

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<sup>1</sup>Johannes Pedersen, Israel: Its Life and Culture, vols. 3-4 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 480.

<sup>2</sup>Raymond Rickards, "Genesis 15: An Exercise in Translation Principles," The Bible Translator 28 (April 1977):218.

<sup>3</sup>W. O. E. Oesterley and Theodore H. Robinson, Hebrew Religion: Its Origin and Development (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1930), p. 97.

Deuteronomy 34:1-6 states that Moses did as the Lord commanded. He died on Mount Nebo and was buried by the Lord (v. 6). The verse goes on to state that no man knows where Moses was buried. Therefore, one may conclude that Moses was not gathered together in some common burial place with his ancestors. This incident, in conjunction with that of Abraham, seems to be proof enough to deny the view of a common burial. However, there is another way in which one may possibly look at this view.

Idioms are often used in the Bible just as the English language has idioms of its own. Fields, in discussing this issue, comments:

A dead metaphor may be defined simply as a fixed idiom --a metaphor which has become so much a part of the language that the original impetus for its usage may even be forgotten. In English there are such idioms as "being in the doghouse," or "down in the dumps," or "wind up an argument." Language is replete with them, and would in fact lose much of its color if they were excised. On the simile side there are an equal number: "busy as a bee," "reckless as a bull in a china shop," "sly as a fox."<sup>1</sup>

In light of this, the phrases at hand could possibly be idioms that are frozen expressions in the Hebrew language which were common to the Hebrews to mean death and burial. Based upon the culture in which the Israelites lived this is a possibility, since there was the practice of family burials. However, this writer has been unable to locate these phrases or any similar phrases in extra-biblical

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<sup>1</sup>Weston W. Fields, "The Translation of Biblical Live and Dead Metaphors and Similies and Other Idioms," Grace Theological Journal 2 (Fall 1981):194.

sources from the time period of the patriarchs, kings, or preceding. This is not to say that they do not exist, but there is no evidence of their existence. Since this is the case, the writer does not feel comfortable to accept the burial view as an interpretation for the phrases at this time. Further in-depth study of this possibility could enhance one's understanding of the interpretation of the phrases.

### Sheol

The final interpretation of these phrases is that of Sheol. The majority of biblical scholars hold to this view. This view interprets the phrases as idioms for a place called Sheol where the spirits of people during Old Testament times were gathered at death. This view holds that these spirits are not annihilated at death, but continue in a conscious existence after the separation of the body and the spirit. This writer holds that the Sheol view is the best explanation for the idioms "gathered to his people" and "go to your fathers." Therefore, this writer will show how these two phrases are best interpreted by the Sheol view.

## CHAPTER II

### THE CONTEXTUAL SETTING

One must have a proper understanding of the context in order to correctly interpret any passage of Scripture. Therefore, this chapter will take into consideration the three general phrases, "go to your fathers," "gathered to his people," and "slept with his fathers." Each phrase will be considered individually, although not every passage will be discussed. A paper of this nature does not allow for a detailed review of every passage. However, those passages which serve as good examples will be considered as to the strengths and weaknesses of each of the views considered in the previous chapter.

#### Go to Your Fathers

This phrase is found only once in the Old Testament (Gen 15:15). In chapter 15, the Lord reassures Abram of His promise: a seed, land, and blessing. Abram asks in verse 8, "How may I know that I shall possess it (the land)?" The Lord responds by making a covenant with Abram in verses 9-11. In verse 12, Abram is found in a deep sleep of a special kind. The Lord gave to Abram a revelation in this special way so that it might be permanent in his mind. In verses 13-21, the Lord tells Abram what will happen to his

seed, but in the middle of this revelation the Lord supplies some information as to where Abram will be during this time. The interesting factor at hand is that Abraham will die at a "good old age," which gives the Lord plenty of time to do His work. Before the Lord tells Abram this, He says to him, "And as for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace." One cannot assume that Abram went back to his homeland and spent time with his ancestors. Terah, the father of Abram, had died in Haran while on his way to Canaan. Therefore, if Abram was to rejoin his father, it must have been through some means of death. As was shown in the preceding chapter, some scholars hold that this was done in the grave. That is, the body of Abram was to be buried in a family burial plot with his ancestors that had died before him. Those who hold to this view admit that there is a problem here as explained by Von Rad, "The expression 'to go to one's fathers' is to be understood from the viewpoint of the family grave; here to be sure, it does not quite fit, for Abraham had broken with his family."<sup>1</sup> Barnhouse points out that "Terah and Abram's other ancestors were not buried in Canaan, but in Haran and in Ur of the Chaldees. This promise does not mean, therefore, that Abram was to be

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<sup>1</sup>Gerhard Von Rad, Genesis, trans. John H. Marks (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1961), p. 182.

buried in the same plot with them, but that he would rejoin them in the land of the dead."<sup>1</sup>

If Abram was not to be buried in a family burial plot with his fathers, then the Lord must have been implying something else by His statement. Murphy suggests that the process of going from one place to another does not imply annihilation, but some kind of continuance in existence.<sup>2</sup> This interpretation seems to be supported by the fact that immediately following the phrase in verse 15, the Lord says, "You shall be buried at a good old age." This writer cannot see why the Lord would continue to explain that Abram would be buried, if the "going to his fathers" meant that he would just die.

One must keep in mind another interpretation exists. The phrase could possibly be a frozen expression which means to die and be buried. However, the use of such a frozen expression is not necessary to understand what is being said. There are no contradictions or other problems in accepting the Sheol view in this passage to interpret the meaning of what God is saying to Abram. If one insists on accepting the phrase as a frozen idiom, then this passage would simply be saying that Abraham has a long time to live before he dies.

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<sup>1</sup>Donald Grey Barnhouse, Genesis: A Devotional Exposition, 2 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970), 1:117.

