Sheol in the Book of Job: With a Survey of Afterlife Ideas in the Ancient Near East

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SHEOL IN THE BOOK OF JOB:
WITH A SURVEY OF AFTERLIFE IDEAS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

by

Timothy E. Gilmartin

Thesis
Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
For the degree of Master of Arts in Biblical Studies
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The Bible translation used for this work is the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), unless otherwise noted.
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My time studying the Scriptures at Providence College has benefitted greatly under each of you.
# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

## Bible Translations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Full Name</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ESV</td>
<td>English Standard Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JPS</td>
<td>Jewish Publication Society Tanakh</td>
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<tr>
<td>KJV</td>
<td>King James Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>LXX</td>
<td>The Septuagint</td>
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<tr>
<td>NAB</td>
<td>New American Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>NASB</td>
<td>New American Standard Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>NETS</td>
<td>New English Translation of the Septuagint</td>
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<tr>
<td>NKJV</td>
<td>New King James Version</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NIV</td>
<td>New International Version</td>
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<tr>
<td>NRSV</td>
<td>New Revised Standard Version</td>
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<td>RSV</td>
<td>Revised Standard Version</td>
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## Journals and Commentaries

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<tr>
<td>AB</td>
<td>Anchor Bible</td>
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<tr>
<td>AOAT</td>
<td>Alter Orient und Altes Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBQ</td>
<td>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</td>
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<tr>
<td>IEJ</td>
<td>Israel Exploration Journal</td>
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<tr>
<td>JBL</td>
<td>Journal of Biblical Literature</td>
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<tr>
<td>JSOT</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>JSOTSup</td>
<td>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OLP</td>
<td>Orientalia Lovaniensia Periodical</td>
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Introduction

The study of Sheol has received significant attention from scholars of the Old Testament. Scholarly contributions have included identifying the significant development in ancient Israel's view of the afterlife as observed across the books of the Hebrew Bible. Research has also utilized comparative work in analyzing the afterlife views and burial practices of neighboring Mesopotamia, Egypt and Canaan, the fruit of which has shed greater light on Israel's understanding of the dead and has revealed both important similarities and major differences.

The purpose of this thesis is to focus on how Sheol is presented and understood in the wisdom book of Job. The wisdom books are a unique class of scripture, silent on God's covenant with Israel and the history of the nation, two themes that predominate the rest of the Hebrew Bible. It is therefore worth investigating how Sheol functions in Job given its unique theology, especially considering that it is the longest wisdom book with the strongest emphasis on Sheol.\(^1\) The Book of Job presents several passages of interest that reveal the ancient Hebrew idea of what lies beyond death. The ways in which the author perceived the realm of the dead and how those views are communicated will be critically analyzed. In order to accurately understand the Book of Job's views on Sheol, however, the afterlife views of the ancient Near East must first be reviewed.

\(^1\) Proverbs has the most direct references to Sheol with nine (1:12; 5:5; 7:27; 9:18; 15:11; 15:24; 23:14; 27:20; 30:16), while Job has eight (7:9; 11:8; 14:13; 17:13; 17:16; 21:13; 24:19; 26:6) and Ecclesiastes one (9:10). However, when adding the many indirect references in Job, the book has the most content on Sheol out of the wisdom literature. One example of an indirect reference to Sheol in Job would be 7:21b ("For now I shall lie in the earth;/ you will seek me, but I shall not be.").
Part I – An Overview of Afterlife Ideas in the Ancient Near East

Before examining the presentation of Sheol in Job, it is important to understand the afterlife views of the cultures surrounding Israel whose literature predated Israel's and whose ideas certainly had contact with and influence upon Israel. Considering that the patriarchal narrative concerning the Hebrew nation begins in Mesopotamia, moves to Egypt and then returns to Canaan, the three neighboring cultures will be explored in that order. Focusing on each culture's afterlife views one at a time also helps trace the development that occurred in each.

Three categories will be used for each culture to survey its afterlife views. The first category, the human condition, describes the aspects that the human being was believed to be created with. It then explains if and how those aspects were considered to continue beyond death. The second category, the netherworld, describes the realm that the dead were envisioned to be in. The realm’s environment and activity will be analyzed. The third category, the relationship between the living and the dead, describes the care that the living provided for their deceased loved ones. It also answers how the level of care was perceived to affect the well-being of both parties.
I. Mesopotamia

Ancient Mesopotamian views on the afterlife are gathered from diverse literary genres and time periods. While the beliefs concerning the dead frequently appear in narratives or epics, they also can be found in ritual texts, grave inscriptions, economic texts, royal edicts, letters and written omens. The time period for some of the sources such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* dates back nearly as far as the third millennium BC around the start of the Old Assyrian Empire, and certain figures mentioned in the epics such as Gilgamesh and Ur-Nammu were believed to have lived even earlier during the Early Dynastic Period (2900 – 2350 BC) and the Third Dynasty of Ur (2112 – 2004 BC), respectively. The Mesopotamian sources that will be referenced are *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 20th century BC), *The Death of Ur-Nammu* (c. 20th century BC), *The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld* (c. 18th century BC), and *The Atrahasis Epic* (c. 17th century BC). Each of these sources reveals unique details about the Mesopotamian view of the afterlife.

a. The Human Condition

To accurately comprehend Mesopotamian afterlife, it is important to consider their understanding of the human being. *The Atrahasis Epic* records a creation account where the gods formed humans from clay and brought them to life by infusing blood into them from We-ilu, a rebellious deity who was slaughtered for the occasion.³ The Mesopotamians believed that humans were alive for as long as they had blood in their

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² The exact composition dates for many of the ancient sources referenced in this thesis are not entirely agreed upon. The estimate given is based on the scholarly consensus, although there are significant differences.
veins and breath in their nostrils. Upon the cessation of blood flow and breathing, the body was considered a lifeless, empty cadaver, and it returned to the clay, quite similar to the dust returning to dust idea in Gen 3:19.

Death was not the end of existence for the Mesopotamians, however, as humans continued on in the form of a spirit in the underworld. The spirit, or eṭemmu in Akkadian, was the divine element that humans were created with even though they themselves were not divine. We-ili was said to have temu, which essentially means “personality”.4 Since humans were created using We-ili’s blood, they had a trace of his temu, from which came their eṭemmu (spirit). One’s eṭemmu was believed to continue on after death, and it was the mode through which humans experienced an animated existence in the underworld. Here it was recognizable by others and could be reunited with those who preceded the deceased person in death, but the eṭemmu did not necessarily retain the personality traits that the person possessed while alive.5 The best way to describe the eṭemmu is as one’s ghost. It was not a problem to the Mesopotamians for one to return to the dust and be dead, yet still continue on in the underworld as an eṭemmu.

The consensus among Mesopotamian literary sources is that mankind had no hope in resurrection or immortality. The Epic of Gilgamesh makes it clear that immortality was reserved for the gods and that every human must die, as depicted through Gilgamesh who tried for it and could not attain it. While it is true that Utnapishtim did in fact escape death, the story is careful to express that no other human would ever be given such a privilege.

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The mortality of the living is further displayed in *The Atrahasis Epic* where the god Enki ordains death for all mankind with the flood.⁶

b. The Netherworld

To the Mesopotamians the netherworld was a somewhat depressing version of life on earth. The underworld was perceived as being just beneath the earth’s surface, although conceptually it was very far removed from the land of the living. It was not a place of divine punishment or reward, but rather the destination for all the spirits of mankind who received proper burial care (those who did not receive proper care would become restless ghosts on earth).⁷ Unlike the Hebrew idea where all the dead were equal to one another in Sheol (cf. Job 3:13-19), one's life status at the time of death was retained in the Mesopotamian underworld. Kings remained kings, priests remained priests and those in the lower ranks of society kept the same status.⁸

One’s *eṭemmu* was not immediately transported to the netherworld but had to undergo a strenuous journey in order to reach it. The start of the journey was contingent upon proper burial and mourning over the corpse. The *eṭemmu*’s journey through the netherworld wilderness included traversing a demon-filled plain and crossing a river known as the Khuber River with the assistance of an individual named Khumut-tabal (also known as Silushi or Silulim). The *eṭemmu* would then enter the city of the dead through its seven walls and seven gates with the permission of an individual named Bidu, a gatekeeper

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⁸ Ibid., screen 6
whose name means “open up.” The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld records an episode of the goddess being stripped of her garments at each gate until she entered the city completely naked. However, she was able to return back to life at the end of the story being that she was divine.

Upon entrance the spirit would be judged by a group of divine beings known as the Anunnaki who would assign it a place in the community. The underworld was ruled by a god, originally the goddess Ereshkigal though in later texts the warrior god Nergal has this role, and the Anunnaki assisted the god in governing its affairs.10 The judgment passed on the efemmu by the Anunnaki was not based on the moral actions of the human while he or she was alive, but rather on one’s social status while living and on the care that the deceased’s body, grave or cult statue received following the death.11 In Enkidu and the Netherworld, a poem found in The Epic of Gilgamesh, the number of children one had determined one’s standing in the underworld.12 This understanding may have followed the reasoning that the more descendants one had the more funerary care one would receive through a greater population of mourners.

