

Afterlife Beliefs in Israel and the Ancient Near East

Sheol is the Hebrew word for the netherworld. Though it might have been considered an act of judgment for a person to be consigned to Sheol from life, it was not in itself a place of judgment to be contrasted to the reward of a heavenly destiny. The word was sometimes used as a synonym for "grave" because the grave was the portal through which one entered the netherworld. The Israelites believed that the spirits of the dead continued to exist in this shadowy world. They were not thought to have a pleasant existence, but Sheol is never associated with the torment of hellfire in the Old Testament (the imagery seen in Is 66:24 is not associated with Sheol). It is not clear that there were any alternatives to Sheol. People who were spared from Sheol were spared from it by being kept alive rather than by going somewhere else. There was at least a vague idea of somewhere else to go seen in the examples of Enoch and Elijah, who avoided the grave and presumably did not go to Sheol. But those texts are very unclear about what the other alternative was. In the absence of specific revelation to the contrary, Israelite beliefs conformed generally to those current among their Canaanite and Mesopotamian neighbors.

In Mesopotamian beliefs the dead needed to cross a desert, mountains and a river, and then descend through the seven gates of the netherworld. Though described in Mesopotamian literature as a place where there is darkness and the inhabitants are clothed in bird feathers and eat dust, kinder accounts were also current. The denizens of this shadow world were believed to be sustained by the offerings presented by those who were still alive. They enjoyed some light as the sun god passed through the netherworld when it was night in the land of the living so he could rise in the east again the next morning. The rulers of the netherworld, Nergal and Ereshkigal, were assisted by a group called the Anunnaki. Despite these depressing descriptions, no one wanted to be turned away from the gates because the alternative was to be a wandering spirit with no access to funerary offerings.

Bible Background Commentary - The IVP Bible Background Commentary – Old Testament.