<sup>2</sup>J. G. Murphy, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Genesis (Andover: Warren F. Draper, 1866), p. 229.

### Gathered to His People

Phrases which contain the word "gathered" and also present the general idea of death are found fifteen times in the Old Testament. This idiom is used of Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Aaron, Moses, Josiah, and an entire generation of Israelites (Judg 2:10). The following discussion concerning context will focus especially on Abraham, Jacob, Aaron, Moses and Josiah.

#### Abraham

Genesis 25:8 is the fulfillment of what the Lord had said in Genesis 15:15. Verse 28 says, "And Abraham breathed his last and died in a ripe old age, an old man and satisfied with life; and he was gathered to his people." Alexander Maclaren explains it well when he says:

'He was gathered to his people' is not the same thing as 'He died,' for, in the earlier part of the verse, we read, 'Abraham gave up the ghost and died . . . and was gathered to his people.' It is not the same thing as being buried. For we read in the following verse: 'And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah, in the field of Ephron, the son of Zohar the Hittite, which is before Mamre.' It is then the equivalent neither of death nor of burial. It conveys dimly and veiledly that Abraham was buried, and yet that was not all that happened to him. He was buried, but also 'he was gathered to his people.' Why! his own 'people' were buried in Mesopotamia, and his grave was far away from theirs. What is the meaning of the expression? Who were the people he was gathered to? In death or in burial, 'the dust returns to the earth as it was.' What was it that was gathered to his people?--the continuance of the personal being after death.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Alexander Maclaren, The Book of Genesis (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1905), p. 188.



### Jacob

The passage containing the account of the death of Jacob adds much light to the issue at hand. In Genesis 49:29, Jacob informed his sons of what was about to happen to him. He says, "I am about to be gathered to my people; bury me with my fathers in the cave that is in the field of Machpelah, which is before Mamre, in the land of Canaan, which Abraham bought along with the field from Ephron the Hittite for a burial site." From this passage, one can show that the burial view of the phrase cannot be true. Jacob is saying, "Once I am gathered to my people, then bury me in the same place where my people are buried."

This passage could be taken with verse 33 to support either the Sheol view or the death view. However, verse 33 seems to indicate that when Jacob "breathed his last," it was at that point he died. If this is true, then when he "was gathered to his people" his soul was transported to Sheol where he would exist with his people. This existence in Sheol will be dealt with at a later point.

### Aaron

Aaron's death is the subject of discussion in Numbers 20:23-29. In verses 24-26, the Lord spoke to Moses saying,

Aaron shall be gathered to his people; for he shall not enter the land which I have given to the sons of Israel, because you rebelled against My command at the waters of Meribah. Take Aaron and his son Eleazar and bring them up to Mount Hor; and strip Aaron of his garments and put them on his son Eleazar. So Aaron will be gathered to his people, and will die there.

Verse 28 goes on to say, "Aaron died there on the mountain top." This passage of Scripture can be used to disprove the death view of interpretation. Verse 26, in very clear terms, states that the death of Aaron and the gathering to his people are two separate entities. The two events appear to be simultaneous in the English, "Aaron will be gathered . . . and will die." However, there is a textual variant which occurs here among Hebrew manuscripts. The majority of the manuscripts include וַיָּמָת followed by וַיִּקָּבֵץ. If this combination is accepted, there would be a problem in harmonizing it with the Sheol view. This combination would make the phrase a waw consecutive which means that the going to Sheol took place before the death of Aaron. However, the Pentateuchí textus hebraeo-samaritanus includes וַיִּקָּבֵץ instead of וַיָּמָת. This would make the waw a conjunctive rather than a consecutive. Therefore, the events of departure to Sheol and death would be simultaneous. The writer recognizes that this argument is weak, but the notion should not be overlooked.

### Moses

Moses' death is foretold by the Lord to Moses in Numbers 27:13 and in 31:2. In Deuteronomy 32:49-51, the Lord speaks to Moses saying:

Go up to this mountain of the Abrahim, Mount Nebo, which is in the land of Moab opposite Jericho, and look at the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the sons of Israel for a possession. Then die on the mountain where you ascend, and be gathered to your people, as Aaron your brother died on Mount Hor and was gathered to his

people, because you broke faith with Me in the midst of the sons of Israel at the waters of Meribah-kadesh, in the wilderness of Zin, because you did not treat Me as holy in the midst of the sons of Israel.

Then in 34:4-5, one reads:

So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord. And he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows his burial place to this day.

This account of Moses' death denies the burial view and the death view of the phrase if taken at face value. The burial view is disproved in Deuteronomy 34:6, since the Lord buried Moses' body in the valley in the land of Moab where no man knows the exact burial place. Evidently, the Lord did not bury him in some common burial place with Moses' ancestors. However, if the phrase is seen as a frozen expression, it is possible to mean that Moses died and was buried. This would be a restricted use of the phrase as throughout the other passages.

When one takes the passage literally without interpreting it figuratively, he eliminates the death view because of what is said in 32:50, "Then die on the mountain where you ascend, and be gathered to your people." Moses had to die and be gathered to his people as the Lord had said. In 34:5, it says that Moses died "according to the word of the Lord." Therefore, one may assume that he died and was gathered to his people as the Lord had said in 32:50. If the passage is understood in this way, the Sheol view is the best interpretation. But this does not exhaust the possibilities. The lack of the phrase "gathered to his people"

in 34:5 could suggest that both are different ways of saying that he died. When interpreting the passage in this manner, one would consider the phrase to be a frozen expression used as an idiom for death.