One’s efemmu was apparently not altogether separate from the body, as it is described as having corporeal needs in the underworld such as hunger and thirst. It is also

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9 Ibid., screen 5
11 Choksi, “Mesopotamian Beliefs,” screen 5. Moral evil to the Mesopotamians such as stealing or murder was dealt with in this world through the application of their laws. The Code of Hammurabi or the even earlier Code of Ur-Namnu are prime examples of this. Evil in general, on the other hand, was perceived as disorder in creation, which the Mesopotamians responded to with rites of renewal, particularly those in their New Year Festival. See Nicolas Wyatt, Space and Time in the Religious Life of the Near East (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001) 255.
described as sleeping in the grave, similar to the Hebrew notion of the dead sleeping (cf. I Kgs 2:10, 11:43; II Chr 9:31; the Hebrews did not specifically express one's spirit as sleeping but rather referred to the person in general as asleep, however). The body/soul dualism that characterized Greek thought would therefore not accurately reflect the Mesopotamian understanding of body and eṭemmu. The purpose of continuous offerings of food and drink for the deceased’s grave was to ensure their comfortable existence in the underworld, while the purpose of proper burial and mourning beforehand was to ensure that they arrived safely at the city of the dead. The Death of Ur-Nammu attests that “the food of the netherworld is bitter and the water of the netherworld is brackish,” and as a result the dead were dependent on the living for subsistence. As long as grave offerings continued, an eṭemmu was satisfied and could even be summoned to assist to aid or protect the living. Were an eṭemmu’s children to neglect providing it with sustenance and the offerings ceased, the eṭemmu would be reduced to a beggar in the underworld. In turn, the living might become subject to affliction.

Not all descriptions of the underworld were entirely pessimistic. In The Death of Ur-Nammu, the spirits of the dead rejoice and hold a feast upon Ur-Nammu’s arrival. The sun god Shamash also visited the underworld each night during his circuit, serving as its judge for the night and bringing light to its darkness. Iconography of Ishtar discovered at grave sites could indicate hope in a more pleasant afterlife considering she returned from

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13 Ibid., screen 5.
16 Cohen, Death Rituals, 94.
the underworld after her descent.\(^\text{18}\) As noted earlier, however, a belief in resurrection is not articulated in any literary sources. The iconography should therefore not be taken too far as evidence for resurrection.

c. The Relationship Between the Living and the Dead

The duty to make offerings on behalf of an \textit{efemmu} in the underworld fell to the oldest son of the deceased person, a responsibility that was probably part of receiving the firstborn share of the inheritance.\(^\text{19}\) For common people, it seems that offerings would eventually stop for a loved one after the immediate family member responsible for making such offerings had also died. There is no explanation given in Mesopotamian literature of what would happen to an \textit{efemmu} after the child who made the offerings passed away, whether additional generations would need to continue the sustenance for the \textit{efemmu} to not become a beggar in the underworld. The belief system may not have been that developed or concerned with such detail. What we do know, however, is that grave offerings for royal people were different by nature in that they did continue well beyond one’s immediate children. Each royal ancestor of the reigning king received grave offerings, even if the king was several generations removed.\(^\text{20}\) The extended ritual was likely intended by the king to secure supernatural favor from those who preceded him.

In the instance that deceased persons did not receive proper burial or mourning in Mesopotamia, they were believed to become a restless, wandering ghosts who pursued, possessed and harmed their victims. Non-burial could be the result of an unnatural or

\(^\text{18}\) Choksi, “Mesopotamian Beliefs,” screen 2.
\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., screen 7.
\(^\text{20}\) Ibid., screen 8.
violent death when the body was completely destroyed. Being unmarried or lacking family could also deprive someone of proper burial, particularly due to the lack of people available to mourn over the body to transport the *etemmu* through the netherworld wilderness and into the city of the dead. Nightmares, sickness and mental illness were believed to be caused by ghosts of the unburied or neglected dead, and when a person was possessed it was thought that the ghost entered their body through the ears.\(^{21}\) The Mesopotamians had various magic practices to combat ghosts such as burying a figurine that represented the unburied person as well as the use of ointments and potions.\(^{22}\) Just as *etemmu* were dependent on the living for their well-being in the underworld, so were the living at the mercy of the dead if they were not properly buried or cared for.

**Summary**

The Mesopotamian afterlife can best be described as a shadowy, subsistence-level existence where roles reflected society on earth and the gods continued to govern affairs. The themes of sleep and returning to the clay are similar to those we will see in ancient Israel. However, social class retention in the underworld was certainly unique to Mesopotamia. No punishment or reward existed in the underworld for one’s actions on earth, and neither resurrection nor immortality were possibilities. Rather, one would remain in the underworld perennially, but at least in comfort, so long as one’s living relatives provided food and drink periodically at the grave.

\(^{21}\) Ibid., screen 9.
\(^{22}\) Ibid.
II. Egypt

Of all the cultures in the ancient Near East, none had as detailed an idea of the afterlife as ancient Egypt and none had one more complex. Though the material on the afterlife is copious, complications arise when trying to produce a clear, overarching view of what the ancient Egyptians believed. The sheer span of time that their literature covered from the Early Dynastic Period (3100-2686 BC) through the New Kingdom (1069 BC) and later reveals major variances and developments in their ideas that are not necessarily congruent. It is important to note that the Egyptians’ excessive concern about the afterlife was not due to an obsession with death, but rather a love for life. Life was not viewed as ending upon physical death but continuing beyond it. Death, therefore, was simply a change or interruption, and great provision was made for the afterlife since it was the longer of the two. John Taylor attests that the basic archaeology of ancient Egypt speaks to their view of earthly life as temporary and the afterlife as eternal given that housing quarters were made of perishable materials such as mud-brick, reeds and wood, including for the ruling class, whereas death quarters such as tombs were constructed of stone.23

The very earliest beliefs about the afterlife appear sometime during the Badarian and Naqada I and II cultures (c. 4400 – 3200 BC) where archaeology reveals the dead were buried in individual pit-graves and that mourners placed jars of food and drink, weapons, flint knives, tools, cosmetics and jewelry inside for the departed to live the same way that they did on earth.24 Around the time that the Egyptian state was unified in 3100 BC, marking the start of the Early Dynastic Period, burial practices became more developed.

24 Ibid., 13.
Tombs became complex architectural structures, the most noteworthy of which were the pyramids for the pharaohs beginning c. 2630 BC with the pyramid of Djoser. A series of elaborate rituals, incantations and images became part of proper burial practice.\textsuperscript{25}

The Egyptian sources that will be referenced are as follows: from the Old Kingdom, \textit{The Instructions of Ptahhotep} (c. 24\textsuperscript{th} century BC) and \textit{The Pyramid Texts} (c. 24\textsuperscript{th} century BC); from the First Intermediate Period, \textit{The Coffin Texts} (c. 20\textsuperscript{th} century BC) and an anonymous letter; from the Second Intermediate Period, \textit{The Book of the Dead} (c. 16\textsuperscript{th} century BC); from the New Kingdom, \textit{The Amduat} (c. 15\textsuperscript{th} century BC), \textit{The Book of the Gates} (c. 14\textsuperscript{th} century BC), \textit{The Book of Caverns} (c. 13\textsuperscript{th} century BC) and an anonymous letter.

\textbf{a. The Human Condition}

To the ancient Egyptian, the human being was made up of six parts: the body, the heart, the \textit{ka}, the \textit{ba}, the name and the shadow. The body's importance cannot be understated as it was the foundation for the other parts to function. It was the base for the \textit{ka} and \textit{ba}, two invisible aspects of the person that required a physical form. Preservation of the body including through mummification and embalming was essential, as it was believed that such practices helped transform the corpse into a new eternal body.\textsuperscript{26} The second part that made up the human, the heart, was also closely connected with the body as it was physically part of it. Moreover, it was the place where intellect and memory came from (not the brain). Morality was believed to stem from the heart too, and ancient Egypt was preoccupied with moral living. In fact, in \textit{The Book of the Dead} one’s heart was said to

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 15.
\textsuperscript{26} Ibid., 17.
be weighed on a scale in the hall of judgment after death in order to determine if eternal life would be granted.\textsuperscript{27} The \textit{ka} was the twin or double of one’s self, an identical copy of the individual although immaterial. The Egyptians perceived that it came into existence at one’s birth, and it had connections with reproduction, represented through male potency or seed.\textsuperscript{28} A line in \textit{The Instructions of Ptahhotep} reads, “He is your son, your \textit{ka} begot him”.\textsuperscript{29} The word \textit{kA.t} in ancient Egyptian, meaning “vulva,” is also based on \textit{ka}, further showing the \textit{ka}’s synonymy with reproductive activity.\textsuperscript{30} The \textit{ka} was understood as the life force of the individual, and since the body could not consume food or drink after death, it was believed that the \textit{ka} received it and kept the person sustained in the afterlife. Tomb inscriptions frequently stated that funerary offerings nourished the \textit{ka} of the deceased.\textsuperscript{31} The \textit{ka} required a body to inhabit, but when an offering was made to the person, the \textit{ka} was free to move from the body to the entrance of the tomb or gravesite where the food or drink was placed, often at a statue in the tomb chapel. The \textit{ka} would temporarily inhabit the statue to partake of the offering and then go back to the body.\textsuperscript{32} Unlike the \textit{ba}, the \textit{ka} was limited to roaming from the body only within the grave site.

The \textit{ba} was the vehicle behind an individual and could be described as one’s personality. It was primarily understood as one’s spirit and was the mode by which an

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 17-18. 
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 17. 
\textsuperscript{29} Miriam Lichtheim, ed., \textit{Ancient Egyptian Literature, Vol. 1: The Old and Middle Kingdoms} (Berkeley: University of California, 1975) 66. 
\textsuperscript{30} Armine Arakelyan, “Ancient Egyptian kA Hieroglyph and Sign: A Short Overview on One of its Meanings and Form,” online posting, Academia.edu [bulletin board online; article at http://www.academia.edu/10283517/ accessed March 15, 2016] 1. 
\textsuperscript{31} Taylor, \textit{Death and Afterlife}, 19. 
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 19-20.
individual continued to exist beyond death. The *ba* had free and unrestricted movement and was able to leave the tomb and travel to the land of the living or even to the sky to be with the sun god. For this reason, it was depicted in Egyptian inscriptions and art as a bird with a human head. The only restriction on the *ba*’s travels was that it must return to and reunite with the body at night or else the individual would perish. Although it was not physical, the *ba* was able to perform human functions such as eating, drinking, speaking and moving. The *ba* could even feed itself, so it did not require the food and drink offerings that the *ka* did. Some similarities exist between the *ba* and the Akkadian *etemmu*.

The fifth and sixth aspects of the person, the name and the shadow, respectively, were equally important and also viewed as continuing beyond death. A name in ancient Egypt had a meaning that was believed to be directly connected to one’s well-being, similar to how a name in ancient Israel was indicative of one’s personality or destiny (cf. Nabal in 1 Sam 25:25). For example, the Egyptian name Amenhotep means “Amun is content,” which expresses favor from the god Amun to the individual who held the name. Remembrance of the name by the living was necessary for an individual’s survival in the afterlife. For this reason the name of the dead person would be pronounced at the funeral, a practice that was believed to provide nourishment in addition to the grave offerings. Funerary texts also instructed those who visited the tomb in future times to again pronounce the person’s name. The name was publicly inscribed all over the tomb including on the doorways, coffins and stelae, and the lasting presence of the name on earth assisted the deceased

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33 Ibid., 21.
34 Ibid., 21.
person in the world beyond.\textsuperscript{36} The shadow, on the other hand, was the least defined aspect of the person. Since the body casts a shadow, the Egyptians perceived the shadow to contain a very real part of the individual that would continue on. It was often believed to be able to separate from the body and move freely like the \textit{ba}, although some writings envision it as restricted to the body itself.\textsuperscript{37}

While it was possible for each of the six aspects to survive death individually, the desire was for all of these parts to perpetuate beyond death together and be united, resulting in a comprehensive rebirth. A passage in \textit{The Book of the Dead} mentions nearly all aspects of the person together, expressing the state as blessed and one that would never perish. Taylor translates the passage, “may his heart be sweet, may it join his body, his \textit{ba}-spirit to his body...twice purification to his \textit{ka}-spirit, to his \textit{ba}-spirit, to his corpse, to his shade, to his mummy; he shall never perish before the lord of the sacred land.”\textsuperscript{38} When and how this rebirth transpired is not clearly explained, especially as it relates to the various destinations of the person in the afterlife, such as the sky, the underworld and the Field of Reeds. Characteristic of Egyptian culture, the emergence of new ideas did not mean that those held previously were discarded. As new ideas developed, they were maintained alongside the old ones for centuries, and while some integration occurred, divergent beliefs such as varying afterlife destinations were not necessarily reconciled to produce coherent doctrine.

\textsuperscript{36} Taylor, \textit{Death and Afterlife}, 23-24.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 24.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid.
b. The Netherworld

The Egyptians’ understanding of a netherworld developed over time. The earliest conception of an afterlife in the pre-historic Egyptian periods was simply as a continuation of earthly existence. Belief in rebirth, or states more beatific than earthly continuation, first appeared during the Early Dynastic Period and originally pertained only to the pharaoh, although as time went on they were extended to his subjects as well. The earliest written source for the pharaoh’s rebirth is *The Pyramid Texts* from the Old Kingdom where the myths about Osiris and Ra first appeared. Since Osiris resurrected from death, and the pharaoh is identified with Osiris in some of *The Pyramid Texts*, the idea followed that the pharaoh would resurrect from death too. The pharaoh in his resurrected state would ascend to the sky and join the stars, which were regarded as eternal. Later, *The Coffin Texts* of the First Intermediate Period introduced a description of the underworld, which was the abode for all the dead except pharaoh (the sky was previously conceived of as the general realm of the dead for humans during the Old Kingdom, although such ideas for common people were not defined). The *Coffin Texts* introduced the belief that each individual had the chance to be identified with Osiris and therefore be resurrected, evidenced partly by the fact that the dead are addressed in such texts as Osiris.

According to *The Amduat* of the New Kingdom, each evening the sun god Ra would pass through the underworld and the dead would awake to new life when his rays shone on them. The aspect of the person that resided in the underworld is not defined, although the fact that Ra encountered his own corpse there, merged with it and was rejuvenated,

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39 Ibid., 32.
40 Ibid., 25-27.
41 Ibid., 28.
probably means the Egyptians thought that the body was present in the underworld.\textsuperscript{42} The ancient Egyptians were not concerned with the seeming logical conflict that one’s body could not be buried in the earth and be in the underworld at the same time. It also does not follow that the \textit{ka} was considered the aspect of the person in the underworld, since it was not allowed to leave body or at least the tomb area. While an argument could be made that the Egyptians thought all aspects of the person together constituted one’s being in the underworld, the \textit{ba} traveled with the sun god and even participated in his nightly descent to the underworld,\textsuperscript{43} showing that at least one aspect of the person was conceived of as not naturally present in the underworld. It appears that the merging of the \textit{ba} with the body in the underworld is what brought about rebirth. This is probably why the Egyptians believed that the \textit{ba} was free to travel but had to return to the buried corpse each night. Whatever the case, Ra’s merging with his corpse in the underworld during his nightly descent and his awakening of the dead to new life was the model for rebirth.

Amalgamating a consistent, highly detailed framework for exactly what one’s state would be in the underworld and how one’s resurrection would transpire thereafter might be an unachievable goal even for an Egyptologist as the ancient Egyptians themselves were not concerned with offering such a model.

What we do know from Egyptian material is that the primary goal of the deceased was to reach an immortal state known as \textit{akh}, conceived of as a cyclical eternity of endless rebirths in the manner of Ra and Osiris. \textit{Akh} was the transfigured being as a whole, and the word carried connotations of luminosity and effectiveness like the gods had, living

\textsuperscript{42} Ibid., 29.
\textsuperscript{43} Part of the \textit{ba’s} descent into the underworld with Ra included spearing the serpent god Apep, who was the leader of the forces of chaos and opposed Ra’s descent. See Taylor, \textit{Death and Afterlife}, 31.
eternally and influencing other beings. In order to reach akh, one had to successfully pass a series of tests. As in Mesopotamia, proper burial was necessary to even begin the journey and a demon-filled wilderness must be passed, although here the obstacles included mounds and water-bodies such as fiery lakes rather than a steppe (the Egyptians also believed there was an alternate land path, seemingly an easier option if one was so lucky to find themselves on it). The Coffin Texts describe how one needed special knowledge to reach the underworld abode, including the names of its inhabitants, familiarity with its paths and the required words and acts to get through its gates. Both The Amduat and The Book of the Gates, which is also from the New Kingdom, describe how the underworld was comprised of twelve regions that corresponded to each hour of Ra’s journey and were occupied by the dead. At the moment Ra’s light shone upon the dead, their bodies would awaken to new life in their coffins. They would cast off the mummy wrappings and enjoy the equivalent of a full lifespan in the hour they were in Ra’s presence. The dead were then judged for their behavior during the hour, with rewards and punishments being assigned. Upon cessation of the event, Ra would depart and the dead would lament and return back to sleep until the following night where the same thing would happen again, and the cycle would repeat endlessly. Apparently this cyclical eternity was called or named akh, although it was not the only conception of akh.

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45 Taylor, Death and Afterlife, 33.
46 Ibid., 32.
48 The dead casting off their mummy wrappings in the underworld implies that the Egyptians viewed the body that was buried as interchangeable with the body that apparently resided in the underworld. See Taylor, Death and Afterlife, 33-34.
49 Taylor, Death and Afterlife, 34.
The Book of Caverns of the New Kingdom presents an idea of separate fates for the righteous and the wicked. The idea was apparently distinct from the aforementioned rewards and curses that came at the end of the awakened hour in Ra’s presence. Here, the sun god visits the underworld nightly as he does in the other sources. However, the righteous are granted eternal life and blessings for living according to maat ("justice"), whereas the wicked are viciously tormented and burned in furnaces until made totally extinct. In this text, it appears that the wicked would receive only this one visitation from Ra, which resulted in their final demise. The righteous, on the other hand, would perpetually have eternal life conferred on them during Ra’s nightly visit to the underworld.

Taylor explains how the Egyptians also conceived of an alternate state of akh as shown in a completely separate tradition, one where the transfigured dead were in the form of everyday dress in a paradise known as the Field of Reeds. This idea appears during the Second Intermediate Period in The Book of the Dead, which came slightly before the developed idea of a cyclical eternity in the underworld as described in the New Kingdom sources. The two traditions seem to have existed alongside one another, and they did not pose problems for Egyptians thinkers. The Field of Reeds was a place for the righteous that reflected the land of Egypt with rivers and banks. So close in resemblance was the Field of Reeds to the land of Egypt that it was considered undesirable for an Egyptian to die in a foreign land and be buried there. Here the righteous dead would plough, sow and reap crops, sustaining themselves throughout eternity. One requirement in the Field of Reeds was that each person would have to do agricultural labor for the gods.

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50 Ibid., 38.
51 Ibid., 38.
52 Ibid., 40.
53 Ibid.
in addition to themselves. The only way to escape this burdensome responsibility was through a magical ritual involving a figurine known as a shabti that the living would use in hopes to relieve their beloved deceased of the task.54

Like the afterlife in the underworld, afterlife in the Field of Reeds also required proper funerary care to begin the journey. Instead of traversing a wilderness, however, the Field of Reeds tradition envisioned the individual immediately in a place of judgment known as the Hall of Two Truths, presided over by Osiris, the goddesses Isis and Nephyths and the sons of Horus (in later texts, Ra judges in the place of Osiris).55 The dead person greeted the gods by their names, and in turn the gods investigated the person. The person recited forty-two negative confessions to attest their character and deny committing particular wrongs while alive.56 The Declaration of Innocence in The Book of the Dead presents these confessions including, “I have not done any harm…I have not blasphemed a god…I have not robbed the poor…I have not killed…I have not depleted the loaves of the gods.”57 The person’s heart was then weighed on a scale against a feather, which represented the moral ideal of maat.