### Josiah

Josiah's death is foretold in 2 Kings 22:20 and 2 Chronicles 34:28. Since these two passages are much the same, only 2 Kings 22:20 will be dealt with here. The Lord sends the message saying, "Therefore, behold, I will gather you to your fathers, and you shall be gathered to your grave in peace, neither shall your eyes see all the evil which I will bring on this place." Some scholars question how peacefully Josiah was gathered to his grave, since he was killed on the battlefield by the archers of Pharaoh Neco, the king of Egypt (2 Kgs 23:29; 2 Chr 34:22-23). Whitcomb reconciles the problem by stating:

It may seem strange indeed that God would have promised Josiah: "Thou shalt be gathered to thy grave in peace" (2 Kings 22:20), when, as matter of fact, he was killed by an Egyptian pharaoh on the field of battle! (cf. 2 Chron. 35:23). The problem is solved, however, when we realize that for the Israelite, to die "in peace" meant to die in a state of fellowship with God as a true believer, whether in the front line of battle or at home in bed. In contrast to this, "there is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked" (Isa. 57:21).<sup>1</sup>

This argument is weak when one considers the context of 2 Kings 22:20. What is actually meant is that Josiah will

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<sup>1</sup> John C. Whitcomb, Jr., Solomon to the Exile: Studies in Kings and Chronicles (Winona Lake: BMH Books, 1971), p. 138.

not have to stand by and watch the nation be exiled by the Babylonians (cf. verse 19).

The death of Josiah is not the strongest account in support of the Sheol view. However, the other two views are not heavily supported by this passage as well. The burial view is refuted by the fact that 2 Kings 22:20 makes a distinction between Josiah's death and his burial. He was buried with his fathers (2 Chr. 35:24), but this is not support enough for the burial view.

When considering the use of the phrase in other passages, the death view cannot be accepted, since it is not appropriate to the other passages. If the phrase is taken to be a frozen expression, it would be most appropriate in this context. However, the Sheol view must be considered to be acceptable as well, since it has been shown to be acceptable in the other passages.

#### Slept With His Fathers

The phrase "slept with his fathers" is used thirty-seven times in the Old Testament. Each time the phrase is used it is in connection with a king except in Genesis 47:30 and Deuteronomy 31:16. Tromp does an excellent job of explaining how this phrase is used in its context, so that this rather lengthy quote will be used for the sake of clarity.

The verb škb, used absolutely, means both "to be dead" and "to lie in the grave." The expression "to sleep with one's fathers" may originally have stood for the interment in the family grave; this is not true, however, for

its biblical use. In fact this is excluded, where the formula is applied to Jacob and Moses and expressly denied in some other cases. Its import is clearly suggested by the combinations in which it is found. We find two fixed formulas: "And X slept with his fathers; and they buried him . . . ; and: "And X slept with his fathers and was buried. . . ." In four texts we read: "and X slept with his fathers and was buried with his fathers"; consequently there cannot be any doubt as the formula not standing either for interment in the family grave or for burial in general. Apparently "to sleep with one's fathers" refers to death; it is never preceded or followed by the verb môt or an equivalent, and where môt is used, there our formula is found missing. Therefore it is evident that the use of either expression depends upon (the quality of the subject and) the way a person died. "To sleep with . . ." is exclusively said of kings; the preposition l'm indicates the "common lot," so that the expression may be paraphrased as to die a customary, usual death, "to die normally." And as pointed out by Alfrink also, in practise this means a "natural" death and excludes a violent one. Consequently the solemn obituary notice is kept from kings who died in battle, or in a coup; other exceptions are Athalia's sons (because of their mother's impiety) and Joram in 2 C 21 (who dies of an illness which is a punishment for his wickedness).

In view of the latter two categories the present writer ventures the conclusion that the fixed formula is an indirect testimonium pietatis: in Israel an untimely death was considered a certain consequence of bad life. Simple "to die," applied to kings in Kings and Chronicles, as a rule implies a violent death; said of other persons, however, it does not connote a judgment about the way of death.<sup>1</sup>

While keeping the preceding discussion in mind, the writer would like to examine the two passages that do not refer to kings and then take a look at a passage that will illustrate Tromp's discussion above.

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<sup>1</sup>Nicholas J. Tromp, Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament (Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1969), pp. 169-71.

## Jacob

This phrase is used of Jacob in Genesis 47:29,30:

When the time for Israel to die drew near, he called his son Joseph and said to him, "Please, if I have found favor in your sight, place now your hand under my thigh and deal with me in kindness and faithfulness. Please do not bury me in Egypt, but when I lie down with my fathers, you shall carry me out of Egypt and bury me in their burial place." And he said, "I will do as you have said."

The best way to interpret the phrase in this passage is with the death view. Evidently, the phrase is an idiom for death. In verse 29, it is said that Jacob's time to die drew near. Then when Jacob refers to his death in verse 30, he refers to it as lying down with his fathers, which is the same as saying "he slept with his fathers." One almost has to take this phrase to mean death in this passage, since Jacob never comes out and says the word die. The burial view cannot be accepted in light of the fact that Jacob specifically requests to be buried in the same burial place with his fathers. The Sheol view cannot be supported by this passage, since the word death does not occur in the context, and because the phrase "gathered to his people" occurs in 49:50 in reference to Jacob.

## Moses

The forewarning of the death of Moses is given by the Lord in Deuteronomy 31:14-16. This passage says:

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, the time for you to die is near; call Joshua, and present yourselves at the tent of meeting, that I may commission him." So Moses and Joshua went and presented themselves at the tent of meeting. And the Lord appeared in the tent in

a pillar of cloud, and the pillar of cloud stood at the doorway of the tent. And the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, you are about to lie down with your fathers; and this people will arise and play the harlot with the strange gods of the lands, into the midst of which they are going, and will forsake Me and break My covenant which I have made with them."

The best way to interpret this use of the phrase is with the death view. One should take note how the use of the phrase in verse 16 is parallel to the use of the phrase "the time for you to die is near" in verse 14. This writer feels that the Lord is using an idiom for death to explain what is about to happen to Moses. The burial view is not acceptable in this case due to the circumstances of Moses' burial (as shown above). The Sheol view is a possibility, but it is not consistent with the other passages that use this phrase.

#### A king passage

A clear example of Tromp's discussion in regard to kings is seen in 1 Kings 11:21, "But when Hadad heard in Egypt that David slept with his fathers, and that Joab the commander of the army was dead, Hadad said to Pharaoh, 'Send me away, that I may go to my own country.'" In discussing this particular passage, Tromp makes the following suggestion:

In fact the king died the death of the just, and Joab has been executed (2 K 2, 34); but the latter cannot be deduced from the formula used by the Deuteronomist. He could not possibly have written that David and Joab "had died," because the king died peacefully. The distinction would have been imperative even if the army commander had passed away because of old age.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tromp, Primitive Conceptions of Death and the Nether World in the Old Testament, p. 171.



Therefore, this writer feels that the death view, in light of Tromp's discussion, is the best method to use for interpretation of this phrase.

## CHAPTER III

### THE CULTURAL SETTING

The cultural setting in which one finds the Israelites can help to shed some light on their beliefs. The Israelites were surrounded by pagan practices and beliefs which are often seen in the practices and beliefs of the Israelites themselves. Therefore, a study of the surrounding culture will help one understand the background of the passages under observation. This chapter will take into consideration the burial practices of the Israelites and the religious practices of the surrounding peoples.

#### Burial Practices

During the time of the Patriarchs and Kings, it was customary for the successive generations to be buried in a family tomb, which was either a cave or a rock cut out for burial purposes.<sup>1</sup> This practice was begun by Abraham when he purchased the cave of Machpelah. Abraham was then buried in this burial place, as were Isaac and Jacob. This custom does not seem to dictate the interpretation of the phrases under discussion. Usually the idea of burial in the family

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<sup>1</sup>J. D. Douglas, ed., The New Bible Dictionary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1979), p. 170.

grave was made known to the family members as in Genesis 49:29-30.

### Religious Beliefs

The Semitic peoples among which the Israelites lived did believe in some form of life after death. Such Babylonian works as 'The Descent of Ishtar,' 'The Gilgamesh Epic,' etc. suggest that their mythological characters continued to exist after death. Death is often referred to in these poems as sleep. This would help to explain the language of appearance if they believed in a continued existence after death. However, this does not help in the understanding of the phrases being considered in this study. In fact, these phrases are not used in any of the Semitic works studied by this writer.

The after-life for the Babylonians was a dismal picture. Sutcliffe explains the Babylonian concept of the after-life:

The Babylonians apparently conceived the earth as one great mountain rising from its periphery to its highest point in the centre. Deep down in this mountain lay the abode of the dead. This was called Aralu or Arallu, a name of uncertain etymology. Conceived as having more dwellers than any human city it is called 'the great city.' It is 'the far land which men cannot see.' It is even spoken of without qualification as 'the land.' It is 'the habitation of darkness,' that is, the dark dwelling-place. It is called also 'the house of death.'

Sutcliffe continues a little later to record the opening verses of 'The Descent of Ishtar' to illustrate what the

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund F. Sutcliffe, The Old Testament and the Future Life (Westminster, MD: The Newman Bookshop, 1947), p. 9.

conditions of the underworld were thought to be by the Babylonians:

To the land without return, the region . . .  
Ishtar, the daughter of Sin, set her mind,  
Did set her mind the daughter of Sin,  
To the house of darkness, the dwelling of Irkalla,  
To the house, whence whoso enters, does not issue forth.  
To the way, the journey on which has no return,  
To the house where whoso enters is deprived of light,  
To the place where dust is their food and earth their  
nourishment,  
The light they see not, in darkness they dwell;  
They are clothed like birds in a garment of wings.  
On gate and bolt dust lies spread.<sup>1</sup>

Continuance in existence is suggested in this preceding example, but the outlook of the place is rather dismal. The influence that the culture had upon the Israelites will be discussed in the section on Sheol.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 10.

## CHAPTER IV

### AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF THE PHRASES

It is the intended purpose of this chapter to see if the particular words used or their arrangement have any impact on a proper interpretation of the phrases. Each of the key words in the phrases will be dealt with individually.

#### Go to Your Fathers

##### בָּא

The word בָּא means to come in, come, go in, or go.<sup>1</sup> This verb is used 2,570 times in the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> In the Septuagint, the word ἀπελεύση is used for this verb. The word ἀπελεύση comes from the word ἀπέρχομαι which means to come, go away, set off, or depart.<sup>3</sup> There would be no real problem in using this word to mean the entrance of the soul into Sheol after physical death.

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<sup>1</sup>Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs, editors, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament (Oxford: At the Clarendon Press, 1968), p. 97.

<sup>2</sup>R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, editors, Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, 2 vols. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:93.

<sup>3</sup>W. E. Vine, A Comprehensive Dictionary of the Original Greek Words with their Precise Meanings for English Readers (McLean, VA: MacDonald Publishing Company, n.d.), p. 295.

אב

This word appears in the plural each time it is used in the idiom. The word אב refers to a father (i.e. Gen 2:24), grandfather (i.e. Gen 28:13), great-grandfather (i.e. 1 Kgs 15:3), or great-great-grandfather (i.e. 1 Kgs 15:11, 24).<sup>1</sup> This tends to suggest a strong feeling of bond between the generations in the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> The word used in the Septuagint is πατέρας. This word is used to refer to the immediate male ancestor, forefathers, ancestors, and progenitors.<sup>3</sup> The writer has no problem taking this word as the literal ancestors of the person mentioned in the passage which uses the phrase "go to your fathers." The only possible problem that might be perceived is that of the salvation of the forefathers, such as in Abraham's case. However, this problem will be considered to a greater extent in the chapter on theology.