Maat was the force that moves the universe and society into order, and practically speaking it was the acceptable standard of behavior that humans were expected to live by. The word means “[what is] right” or “justice,” and it was the king’s duty to increase its

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54 Ibid., 34-35.
55 Ibid., 37.
56 Ibid.
57 Miriam Lichtheim, Ancient Egyptian Literature: The Late Period (University of California Press, 1973) 125.
operation among the people in his kingdom.\textsuperscript{58} Maat was also personified as a goddess to whom temples were built in the New Kingdom. It was believed that by living according to maat, the goddess would accompany one in burial and into the afterlife. When the person’s heart was weighed against the feather of maat in the hall of judgment, an equal balance proved that the individual lived in conformity with maat, so that eternal life and land in the Field of Reeds would thereby be granted. If the heart was heavier than the feather, however, the individual was guilty of wrongdoing and their heart was devoured by the creature Ammut who crouched next to the scale.\textsuperscript{59} A devoured heart meant that one’s access to the afterlife would be cut off, which may have represented annihilation.

c. The Relationship Between the Living and the Dead

Offerings for the dead were just as important a part of ancient Egypt as they were in Mesopotamia. The eldest son was responsible for making offerings for a deceased parent, and small sculptured busts of the loved one were kept in homes. Letters sometimes accompanied food offerings at the tomb as a mode of communication, and it was believed that the ka would read the letter while consuming the food or drink offering.\textsuperscript{60} Intervention by the dead in the affairs of the living was also a major belief, as the dead would be petitioned for help when no other natural solutions remained. A First Intermediate Period letter depicts a man petitioning his deceased wife to help fight off the disease in his limbs:

\textsuperscript{59} Taylor, \textit{Death and Afterlife}, 38.
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 42.
Now since I am your beloved on earth, fight on my behalf and remove the infirmity of my body. Please become a spirit for me before my eyes that I may see you fighting on my behalf in a dream. I will then deposit offerings for you as soon as the sun has risen and outfit for you your offering-slab.\(^6\)

This letter displays a belief in the dead's ability to help the living. However, harm towards the living was equally a real threat. The Egyptian underworld was quite a perilous place, and if the dead were not cared for through proper bodily preparation, burial, funerary spells and offerings, several misfortunes could await them there. *The Coffin Texts* describe such misfortunes as hunger, thirst and even the reversal of bodily functions like walking upside down and consuming one's own waste.\(^6\) The living were cognizant of the fact that improper care of the dead could result in reciprocal harm to themselves and sought to avoid such risk as a result. In a New Kingdom letter, a man states that his deceased wife is the cause behind the misery he is in, despite him performing all the proper funerary rites for her. He therefore states that he will appeal to the gods for justice.\(^6\) Both the righteous dead (*akh*) and the wicked dead (*mut*) were capable of harming the living. Disrepair of a relative's tomb was a common cause that brought harm, so a new one would be built to appease them.\(^6\)

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\(^{64}\) Taylor, *Death and Afterlife*, 44.
Summary

What we can therefore gather from the Egyptian sources are essentially two main ideas about the afterlife, one in the underworld and one in the Field of Reeds. The underworld tradition first appeared in *The Coffin Texts* of the First Intermediate Period and developed through New Kingdom sources such as *The Amduat, The Book of the Gates* and *The Book of Caverns*. Ra’s nightly visit brought cyclical resurrection and eternal life to the righteous and annihilation to the wicked, the latter event seemingly a one-time occurrence as opposed to the former. The Field of Reeds tradition in *The Book of the Dead* of the Second Intermediate Period presents the dead in a hall of judgment. Upon affirmation of a moral life, the righteous entered a paradise that closely resembled the land of Egypt, whereas the wicked were annihilated. The vision for humans in ancient Egypt was for all six parts of their being to transcend beyond physical death and to achieve the eternal state of *akh*, whether in the underworld or the Field of Reeds.

Certain parallels exist with Mesopotamia. The *ba*, one of the aspects of the person to the Egyptians, was similar to the Akkadian *eṭemmu*. The *ba* and the *eṭemmu* were one’s spirit and the primary way a human continued on beyond death. The *ba* was distinct from the *eṭemmu*, however, in that it could travel and was not confined to the underworld. A successful journey to the underworld was contingent upon proper burial both in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Blessing or harm from the dead upon the living could also result from the care they received through grave offerings. Distinctly unique to Egypt, however, is the concept of resurrection and eternal life, which was found neither in Mesopotamia nor Canaan. They were the first in the ancient Near East to hold this idea and came long before Israel, who did not develop a clear conception of resurrection until after the Babylonian
exile in the Book of Daniel. Ancient Egypt’s details on how resurrection would transpire were much more complicated and otherworldly than Israel’s.
III. Canaan

The Canaanite view of the afterlife had no expectation of resurrection or immortality. They did believe they could bring the dead alive in a sense through ritual, however, and a particular class of the dead were even believed to be deities. The ways the Canaanites buried and cared for their dead were quite standard when compared to their ancient Near Eastern counterparts. On the other hand, their practices of contacting and celebrating the dead were certainly unique to ancient Canaan’s culture and religion. The sources of reference to understand Canaan’s view of the afterlife are the following Ugaritic narratives: *The Baal Myth* (c. 15th century BC), *The Aqhat Epic* (c. 14th century BC), and *The Kirta Legend* (c. 14th century BC).

a. The Human Condition

Upon death, the Canaanites perceived that one’s vital element or life force, *npš*, left the body.65 Other Ugaritic texts describe that upon death one’s wind or breath, *rh*, leaves the body. Both *npš* and *rh* are present in the same line in *The Aqhat Epic* where Aqhat’s death is described, “his life shall depart like a breath” (*tši km rh npšh*).66 Tess Dawson stresses an interrelation between *npš* and *rh*, based on the idea that the life force left the body out of the nostrils like a smoke or vapor at one’s last breath, making the body lifeless.67 After the body became lifeless, the Canaanites believed that the dead continued on in the underworld. Alan Segal asserts that it was one’s *npš* that continued to exist

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there. However, the dead were not considered to be immortal, and there was no belief in a resurrection.

The only sense of immortality in ancient Canaan, if it can even be referred to as such, came in the form of one’s celebration and veneration at a feast called a marzeah. This concept is evident at the end of The Aqhat Epic. After Aqhat has been killed and is in the underworld, the goddess Anat says to him, “ask life and I will give it to thee,/ immortality and I will freely grant it thee.../ As Baal, even as he lives and is feted,/ lives and is feted and they give him to drink,/ singing and chanting before him.../ even so will I give thee life, O Hero Aqhat.” Anat’s offer was therefore not a return to life but rather the experience of celebration and toasting through the festivities of the living and was the only way that the dead were conceived of as living again.

Anat’s offer is somewhat ironic because earlier in the epic, she presents a false offer of immortality to Aqhat in an attempt to take his coveted bow and arrows. Aqhat exposes the offer as frivolous, stating that he knows that he will die as all men do and will not be fooled. In response to his bold words, Anat calls for his wounding by the god Yatpan, but Yatpan accidently murders him and Aqhat dies just as he said he would. Segal asserts that Anat’s original offer of immortality was actually the same one that he received in the end anyway, a marzeah in his honor. The reality of man’s mortality is further depicted in The Kirta Legend. The children of the king of Khubar erroneously thought that their father

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68 Segal, *Life After Death*, 114.
69 Segal, *Life After Death*, 113.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid., 111-112.
72 Ibid., 113.
was immortal since he was a king, and the idea is presented as naïve and mistaken. What is clear is that the Canaanites were firm in their belief that humans could not live forever in the manner of the gods, and they had not even one, historical exception to the rule like the Mesopotamians did in Utnapishtim.

There is also a strong lack of evidence in Canaan for a belief in a resurrection. *The Baal Myth*, which is a fertility myth, mentions the resurrection of the god Baal, but there is no indication in Ugaritic material that humans had a similar hope. This reality parallels Mesopotamia where Ishtar’s resurrection was not believed to serve as a model for humans. As the story in *The Baal Myth* goes, Baal consents to visit the underworld at Mot’s request. Before leaving, he mates with a cow eighty-eight times, produces a son to leave behind, and then he dies, depriving the earth of fertility and causing it to dry up. As Baal’s sister and consort, Anat retaliates by confronting and overcoming Mot. Baal returns to new life as a result and the earth is renewed, but the battle between Mot and Baal/Anat occurs cyclically. The real significance of the myth lies in its relation to the climate and rain patterns of the area. As the god of storm and cloud, Baal was worshipped for the provision of rain and the reaping of the agricultural harvest. The reasons that the Canaanites had for explaining the ceasing of rain in late spring and its returning in the fall was that Baal had died and gone underground and then had come back up. *The Baal Myth*’s primary purpose therefore was to explain the seasons, not to express any beliefs about resurrection or the afterlife. Segal states that the myth does not go beyond the focus of Baal’s lordship over the climate.

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75 Ibid., 110.
b. The Netherworld

Since the dead were buried in the earth, the netherworld’s location was understood by the Canaanites as beneath the soil. The underworld was the kingdom of Mot, the god who ruled the dead. There was no idea of reward or punishment awaiting the dead in the underworld in ancient Canaan. Unlike Mesopotamian and Egyptian material, very few details are given at Ugarit about the underworld environment and the affairs of the dead therein, a shortage of information that is similar to the Hebrew Bible. Really the only special experience the dead could find beyond death was the temporary transformation of their state, made possible through the marzeah ritual by the living.

A marzeah was a great drinking party that was held in honor of a deceased person in the family. It usually occurred sometime after the burial and wake and was not necessarily limited to one occasion. In The Aqhat Epic, Baal mentions among the duties of a son the hosting of a marzeah for one’s father. The marzeah ritual would include toasting and drinking to the honor of the deceased person, whose departed spirit was believed to appear at the party. The phenomenon of ghosts entering a house for a marzeah is recorded in The Aqhat Epic. Here the family roles are actually reversed, however, with a father, Danel, hosting the party for his prematurely dead son, Aqhat:

Then Daniel should say:
'Come into the house of my Marzeah,
go into my house for the rp’um.
I invite you into my house,
I call you into my palace...
ghosts flutter to the holy place.
may they come into the house of my Marzeah.'