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<sup>1</sup>Brown, Driver, and Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, p. 3.

<sup>2</sup>G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringren, editors, Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament, 6 vols., trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974), 1:10.

<sup>3</sup>William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 640.

Gathered to His People

קָבַץ

The verb קָבַץ occurs 199 times in the Old Testament.<sup>1</sup> This verb appears in the niphal in the passages containing this phrase. The niphal may be translated as a passive, reflexive, or reciprocal. In this phrase its usage seems to be in the passive. The general translation of the verb is to "gather" or "collect." Feinberg suggests that "transitively, the verb under consideration denotes 'to bring together,' 'collect'; intransitively, 'to come together,' 'assemble.'"<sup>2</sup> In 2 Samuel, the verb is used to imply association, responsibility, and protection. In Deuteronomy 22:2, the verb is used in regard to stray ox or sheep.<sup>3</sup> Hirsch uses this idea to interpret the meaning of the phrase:

Moreover the word קָבַץ designates receiving a strayling into sheltering protection, and of an expelled one back into his original home-- . . . . According to that "קָבַץ" regards the next word as the real home to which mankind belongs, and this world, the testing years of wandering abroad, out of which at the end of the wandering, the soul returns home and is received in the waiting circle of those to whom it belongs.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Harris, Archer, and Waltke, Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, p. 60.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, p. 62.

<sup>4</sup> Samson Raphael Hirsch, The Pentateuch, vol. 1, trans. Isaac Levy (Gateshead, England: Judaica Press, Ltd., 1976), p. 417.

The above may not be the reason for the use of this particular word, but there is no reason why this word cannot be referred to as the process of bringing the souls of the dead together in Sheol.

The Septuagint uses the word προσετέθη. This word comes from the root word προστίθημι. The meaning of this verb in the Greek is to "add" or "put to." The verb is used "of persons who are added to a group already existing, or who are attached to an individual, to whom they henceforth belong."<sup>1</sup> An example of this usage in the New Testament is found in Acts 2:47.

### אָמ

The word אָמ is usually translated "people," "kinsman," or "father's kinsman" throughout the Old Testament.<sup>2</sup> Van Groningen states:

The term am is often used in a general sense in the OT to refer to a group of people, larger than a tribe or clan, but less numerous than a race (ie- ōm). When the reference is to a large group, without reference to any specific characteristic or relationship, translators have, in instances, correctly rendered am as "folk" or "men." In the Aramaic portions of Ezr and Dan the term is used with this general sense in all but two instances (Ezr 7:13; 7:16).

However, am is predominantly used to express two basic characteristics of men considered as a grouping: 1) relationships sustained within or to the group and 2) the unity of the group.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Arndt and Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, p. 726.

<sup>2</sup>Brown, Driver, and Briggs, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament, p. 766.

<sup>3</sup>Harris, Archer, and Waltke, Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, p. 676.



When taking into consideration this understanding of the word along with the idea behind the word for gathered, one may come to the conclusion that the phrase can refer to the gathering into Sheol. Since Abraham was buried only with Sara, the idea presented by the term עם, a group larger than a tribe but less than a race, could easily explain that Abraham was gathered to his forefathers in Sheol.

### Slept With His Fathers

#### שָׁכַב

The word שָׁכַב means "to lie down." Hamilton suggests that the word appears most often in the Qal primarily with the meaning "to lie down (in death)" or "to lie down (for sexual relations)."<sup>1</sup> The Septuagint translates the word with the Greek word ἐκοιμήθη which comes from the root κοιμάω. This word in the Greek means "to sleep" or "fall asleep." It is often taken to be figurative of the sleep of death.<sup>2</sup> This is most likely the reason why many of the translations translate the word "sleep" rather than "lie down." Such a study of the word tends to suggest that the phrase "slept with his fathers" means to lie down in death.

#### אָב

This word has been dealt with above under "go to your fathers." Therefore, it is not necessary to repeat the

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 921.

<sup>2</sup> Arndt and Gingrich, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, p. 438.

study here. When reviewing the previous study, one may see how this word fits in with the phrase "slept with his fathers." Each time the phrase is used in the Old Testament, it is used to indicate that the person under consideration has joined all of his forefathers in the state of death.

CHAPTER V

THE THEOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE  
OF THE PHRASES

The context, culture, and language of the phrases have been studied in detail. In order for one to come to a final conclusion on the subject, it is necessary to see how the phrases and the views fit into the entirety of Scripture. This chapter will deal with the relationship between the three phrases. Also, it is necessary to take into consideration the topic of the Old Testament understanding of the after-life. Finally, this chapter will deal with the New Testament and the light that it sheds upon the topic.

The Relationship Between the Phrases

The question must be asked, "Is there a difference between the three phrases under discussion?" This writer would like to suggest that the phrases "go to your fathers" and "gathered to his people" are synonymous to each other. Genesis 15:15 states that Abraham will go to his fathers. Genesis 25:8 then appears to be the fulfillment of that promise by the Lord when it states that he was gathered to his people. All scholars would most likely agree to this no matter which view they chose to interpret the phrases. According to the research which this writer has done, there

is no evidence in the language, culture, or context to contradict this.

There does seem to be a difference between the two phrases discussed above and the phrase "slept with his fathers." Hirsch makes a distinction when he says:

To lie with one's fathers is not to be buried in their proximity but is the physical act of death, as *האסח* designates the spiritual side of that act. *האסח*, the return home of the soul to the homeland of souls; *שכב*, the laying down of the body into the earth, into the common bosom, wherever one may be buried, in which, wherever they too may be buried, one's preceding parents rest.<sup>1</sup>

Neither the language nor the culture suggests any reason why there must be a distinction made, but the discussion of context above seems to require a difference. There also seems to be a distinction made in the fact that the first two phrases are used primarily of patriarchs, while the last phrase is used primarily of kings. This distinction would suggest (but not require) that the writers of Scripture saw the phrases as having different meanings. It is possible that the phrases were frozen expressions which were used in conjunction with different peoples. The writer has been unable to locate exactly the reason for the distinction except for those stated in the chapter on context. This area of discussion would be worthy of further study by one who is interested in pursuing the issue further.

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<sup>1</sup> Hirsch, The Pentateuch, p. 644.

## The Old Testament Understanding of the Phrases

One must consider the subject of the after-life in the same way which Abraham and the other Patriarchs did in order to fully understand what these phrases are trying to say. The following discussion will take into consideration the topics of Sheol and the spirits of the dead. The purpose of this section is not to give a complete study on these topics but to give a summary, so that one might better understand the interpretation of the phrases under discussion.

### The after-life

Many scholars tend to present the idea that the Old Testament saints did not understand anything about an after-life. However, this writer cannot help but feel that they knew more than what scholars today want to give them credit for. Hirsch makes an excellent observation when he states:

וּיֹאסֵף, הָאֵסֵף אֶל עַמּוּד, with this term, which has become so general, a thought is expressed in our vernacular to which we can point with pride against those people who have the arrogance to declare that "in the Old Testament the dogma of immortality is not taught, that is a prerogative of the New." Certainly it was not taught in the Old Testament but that is because there was no necessity to teach it. The people who speak of their dead as נִאֲסָף אֶל עַמּוּד, where individuals speak of themselves: נִאֲסָף אֶל עַמּוּד הַנֶּה אֲנִי, to them the thought of immortality was so common, the denial of it lay so much out of their whole trend of thought, that it would have been quite absurd to want to make "the belief in immortality" something that had first to be taught to them. So that these people are on an incomparably higher level than those to whom this truth had to be taught as a "dogma," and bolstered up in the minds of the people with so-called "proofs." Also, "And the

dust returns to the earth as it was; and the spirit returns unto God Who gave it" is not quotation from the New Testament but from the old, Ecclesiastes (Ch. xii, 8), and there, too, it is not given as a sermon, but this description of human dissolution is inserted as a well-known fact.<sup>1</sup>

Strachan takes a look at this same idea when he makes the following observation concerning the Israelites' surrounding culture:

The old Semitic idea was that all the dead, good and bad alike, went to the spectral realm of Sheol, "the congregation of shades," "the land of darkness and forgetfulness," "the house appointed for all living," where men were but feeble, flaccid semblances of their former selves, life was a pale image of the activities of the upper world, and fellowship with God was for ever at an end. But this cheerless prospect could not satisfy men who believed in a living, personal, gracious God; and it was here that inspired idealism achieved its most splendid results. . . . Men of faith were enabled to apprehend and proclaim the truth that their communion with God would never cease; that they would overleap Sheol; that they would see God's face and be satisfied; that they would dwell in the house of the Lord for ever; that though their flesh and heart failed, God would be the strength of their heart, and their portion for ever. How far this was believed by the writers of Genesis we hardly know. But the argument for immortality, with special reference to the patriarchs, has been stated by the highest Authority. The words, "I am the God of Abraham, and the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob," contain the doctrine of immortality, since "God is not the God of the dead, but of the living."<sup>2</sup>

The Semitic culture was noted for its belief in some form of existence after death, as is suggested by Pfeiffer:

Our available information indicates clearly that the early Semites, like the Israelites later, believed in human survival after death and feared the ghosts of the deceased, but it does not prove that such ghosts were worshipped like divine beings. In the earliest times

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., p. 416.

<sup>2</sup> James Strachan, Hebrew Ideals (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), pp. 198-99.

the dead were believed to survive weakly and miserably in the bleak darkness of the family grave.<sup>1</sup>

The Semitic peoples were depraved human beings that did not believe in the true God, but yet they believed in some form of existence after death. The Israelites were God's chosen people. Therefore, it should not be surprising that God gave to them some understanding of that blessed hope that they would have in God. Job attests to what death has to offer him in Job 17:13-16:

If I look for Sheol as my home,  
I make my bed in the darkness;  
If I call to the pit, "You are my father";  
To the worm, "my mother and my sister";  
Where now is my hope?  
And who regards my hope?  
Will it go down with me to Sheol?  
Shall we together go down into the dust?

This passage seems to present a dismal picture for this righteous one who claims God for himself. However, Job does not only present a gloomy picture for his future but possibly presents a picture of hope as well. In Job 19:25-27, Job states:

And as for me, I know that my Redeemer lives,  
And at the last He will take His stand on the earth.  
Even after my skin is flayed,  
Yet without my flesh I shall see God;  
Whom I myself shall behold,  
And whom my eyes shall see and not another.  
My heart faints within me.

This passage of Scripture is very difficult to understand in the Hebrew. David Thomas makes the comment:

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<sup>1</sup>Robert H. Pfeiffer, Religion in the Old Testament, ed. by Charles Conrad Forman (New York: Harper and Brothers Publishers, 1961), p. 18.