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76 Klaas Spronk, Beatific Afterlife in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East (AOAT 219; Verlag Butzon & Berker, 1986) 170.
The recalled spirit would receive libation offerings presented at the party from the family members and the rest of the guests who would also be drinking. Altered states of mind from excessive drinking may have contributed to the heightened perception of the spirit’s presence in the room. A marzeah was typically a raucous occasion and orgies were not uncommon, serving to provide wild entertainment for the deceased person. While the dead could not be brought back to life through the ritual, they were readily present in the moment to be praised, toasted and celebrated, a much more pleasant reality than confinement in the underworld, even if it was only a temporary experience.

The Canaanites did believe in a special group among the dead, however, known as the rp’um. They were privileged to participate in the New Year festival in the fall, being recalled from the underworld to eat, drink and celebrate the return of Baal and the rain. The rp’um’s arrival was perceived grandiosely with chariots and banners and in the company of the gods. Segal offers a translation of rp’um as “healed ones,” consistent with the ancient Near Eastern idea that the dead were naturally in a broken state since they were no longer living on earth. Segal’s translation is likely based on an extension of the text about the rp’um quoted above. The extended text from The Aqhat Epic reads, “Then [Baal] will heal/ you/ The Shepherd will/ give life/ to you.” Both the rp’um and ghosts are mentioned together by Danel in his invitation to the marzeah for his son, but it is not clear what is the distinction between them. The best explanation seems to be that the

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77 Segal, Life After Death, 113.
78 Ibid., 118.
79 Ibid., 116.
80 Janet Smith, Dust or Dew: Immortality in the Ancient Near East and in Psalm 49 (Cambridge: James Clark and Co, 2012) 160. Philip Johnston states that this text is very difficult to translate and that some scholars dismiss the theme of revivification in it. See Philip S. Johnston, Shades of Sheol: Death and Afterlife in the Old Testament (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2002) 140.
rp’um were a special class of ghosts. Both the rp’um and ghosts were “healed” in the sense that they were reconnected to the living through a marzeah, with the former having the privilege of participating in the New Year festival as well. The New Year festival can perhaps be described as a giant marzeah for Baal. The god himself was perceived as literally coming back to life through the festival. The same cannot be said for the rp’um, however.

The Baal Myth possibly equates the rp’um with deities considering the parallel structure of the below passage. The setting of the passage is the sun god Shapash passing through the underworld each night, just as the respective sun gods in Mesopotamia and Egypt did. The text reads:

Shapash, the rp’um are under you;
Shapash, the ghosts are under you;
The gods come to you,
Behold, the dead come to you.\textsuperscript{81}

Segal understands the rp’um in this passage as deified ancestors since they are referred to as gods.\textsuperscript{82} While this seems contradictory to the idea stated previously that immortality in Canaan was not believed to be an option for humans, deification of the dead did not necessarily mean they were immortal or on equal footing with the gods in the pantheon. The rp’um’s association with the gods could simply be due to their arrival at the New Year festival with Baal and the gods, and otherwise they were confined to the underworld. William Schniedewind and Joel Hunt offer an interpretation of the rp’um as deceased kings, taking the word as the plural of Rapiu, which is a name for Baal, the eternal king.\textsuperscript{83} The

\textsuperscript{81} John C. Gibson, Canaanite Myths and Legends (London: T&T Clark, 2004) 81.
\textsuperscript{82} Segal, Life After Death, 116.
\textsuperscript{83} William M. Schniedewind, Joel H. Hunt, A Primer on Ugaritic Language, Culture and Literature (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007) 16.
royal household in Canaan certainly deified their ancestors for protection and favor, and
the king was probably believed to have semi-divine status. Deified ancestors appears to
be the correct meaning of rp’um, therefore, and the rp’um’s presumed lack of immortality in
the manner of the other deities did not disqualify them as gods in the eyes of the
Canaanites who attributed noteworthy power and status to them. The apparent way one
would be among the rp’um in the underworld was to have been a king while alive.

c. The Relationship Between the Living and the Dead

Archaeological and literary evidence speaks to other, various ways that the dead
were venerated in Canaan. Part of the burial custom was pouring a glaze upon the person’s
head. Filling a skull’s cavities with plaster was also common as it gave it a fuller, more life-
like face to commemorate and remember the person. Plastered skulls of this sort were
found in Jericho in the 1930s and again in the 1950s. As a line in The Aqhat Epic reads,
“Glaze will be poured upon my head,/ plaster upon my pate.” The dead were honored
through grave offerings like they were in Mesopotamia and Egypt. They also were
perceived of as needing sustenance, and the family gave offerings of food at intervals. A
large jar was often placed at the entrance of the tomb for this purpose, while at other tomb
sites it was buried underground in a depository, which was believed to make it easier for
the deceased person to access and consume.

The tombs themselves were sometimes connected to the family house by a stone
shaft and would be used over generations, with prior remains being moved aside for new

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84 Ibid.
85 Peter F. Ellis, The Yahwist; the Bible’s First Theologian: With the Jerusalem Bible Text of the Yahwist
86 Segal, Life After Death, 115.
ones. Deceased children were not always buried within the tomb, but buried at the entrance.\textsuperscript{87} Perhaps this is in some way related to the practice of child sacrifice in Canaanite culture. Other tombs had halls built above them, which served the dual purpose of both an herb garden for the marjoram leaves used in funerary rituals and also as a place to fill offerings jars and perform rites for the gods.\textsuperscript{88} The close proximity of the tomb to the house was to keep the dead a part of the family. Relationships between the living and the dead were just as important in Canaan as they were in Mesopotamia and Egypt, and the purpose of the grave offerings was to let the dead know that they were cared for and to appease them from any type of retaliation for neglect.

\textit{Summary}

What we can therefore gather from Canaan regarding the afterlife is that upon death one's \textit{npš} went to the underworld and continued to exist there. While humans could not resurrect or live forever, their ghost could be recalled at a \textit{marzeah} to be toasted and celebrated in the company of the living. The \textit{rp’um} were a privileged group among the dead, likely deceased kings, who were considered gods and could partake in the fall festival with Canaan’s deities, even if they were not immortal. Grave offerings were essential, and tombs being connected to homes reflected the ideal of always keeping the dead as active members of the family.

Canaanite views of the afterlife parallel Mesopotamia in several ways. Immortality was reserved for the gods in both cultures. Baal’s resurrection did not serve as a model for humans in \textit{The Baal Myth} just as Ishtar’s did not in \textit{The Descent of Ishtar to the Underworld}.

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.\textsuperscript{87} \\
\textsuperscript{88} Ibid.\textsuperscript{88}
The *npš* existed in the same weak state in the underworld that the *etemmu* did. However, very few details are given at Ugarit describing any action or activity within the underworld, which is different from Mesopotamia and Egypt but similar to Israel. One major detail that is given is that the sun god would pass through and shine on its inhabitants. This was staple belief for all cultures in the ancient Near East except Israel. The dead needed sustenance in Canaan as they did in Mesopotamia and Egypt and were provided with grave offerings by the living for good relationships to be maintained. The dead also remained a part of the family, evidenced by their burial chamber connected to the house, very unlike Israel where the dead were buried away from the house and neglected thereafter.
IV. Israel

Ancient Israel's view of the afterlife was most distinct when compared with their neighbors. The best way to form an overview of Israel's ideas is to say that they developed from no belief in an afterlife into a belief in bodily resurrection and new life on earth. In Israel's early stages, death was the permanent end of life (cf. Jacob and David's words in Gen 42:38 and II Sam 12:23, respectively). The dead were still envisioned as going to the underworld, but there was neither continuance of social class there as in Mesopotamia nor a spiritual return to earth for festive occasions through a marzeah as in Canaan. The dead are presented as inactive and strictly confined to Sheol throughout the Hebrew Bible (with the exception of I Samuel 28 and the later, resurrection texts of Ezek 37:1-14 and Dan 12:2), and we will see that the Book of Job is firmly in line with this view.

While some Psalms, whose dates of composition are debatable, speak of seeing God and are associated with the afterlife, Mark Smith maintains these texts are not references to an awakening from death but rather a beatific vision of God in this life.89 A case could be made that there is a foreshadowing of hope for a resurrection in pre-exilic material,90 but the idea does not become developed until exilic texts and post-exilic texts. The valley of dry bones in Ezek 37:1-14 gives a picture of fallen Israelites being raised back to earthly life, although this life was probably envisioned as ending again someday. The awakening of the multitudes in Dan 12:2 also depicts people being raised to eternal life, and this one is described as one that will never end. Israel was distinct among their neighbors for their

90 Johnston renders Deut 32:39 and I Sam 2:6 as a hope for resurrection where Yahweh states that he kills and makes alive. Although some date the composition of these texts to after the exile, their theological content is presented as before it. See Johnston, Shades of Sheol, 218-219.
belief in restored life on earth, as even Egypt with their hopeful afterlife in the Field of Reeds did not envision new life on earth itself but rather saw paradise as a place that was conceptually outside of earth.

a. The Human Condition

The Hebrews emphasized the holistic nature of the human person. This is evident in the Yahwist creation narrative where dust, which constituted the body, and God’s breath, which constituted the spirit, together made man a living soul (cf. Gen 2:17). What distinguished the nature of the human person in Israel is that one’s spirit, אֲדַנְו, was not expected to continue on in the underworld like the Akkadian ējemmu or Ugaritic npš. Rather, one’sروح returned back to God. Qoheleth describesروح in the language of humans borrowing or hosting something that is not theirs, which they forfeit upon death (cf. Eccl 12:7). John Walton explains thatروح is related to vitality, which was utterly stripped from the human at death. The reason is because the Hebrews wanted to give no attribution of life to the dead in any way.