These three verses have given rise to great controversy amongst Biblical critics. Some regard Job as expressing his full confidence in the Redeemer of the world and His advent in the last day, to raise him from the dead and vindicate his character before the universe; and others maintain, that all he means to express is his confidence, that God on this earth will appear to vindicate his character before He took him away from this world.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas goes on to say, "This passage expresses a hope of immortality. In it the spirit of Job pierces beyond Sheol into the future: confidently looking for a vision of God to vindicate his righteousness."<sup>2</sup> Royston, in a thesis presentation to Dallas Theological Seminary, argues:

Job in this verse anticipates experiencing physical death and he expects that his body will experience corruption as it returns to dust, but then he says, ". . . yet in my flesh shall I see God." This clause not only expresses Job's hope in immortality in that he expects to behold God after he dies, but it relates his existence after death to a fleshly body. The significant word here is מִבְּשָׁרִי which the Authorized Version translates as "in my flesh." However, the normal meaning of the preposition מִן is from and this verse would seem to express Job's thought better if the preposition were given this force. מִבְּשָׁרִי should be translated from my flesh; i.e., the vantage point of Job's view of God after his present physical body is destroyed.<sup>3</sup>

The writer must admit that this passage presents problems in interpretation. Nevertheless, the passage must not be disregarded without some serious consideration as to its contribution to the issue at hand.

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<sup>1</sup>David Thomas, The Book of Job (Minneapolis: James & Klock Publishing, 1976), pp. 238-39.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 239.

<sup>3</sup>Lindley Royston, "The Old Testament Concept of Life After Death" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1962), pp. 65-66.



## Sheol

The next issue to be dealt with is that of Sheol. There are various opinions as to what Sheol actually is, but this writer will present his personal view in order to support his view on the phrases.

The word Sheol is used many times in the Old Testament. Davidson comments:

The word שְׁאוֹל, rarely written defectively, is a feminine noun, as most other nouns are which indicate space, though in a few cases it appears as masculine. Its derivation is uncertain. Some derived it from שָׁאֵל, to ask, believing that Hades is so named from its insatiable craving. But it is improbable that this primitive and ancient name for the underworld should be a mere poetical epithet. Others, with more probability, connect the name with the root שָׁעַל, to be hollow, in which case it would resemble our word Hell, Germ. Holle, that is, hollow; and the name בּוֹר, pit, with which it is interchanged in the Old Testament, and ἄβυσσος, its synonym in the New, favour this derivation.<sup>1</sup>

This place of existence after death was thought by the Hebrew to be a place where man existed, but only in a dismal sense. Fohrer suggests:

The Hebrew term שְׁאוֹל probably means "non-land," the realm in which there is nothing active and dynamic, the land that therefore "does not exist" in the Israelite sense. It was conceived as an enclosed space within the abyssal ocean beneath the earth, or even beneath the waters (Job 26:5). The realm of total impotence, closed by barred gates (Isa. 38:10; Ps. 9:14 [Eng. 9:13]; Job 38:17), is entered by the shade that frees itself from the departed, there to lead the ghostly existence that traditionally typifies the fate of men after death.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A. B. Davidson, The Theology of the Old Testament, ed. by S. D. F. Salmond (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1904), pp. 425-26.

<sup>2</sup> Georg Fohrer, History of Israelite Religion, trans. David E. Green (New York: Abingdon Press, 1972), p. 219.

This writer would like to suggest that Sheol is a place. Sheol is a place of existence for the souls of the dead. It is a place that appears in Scripture to be very bleak and dismal, since there is a separation of the body and the soul. The souls of both the righteous and the unrighteous go to the place called Sheol. If one were to accept this view, he would be able to harmonize the fact that Abraham was gathered to his people in Sheol, whether they were saved or not. The righteous would be gathered in Sheol, or upper Sheol, while the wicked would be under punishment in the lowest part of Sheol (Deut 32:22).

Royston uses this verse in support of punishment for the wicked in Sheol when he comments:

It was pointed out in the introductory remarks to this chapter that it is often difficult to discern exactly where physical punishment stops and eternal punishment begins; this verse is a case in point. God's wrath and anger are greatly aroused due to the idolatry of the people. The context surrounding verse twenty-two is full of physical judgment on living people and even in the verse itself, the earth and mountain foundations are spoken of as coming under the judging fire of God. It is well established in the Old Testament that fire is both a symbol and a method of God's judgment. In this verse the fire is said to be upon the earth and also in the "lowest hell." Perhaps there is not the distinction between temporal and eternal punishment in the mind of God as in ours, but since both partake of the holy and righteous character of God, one is just an extension of the other in this verse.

However, the important thing is that there is a clear assertion that there is fire in Sheol and that this verse may possibly indicate degrees of punishment by using the term "lowest" (הַתַּיִת) as though this was the worst possible for these idolaters.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Royston, "The Old Testament Concept of Life After Death," pp. 80-81.

This understanding of Sheol is supported by Luke 16 which will be discussed later.

The occupants of Sheol are called the re<sup>e</sup>pā'îm. This term means "the spirits of the dead." The word probably comes from the word rāpâ which means to "grow weak" or "collapse."<sup>1</sup> This seems to indicate the total impotence of the spirits in Sheol. Sheol is often seen in the Old Testament to be a place of destruction (Job 26:6; 28:22; 31:12; Psa 88:11; Prov 27:20). However, Daniel 12:13 suggests that Sheol is a place of rest for the righteous.

#### A New Testament Perspective

Many times things that are somewhat unclear in the Old Testament are later clarified by the New Testament. This seems to be true in regards to the topic under discussion. This section will review the issue of Hades and the issue of Abraham's outlook on death.

#### Hades

Hades is the word used in the New Testament to describe the place beyond the grave. This writer feels that Hades is the same as the Sheol of the Old Testament. This can be proven by looking at two passages of Scripture. Psalm 16:10 says:

For Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Sheol;  
Neither wilt Thou allow Thy Holy One to see the pit.

This verse is quoted in the New Testament in Acts 2:27:

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid.

Because Thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades,  
Nor allow Thy Holy One to undergo decay.

The word for Sheol is translated here as Hades. Therefore, the concept of Sheol and the concept of Hades must be the same. This idea is strengthened in Acts 2:31 where an interpretation of the last part of verse 27 is given. Christ went to Hades although He was not abandoned there, and neither will the Old Testament saint be abandoned in Hades or Sheol.