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92 For example, in Isa 14:9, a rare passage where action is attributed to the dead (and poetically at that), the word used for the dead is רפאים, notروح. A similar phenomenon appears in I Samuel 28, the peculiar story of the dead Samuel being conjured up to the earth through a medium. The word that Saul uses in the story for the departed Samuel is אֱוֹב (v. 8), a very obscure word that has connections with necromancy. The departed Samuel that is then said to come up out of the ground is described as אלים (v. 13), a word for a divine being that is never used for a human. In each case, the author avoids usingروح so as to not attribute any type of life or being to the dead in Sheol.
Since man was understood as a whole being, mortality was stressed very definitively in ancient Israel. Man’s identity is frequently associated with the dust, since from it he was fashioned and it is the destination he is inevitably headed towards. The images of dust and clay often symbolize man’s fate in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Eccl 3:20, Isa 64:8, Jer 18:6), evoking the curse of the ground in the Yahwist creation narrative (cf. Gen 3:19). What truly distinguished Israel’s understanding of the human condition from their neighbors, however, is that man was not expected to enter into a partial or substandard version of life in the underworld. Since one could live only as a whole person, death meant a complete end. An afterlife in ancient Israel could only be understood in the context of full restoration to life on earth through resurrection, and this belief did not develop until the latter part of Israel’s history. Mortality was therefore much more literal to the ancient Hebrews, and texts that attribute action to the dead in the underworld are overwhelmingly absent. We will discuss ancient Israel’s understanding of the human condition in greater detail in Part II, Section I.

b. The Netherworld

Ancient Israel’s abode of the dead, שָאוֹל (transliterated sheol), is mentioned 66 times in the Hebrew Bible. A dark, resting place shrouded in obscurity, Sheol was characterized in ways that were unique compared to Israel’s neighbors. Some of these

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93 The etymology of the word is contested and its meaning is not completely understood. The root of the word is the verb רָאַשׁ, which means “to ask or inquire,” perhaps indicating the obscurity surrounding the realm of the dead that one would ask about. There are strong connections between the word and 1 Samuel 28 where Saul inquires of the dead Samuel through the medium (see v. 16 for the verb’s appearance), an event for which Saul was always remembered and likely explains the choice of his name by the author. Both Saul and Sheol are spelled שָאוֹל. See Segal, Life After Death, 135.
characterizations include complete social equality among its inhabitants, no visitation from a sun god or even their own God, and an utter disconnect from all things pertaining to the living. We will analyze Sheol in great detail in Part II, particularly Sections II-IV.

c. The Relationship Between the Living and the Dead

The dead were emphatically not a focus in ancient Israel. In fact, Israelite religion forbade the various modes of communication with the departed that constituted central aspects of their neighbors’ ways of life. Deuteronomy commands:

No one shall be found among you...who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead. For whoever does these things is abhorrent to the Lord; it is because of such abhorrent practices that the Lord your God is driving [nations] out before you. You must remain completely loyal to the Lord your God. Although these nations that you are about to dispossess do give heed to soothsayers and diviners, as for you, the Lord your God does not permit you to do so.

(Deut 18:10-14)

In addition to necromantic restrictions such as this, most archaeological evidence shows that the dead were not a focus to the Israelites. For years, there was an absence of food and drink offerings to the dead found during excavations that could be linked with the ancient Israelites. Alexander Heidel interpreted this lack of evidence in the 1940s to mean that the Israelites neglected the practice of grave offerings altogether.94

Evidence of food and drink remains such as pottery and animal bones have since been found at gravesites in Israel at places like Ashkelon, Beth Shemesh and Lachish.

Scholars such as Elizabeth Bloch-Smith and Philip King assert that Israel imitated Canaan in

providing offerings to the dead, at least for a time. While this is certainly possible, others maintain that there are complications surrounding the association of such remains with the ancient Israelites. Each town where they were found had a mixed ethnic background, and the presence of pottery does not necessarily mean that food for the dead was kept inside of them. Roland De Vaux maintains that materials typically left beside a corpse by the Israelites were confined to a few personal belongings like vases and lamps. Animal bone remains in the tombs are also difficult to identify as Israelite sacrifices to the dead since caves were often reused, and the bones themselves do not always meet the criteria for having been a sacrifice. Philip Johnston states that the discovered sites cannot be clearly identified as Judahite and that there is no clear archaeological evidence that the Israelites regularly provided food and drink offerings for their dead. What we do know is that the authors of the Hebrew Bible did not view the dead as needing sustenance in the underworld, even though some apostate Israelites may have engaged in the practice.

Proper burial, on the other hand, was viewed as imperative for the dignity of the person in ancient Israel. The patriarchs certainly valued the practice for their family members (cf. Gen 23; 25:8-10; 35:29; 50:1-14, 24-26; Josh 24:32). The account where the men of Jabesh-Gilead retrieve the bodies of Saul and his sons from Beth Shan and bury the bones in their ancestral tribe also serves as an example (I Sam 31:11-13). There is no mention in the Hebrew Bible of how improper burial would adversely affect one’s fate in Sheol. Saul Olyan asserts that one’s fate was probably believed to be improved through

97 L.K. Horwitz, “Animal Offerings from Two Middle Bronze Age Tombs,” (IEJ37; 1987) 251.
98 Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 64.
reburial if the person was left unburied, although he admits that biblical texts are not clear on the issue and his assertion is premised on Israel sharing reburial beliefs expressed in Akkadian texts.\(^9\) It seems logical that unburied corpses or those whose remains were exhumed from their tombs such as the king of Babylon in Isaiah 14 still were envisioned as going to Sheol in ancient Israel, considering that Isaiah speaks of the king being mocked in Sheol upon his entrance there (Isa 14:9-20). The necessity of burial is never minimized, however, and even impaled criminals were to be buried the same day (Deut 21:22-23).\(^\) Jehu even ordered that the iniquitous Jezebel be buried because she was a king’s daughter, although the author is careful to note that her corpse was trampled so badly that it was like refuse, portraying the reality of improper burial as shamefully as possible (II Kgs 9:30-37).

**Summary**

The Hebrews believed that the dead went to an obscure underworld, שָאֹל. Sheol was in no way considered an extension of earthly life, and those in Sheol were not to be communicated with or sustained through grave offerings. During ancient Israel’s early stage as a nation, there was no clear belief in resurrection. This stage shared parallels with Mesopotamia and Canaan who did not believe in resurrection either. However, the Israelites were unique in that they rejected the idea of an animated existence in the underworld or a return as through a *marzeah*. Rather, death was a complete end to life. As


\(^10\) H.W.F. Saggs maintains that this passage from Deuteronomy could be potential evidence for an Israelite belief in harm from an improperly buried person. The implication is that the body of the criminal needed to be buried or else his departed being could in some way cause havoc for the living. Most scholars, however, maintain that this commandment is simply related to cleanliness laws. See H.W.F. Saggs, “Some Ancient Semitic Conceptions of the Afterlife,” (Faith and Thought 90; 1953) 164-165.
Israel’s afterlife views developed during their latter stage, the dead were envisioned as living again, depicted in prophetic books such as Ezekiel and apocalyptic books like Daniel. While Egypt also had a conception of rebirth, Israel’s resurrection idea was distinct in that it envisioned renewed life on the earth itself.

As we approach our exegesis of Sheol in the Book of Job, it is important to place the book in the proper stage of ancient Israel’s history. The content in Job would certainly fall in the nation’s early stage before Israel’s afterlife views developed. The ancient Hebrew notion of death’s permanence pervades the entire work, reflecting the second millennium BC date of the story’s setting.\textsuperscript{101} While the date of the book’s actual composition was likely much later, the book lacks any clear idea of a belief in resurrection.\textsuperscript{102} In fact, even in the epilogue, which was probably a later addition along with the prologue, the author is careful to note that Job’s fortunes are restored in this lifetime. Absent from the book is any

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\textsuperscript{101} The second millennium BC setting of the story is revealed by several factors. Job’s wealth is measured in cattle (1:3), he acted as the priest of his family (1:5), and his length of life was 140 years (42:16), all of which characterize the patriarchal era. The mention of the Sabean and Chaldean tribes (1:15, 17) and a piece of silver known as a kesitah (42:11, cf. Gen 33:19, Josh 24:32) also give it a second millennium setting.

\textsuperscript{102} The date of the book’s composition is contested. While some like to place it closer to the period of the story’s setting, the story likely circulated as an oral tradition for some time and might even be non-Israelite in origin given its placement in the greater Edom area. John Collins states that the book had to be written before the second century BC since an Aramaic paraphrase of the book known as the Targum of Job appears then. He states that the language in the prose sections including the mention of Satan would indicate a postexilic date given Satan’s appearance in other postexilic books such as Zechariah and Chronicles. Collins dates the book to the sixth or fifth century BC, which he notes is the scholarly consensus for its composition. John Hartley affirms the evidence for a sixth century date, such as the similarities between Job 3:3-13 and Jer 20:14-18, placing the work around the time of the sixth century prophet. The possible connection of the story to the suffering of the Babylonian captivity in the sixth century is also speculated. On the other hand, Hartley gives evidence for an eighth or seventh century composition date too, showing how difficult it is to date the book. Norman Habel argues that since Job’s author is so well acquainted with Israel’s wisdom traditions, a date prior to the seventh century when such traditions were established is unlikely. Habel maintains that there are defensible arguments for dates even as late as the third century. See John J. Collins, \textit{A Short Introduction to the Hebrew Bible: Second Edition} (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014) 318; John E. Hartley, \textit{The Book of Job} (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 17-20; Norman C. Habel, \textit{The Book of Job: The Cambridge Bible Commentary} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 10.
indication that Job’s innocent suffering would otherwise be rectified in an afterlife.

Whether this was actually the view of the epilogue’s author is uncertain, but the theme of death’s permanence continues through to the very end.
Part II – Sheol in the Book of Job

The focus of Part II will be on analyzing the Israelite underworld as it appears in the Book of Job. Due to the sheer amount of content on Sheol in Job, five categories will be used in order to critically analyze the characteristics that govern Sheol. Upon a close reading of the book, one can locate 27 distinct passages in Job that deal with Sheol either directly or indirectly. These passages’ content can be loosely arranged into the following five categories: 1) Sheol and the human condition, 2) the effect of Sheol on the person, 3) environment within Sheol, 4) the spatial nature of Sheol, and 5) Sheol and the fate of the wicked.

The first category, Sheol and the human condition, builds on what was introduced in Part I, Section IVa and includes verses in the book that inextricably link all mortals with death. The second category, the effect of Sheol on the person, includes passages that describe how Sheol changes the experience or state one knew while alive. The third category, the environment within Sheol, pertains to passages that describe the affairs of the dead in the underworld or give a description of the realm’s internal characteristics. The fourth category, the spatial nature of Sheol, pertains to verses that cast Sheol’s dimensions or features as a place within space or describe its conceptual relationship to God. The fifth and final category, Sheol and the fate of the wicked, pertains to passages that express that

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103 While the eight direct references to Sheol are indisputable, the number of indirect references are open to debate. A factor that comes into play is whether references to death in general should be considered references to Sheol. The approach taken in this study is if the passage mentions the realm of the dead or offers details regarding the experience that is expected to result from one’s own death, it is included as a reference to Sheol. References to death lacking these criteria were omitted (e.g. 27:5b “until I die I will not put away my integrity from me”).
the wicked will die prematurely and leave the earth to the righteous. Each category constitutes a section, and the passages are divided between the categories accordingly.\textsuperscript{104}

\textsuperscript{104} The longest passage on Sheol in the book, 14:10-22, is counted as one passage but its content falls into two categories: Sheol and the human condition and the spatial nature of Sheol, the latter of which appears in 14:13.
I. Sheol and the Human Condition (4:18-21, 10:8-9, 14:10-22, 34:14-20)

The Book of Job frequently portrays the human person as moving back towards the ground he was created from. Both humans in general and the wicked in particular are presented with this destiny, the latter of which will be explored in Section V. A key difference, however, is that for humans in general, Sheol tends to be more of the natural destination in the course of life, the lot that God has established for all. The wicked, on the other hand, are presented as being sent to Sheol quite actively by God. It should come as no surprise that mortals’ inevitable return to the dust is emphasized throughout the book, given the weight of Job’s suffering that characterizes his voice in the poetic discourse (cf. his lament in chapter 3). Human mortality is universally recognized and affirmed by various voices including Eliphaz’ (4:18-21), Job’s (10:8-9, 14:10-22) and Elihu’s (34:14-20). While these characters may oppose one another on several topics in the discourse, Sheol as mankind’s destination is not one of them.

Eliphaz takes up the topic in his first speech in chapter 4, where he juxtaposes the being of angels with that of humans and says:

Even in his servants he puts no trust,
and his angels he charges with error;
how much more those who live in houses of clay,
whose foundation is in the dust,
who are crushed like a moth.
Between morning and evening they are destroyed;
they perish forever without any regarding it.
Their tent-cord is plucked up within them,
and they die devoid of wisdom. (4:18-21)

105 Most references to Sheol are indirect both in this category and in Section V on the fate of the wicked (i.e. the word שאול does not appear). No direct references appear regarding the human condition, and only one appears regarding the fate of the wicked (21:13).
The central thought from the passage is the mortality of humans. Whereas angels are immaterial in being (cf. Ps 104:4), humans are material by their very nature and inevitably pass away. Eliphaz symbolizes humans’ physical bodies in v. 19 as houses of clay (בדים), depicting them as composed of the same, unstable substance that Job later compares his friends’ words to (13:12). A key phrase in the verse is that humans’ foundation is in the dust (פרעה), a word that evokes God’s curse of the ground in the Genesis narrative where humans’ mortality is established (cf. Gen 3:19).106 Job also uses the symbol of dust in 10:8-9 where he states that God fashioned him from clay and will turn him back to dust again. Most noteworthy, however, is Eliphaz’ argumentation in v. 20 that humans perish for ever (lit. “to forever they perish,”ania יאבדו). While his statement acknowledges the process of deterioration that continues until the body is no more, the deeper indication is that decay is the final state that man will find himself in. There was no resurrection in Eliphaz’ understanding, which is consistent with Job’s words that we will see next.

In 14:10-22, the lengthiest passage on Sheol in the book, Job uses analogies from nature to describe the mortality of man. Job starts the chapter with an analogy by stating that man is like a flower that comes forth and withers (v. 2). The pericope then begins in v. 10 where Job mentions that man weakens and perishes, and wonders where he goes, asking “and where?” (איה). Job proceeds to compare mortals passing away to a lake or a river that dries up (v. 11). He then proclaims that man will never wake from the sleep of death, not even when the heavens are no more, an expression of the furthest time in the future he can imagine (v. 12). The verse serves as the central statement in the book about

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106 The word for foundation used in the verse (יסוד) appears in the Mosaic Law when referring to the base of the altar (cf. Exod 29:12). Just as the altar and its base were made of hollow wood and supported as such (cf. Exod 27:8), mortals are made of minute, flimsy particles that support their physical form.
the permanence of death. Hedged in next at v. 13 is his desire that God would hide him in Sheol. The passage reaches a climax in vv. 13-17 where Job longs for restoration in God’s sight. Job maintains that he will wait for God to release him from his misfortune in this lifetime, since being a mortal, he will not live again after he dies (v. 14). Job describes God as longing to bring him restoration (v. 15), and he asks God to not keep so close of an eye on his every action (v. 16) but to cover over his iniquity instead (v. 17).

The second half of the lengthy passage uses other analogies from nature to describe the human condition. As mountains crumble, rocks fall from their place, stones erode and floods wash away soil, so does God destroy man’s hope (vv. 18-19). Here, hope is a reference to continued life on earth, given the following verse where God is depicted as overpowering man and causing him to pass away (v. 20).^{107} Part of this destructive process includes changing man’s countenance (פגע) and sending him off (lit. “and you send him out,” והשלחה), depicting both physical decay and removal from the land of the living, two realities of death. Most noteworthy in this passage is the final vv. 21-22, which read:

> Their children come to honor, and they do not know it; they are brought low, and it goes unnoticed. They feel only the pain of their own bodies, and mourn only for themselves. (14:21-22)

The author emphasizes that whatever happens to the children of the deceased, whether honor or disgrace, is unknown to the departed parents. The limit of the deceased’s experience is with themselves, whom the author presents as in bodily pain and mournful over their state (v. 22).

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^{107} This passage has overtones of God’s active role in bringing about mankind in general’s death, making it somewhat similar to the fate of the wicked passages that we will see later on. However, since Job often speaks out of emotion and contradicts himself throughout the book, the categorizations used for the book’s content should not be established too rigidly.
If the words are to be taken literally about the dead feeling pain in their bodies and mourning over themselves, this verse serves as rare evidence in the book for a belief in a continued, human experience in Sheol. An alternate reading would be that the pain and mourning is felt while the person is still alive and in the process of dying, not afterwards. This interpretation is based on the nature analogies in the passage such as a mountain that is crumbling but has not crumbled yet. A complication with this alternate interpretation is that in the context of v. 22 the person is already deceased, hence the reason why they cannot witness their offspring's experiences.

While some have asserted that the verse implies the pain of a body and soul separation at death, E. Dhorme rejects this interpretation. He explains that the assertions are based on the appearance of both flesh (בשרו) and soul (נפשו) in the verse, which some perceive to be individualized with the suffix עלי being attributed to each. However, Dhorme notes that the words for “his flesh” and “his soul” can equally mean “himself,” and that dualism is certainly not the picture here. Dhorme concludes that the meaning of the verse is that the dead person grieves over his state in Sheol since it is removed from the affairs of the living including those of his children. The dead person knows he cannot come back, unlike the tree that can sprout again if it is cut down (v. 7-9), and that seems to be what is painful. His grieving may also be intended as metaphoric. The ancients were not so concerned with providing such clarifying details about the state of the dead as seen in the section on Egypt regarding the confusion surrounding what aspect(s) of the person they perceived to be in the underworld. Whether the author meant that the pain and

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109 Ibid.
110 Ibid., 206-207.
mourning is experienced by a person in the process of dying or one already dead, or if the grief is metaphoric in any way, is left to the reader's conjecture.

We find the last passage on the human condition in 34:14-20 as part of Elihu's speech. In context, Elihu is defending God's justice and implies that humans cannot accuse him of wrongdoing given his immeasurable power over the universe. Vv. 14-15 begin by illustrating God's power and stating that if he were to take back his spirit (רוחו) and his breath (ונשמה) then all creatures would perish and return to the dust. The statement is very similar to Ps 104:29 where the animals are depicted as returning to the dust when their breath is taken back by God (the return emphasis is strong with the verb שוב). Strong parallels also exist with Ps 146:3-4 where man (אדם) is presented as returning to the ground (אדמה) when his spirit returns to God. The message is clear: man depends on God for his life, and therefore man's identity in himself is only in the inanimate dust. Elihu extends his defense of God's justice in vv. 16-20, describing how God shows no favoritism to royalty or the wealthy since all humans including the poor are equally the work of his hands (v. 19). He illustrates this concept by expressing the universality of death, stating that "in a moment [humans] die;/ at midnight the people are shaken and pass away,/ and the mighty are taken away by no human hand" (v. 20). The theme of death as the great

Of interesting note in Ps 146:4 is the final part of the verse. The RSV translates it that man's "plans perish" and the JPS Tanakh that man's "plans come to nothing." On the other hand, the NASB and the KJV translate it as man's "thoughts perish." The word in contention for plans or thoughts is עשתנת, which occurs only here in the Hebrew Bible. If the translation "plans" is preferred, then it is simply a reference to how the things man intended to do on earth while alive become eliminated at death. If the translation "thoughts" is preferred, it could potentially express that man loses all cognitive ability upon reaching Sheol and that there was no aspect of him (spirit or otherwise) perceived as existing. Due to the phrase's ambiguity, however, it is probably best not to build a definitive case on it for what one's state was believed to be in Sheol.
equalizer for all social classes will be seen in greater detail in Section III in the discussion on Sheol’s environment.