Once one has come to the conclusion that Sheol of the Old Testament is the same as Hades of the New Testament, one can gain a better understanding of what Sheol was like by considering Luke 16:19-31. This is the passage concerning the rich man and Lazarus. Hades is demonstrated as consisting of two compartments. Lazarus is seen in one part of Hades, in the bosom of Abraham. The rich man is seen in another part of Hades where he is being tormented. The picture appears to be two compartments in Hades which are separated by an infinite gulf. Those in each compartment are separated from the other compartment, so that Lazarus cannot go across the chasm to place water on the tongue of the rich man (v. 26).

The two compartment theory presents a problem to those who see Sheol as one compartment for the wicked only. However, this writer feels that the Luke 16 passage is worthy of serious consideration. Some expositors treat the passage as a parable while others accept it as a genuine

reality. Nevertheless, the incident is told by the Lord and must be fully accurate in all details.

Some scholars have rejected the passage as a support for a two compartment view of Hades or Sheol. The reasons they reject the view are based on some of the phrases found in the passage.<sup>1</sup> One such phrase is that of "Abraham's bosom." Vos argues against this view when he says:

. . . if "the bosom of Abraham" were conceived as one of the two divisions of Hades, the other division would have been named with equal concreteness in connection with Dives. In point of fact, the distinction is not between, "the bosom of Abraham" and another place, but between the "bosom of Abraham" and Hades as antithetical and exclusive.<sup>2</sup>

The general question posed is, "Why is there not a special name for the abode of the wicked as there is for the abode of the righteous within Hades?" This writer does not see this as a major problem. It is possible that the name "Abraham's bosom" is given to express the temporary, tender and peaceful rest of the believer until the resurrection of Christ when the souls of believers would be transferred to Paradise (Eph 4:8,9; 2 Cor 12:1-4). Even if this view is not accepted by some, it is still worthy of consideration.

The other arguments used against this passage as a support for the two compartment theory are based on the

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<sup>1</sup>Paul Hook, "An Examination of the Two Compartment Theory Concerning Sheol" (Th.M. thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1959), pp. 32-39.

<sup>2</sup>James Orr, editor, The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1939), p. 1315.

phrases "carried by the angels," "now he is comforted," "afar off," and "great gulf." The arguments are very weak and do not disprove this passage as a possibility for a representation of the two compartment theory.

This same picture could be used to illustrate what Sheol of the Old Testament was like. If this is true, then Abraham's gathering to his people could also be true whether his ancestors were righteous or not. They would all go to the same place, although they would have been separated by the infinite chasm between the two compartments.

#### Abraham and the after-life

There is a misnomer that is common among Bible scholars today. Many think that the Old Testament saints did not have any idea what would happen to them after they departed from this world in death. However, the New Testament sheds some light on this subject. In Hebrews 11:13-16, the author writes concerning the list of Old Testament saints given previously in the chapter:

All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

In reference to the phrase "gathered to his people," Leupold says:

This is a clear testimony to the belief in a life after death on the part of the earliest patriarch. Though no specific revelation on the subject seems to have been given to these patriarchs, faith in the Almighty God drew its own conclusions as to whether God would ultimately let his children perish, and its conclusion was correct: He cannot. This passage confirms that conclusion. If Scripture is to be explained by Scripture, then Heb. 11:13-16 offers the fullest confirmation of our interpretation. Therefore the prevalent expositions which aim to deny the possibility of faith in a life after death on the part of the patriarchs will all have to be discarded.<sup>1</sup>

This passage of Scripture seems to fully support the view of this writer.

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<sup>1</sup>Herbert Carl Leupold, Exposition of Genesis, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956), pp. 694-95.

## CONCLUSION

Death is a subject of great mystery. The New Testament is filled with information regarding what death is like for the believer and the unbeliever alike. This study has uncovered for the writer valuable information concerning the Old Testament saints' perspective on death. Even still, there is a mystery about what happens to a person when he departs from this earth through death. However, the writer has been pleased to find that the Old Testament saint possibly knew more about the after-life than many scholars want to give him credit for.

The three phrases "go to your fathers," "gathered to his people," and "slept with his fathers" have generated an enjoyable study on the part of the writer. He is convinced that the phrases "go to your fathers" and "gathered to his people" are to be interpreted by the same view. Having taken into consideration the possible views, the context, the culture, the language, and the progressive revelation provided by the New Testament, the writer feels assured that the best explanation is that of the Sheol view. He feels that the Old Testament saints knew that when they died they would temporarily go to Sheol and await that time when they would stand before their God face to face. The context and the New Testament perspective seem to strongly support



this view. The language of the passages is supportive of this view but cannot be used to prove it. The culture in which the Israelites lived was saturated with the belief of a netherworld and some form of after-life. This may tend to suggest that the Israelites were saturated with such a belief as well.

The phrase "slept with his fathers" is much more of a mystery than the other two phrases. This phrase can be taken two ways, either as a reference to Sheol or just as an idiom for death. The burial view cannot be accepted on account of the context in which these passages lie. The context seems to best support the death view. The word death does not usually occur in the context with the phrase. It is clearly evident in the context that death is being implied, but the word itself never appears. The culture and language used can be supportive of either view. The most difficult thing to explain is why the Old Testament writers would use this different phrase to refer to Sheol. It seems that the other two phrases would be quite suitable if that is what the phrase was to imply. Therefore, this writer must conclude that the phrase is an idiom used to say that someone died.

The writer has learned much through this study. He has not answered all the questions that arise when studying the topic of death in the Old Testament, however, he feels that he has served his purpose in presenting a possible alternative in understanding the Old Testament view of

death. The writer hopes that someone else can take this study as a foundation to do more research on this topic, since very little has been done by scholars on it. Therefore, there is much room for further study on this most interesting topic.

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