What we can gather from these passages regarding Sheol and the human condition is that man cannot separate himself from his identity as a mortal being. He came from the dust and he will return to the dust, a reality that is frequently symbolized with the images of dust and clay. Eliphaz perceives decay as the final state that man will find himself in. Mortals are unable to witness their children’s experiences on earth in Sheol, whether their offspring are receiving honor or being humbled. Job’s statement that the dead can only feel the pain in their bodies and mourn over themselves is obscure. It is unclear whether the experience is meant to describe a phenomenon in Sheol or simply describe someone in the process of dying, similar to the analogies Job uses from nature. The human condition is further depicted by Elihu who expresses that if God were to remove his spirit from all creatures including man, they would perish and return to the dust. This ancient perspective may give context to the patriarch Abraham’s words, “I am but dust,” when he humbly recognized his identity before the LORD (Gen 18:27).
II. The Effect of Sheol on the Person (7:9-10, 7:21, 21:23-26, 24:19)

The reader finds Job’s explanation of the effect of Sheol on the person in his reply to Eliphaz’ first speech:

As the cloud fades and vanishes,
so those who go down to Sheol do not come up;
they return no more to their houses,
nor do their places know them any more. (7:9-10)

The passage emphasizes the irreversible nature of death. Man lives, man dies and that is the end of the story. Sheol could be described here as completely swallowing up the life of the person. The Pentateuch records an episode of Sheol literally swallowing up Korah, Dathan, Abiram and their families through an earthquake that sent them plummeting into the realm alive (Num 16:28-34). Proverbs characterizes Sheol as never being satisfied (Prov 27:20, 30:16), and Song of Songs describes it as unyieldingly jealous (Song 8:6). Isaiah also personifies Sheol in similar fashion, depicting it as opening its mouth wide, taking in both nobles and masses (Isa 5:14). The power of death was not underestimated in ancient Israel. At the very least, Job’s words show that the dead were utterly absent from the land of the living and had no part in it in any way, a much different view compared to Israel’s neighbors.

Continuing in chapter 7, Job questions why God watches his actions so closely. He asks God in v. 21 why he will not forgive his unknown sins, which Eliphaz had argued were the cause of Job’s suffering. The second half of v. 21 reads, “For now I shall lie in the earth;/ you will seek me, but I shall not be.” The phrase “but I shall not be” is the single compound word ואינני, which can be broken into ו (a conjunction meaning “and” or “but”), אין (a substantive or particle of negation meaning “there is nothing”) and אני (a first person singular suffix meaning “me”). The literal translation we therefore get from ואינני is “but I
am not’. The theological implications of Job’s statement are important. He directly states that God will not be able to find him after he dies, even though he does it poetically. In doing so, he underscores the comprehensive nature of death in the ancient Hebrew mindset. To be dead in Job’s understanding was to be completely gone, especially as it related to being separated from God. There was no form of life apart from the one experienced on earth in the presence of the LORD. Job’s view sharply contrasted the views of Israel’s neighbors who believed that clear forms of continuation happened after death.

The other two references about Sheol’s effect on the person are found in 21:23-26 and 24:19. Both touch on themes previously mentioned, but they also add unique details. In 21:23-26, Job equates the prosperous person and the bitter person alike who lie down in the dust together upon death, illustrating its equalizing nature. What is important is his final mention in v. 26 that worms cover them both. Sheol’s most noticeable effect is that one’s body will rot in the earth, and the picture of worms covering it speaks to its inevitable decomposition. Job therefore presents death as the reversal of life: man goes back to the state from which he was born – formless and in the inanimate ground.

In the other verse, 24:19, Job again depicts the swallowing effect of Sheol. In the larger passage, he wishes curses upon the wicked (vv. 18-24). Job states in v. 19, “Drought and heat snatch away the snow waters; so does Sheol those who have sinned.” The verse here is limited to sinners and picks up on a frequent theme in the wisdom literature of sin leading to destruction (cf. Prov 5:3-5 where the adulterous woman leads down to Sheol). The verb for “snatch” is גזל and is frequently associated with robbery in the Mosaic Law and also in the prophets. The image Job gives is not as sudden as the verb’s other uses in the Hebrew Bible, however, since the theme of disappearance is given the stronger emphasis
here. To Job, Sheol does away with a person in the way that a scorching sun does away with water, leaving not a drop left. The idea is consistent with that seen earlier in 7:9-10 where a dead person never returns to his house or is known again in his place, although here Job uses an analogy from nature to illustrate its reality.

The effect of Sheol on the person can be summarized as a comprehensive swallowing, allowing no return and leaving no trace. The picture of the worms covering the bodies of both the prosperous and bitter man alike in 21:26 emphasizes the destructive nature of death. With the body in the ground and the spirit back to God, the human person was not considered to experience a continued form of life in Sheol. Job’s expression “but I shall not be” (ואינני) speaks to such a reality. Like a cloud that vanishes from a clearing sky and water that disappears from the sun’s heat, Sheol removes the human person entirely.

The reader finds a beautiful image of the Hebrew netherworld right at the beginning of Job’s lament in chapter 3. Job wishes he had died as a stillbirth rather than continuing to live after his great misfortunes, and he offers a description of what he believes Sheol will be like:

Now I would be lying down and quiet;  
I would be asleep; I would be at rest  
with kings and counselors of the earth  
who built ruins for themselves...  
There the wicked cease from troubling,  
and there the weary are at rest.  
There the prisoners are at ease together;  
they do not hear the voice of the taskmaster.  
The small and the great are there,  
and the slaves are free from their masters. (3:13-19)

Three characteristics govern Sheol in the passage: rest, freedom and equality. Job describes Sheol as a place of rest because it is there that he will find a permanent release from the burdens of life. How exactly the author perceived the person of Job to be at rest in Sheol, or any departed person for that matter, is somewhat of a mystery. The biblical authors used analogy to speak of what they did not understand. Sleep became the best representation of death because one who is asleep resembles one who is dead, as both lie inert. The death-sleep analogy appears frequently in the historical books where the deceased Hebrew kings are mentioned as resting with their fathers (יָשָׁכְבוּ עָם אָבָי) 112. Whether or not the author of Job was familiar with such traditions is unknown, but he does use similar language in v. 14 by presenting Job as asleep with kings and counselors of the earth. It is important to note that Sheol and the physical grave (קבר) are often used

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112 The royal tombs housed the corpses of several generations, which would have been placed next to one another.
interchangeably in the Hebrew Bible, including later in the same chapter (v. 22). To be buried in the grave was synonymous with and was probably equivalent to being at rest in Sheol in the understanding of the author.\(^{113}\)

The theme of freedom is also significant in this passage. Among the dead, all are free from the wicked’s troubling (v. 17a), the weary are free from the weight of their earthly burdens (v. 17b), prisoners are free from their taskmasters (v. 18), and slaves are free from their masters (v. 19). The nature of the passage is all-encompassing, serving to represent any cumbersome situation on earth that humans find themselves in. It is especially sensitive towards those who are on the receiving end of oppression like Job feels he is at the hands of God. Job’s choice of words is superb as the word for taskmaster in v. 18 (נגש) is the same word used in the Exodus narrative for the slave drivers who oppressed the Israelites in Egypt (Exod 3:7, 5:6, 10, 13-14). The underlying notion is that death delivers from the misfortunes of life in the same way that God delivered Israel from Egypt. The author of Job may well have intended such an allusion for his audience.

What is particularly important is the last verse of the passage stating that both the great and the small are in Sheol. Death was the great equalizer to the Hebrews, and regardless of what status or accomplishments one had achieved in life, Sheol leveled the

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\(^{113}\) Robert Martin-Achard maintains that any expression in the Hebrew Bible attributing human function, such as rest, to the dead in Sheol is metaphoric and that the dead were believed to be in a state of total non-being. The fact that רוח is never used for those in Sheol certainly means that the Israelites did not believe the dead to be alive in any way. However, to say that the dead are not somehow present in Sheol, or are non-existent as Martin-Achard describes it, may go beyond what the biblical authors attest. Death as total obliteration or annihilation does not appear to be the case in ancient Israel given that God could restore the dead back to life if he wished (cf. Deut 32:39, 1 Sam 2:6, Ezek 37:1-14, Dan 12:2). The Israelites cannot quite explain how the dead are in Sheol, but they believe that they are there. See Robert Martin-Achard, From Death to Life: A Study of the Development of the Doctrine of the Resurrection in the Old Testament (London: Oliver & Boyd, 1960) 17.
individual to the ground (cf. Isa 14:9-10 where the Babylonian king is metaphorically mocked in Sheol and his weakness in death is equated with that of his mockers). Job’s equating of the great and small, captive and captor, slave and master in Sheol was drastically different than neighboring Mesopotamia’s underworld, where one’s social status on earth was retained. Job foresees himself resting beside kings and counselors, even though he himself was not a king. The book seems to emphasize more of a common experience with death than the historical books do where deceased kings are presented as resting exclusively with past generations of kings (cf. I Kgs 14:31, 15:8, 15:24; II Chr 12:16, 14:1, 16:13). Job’s expression of equality with the highest members of society also came after the loss of his possessions, showing that Sheol was effective in equating the rich and the poor in Job’s understanding.

The author of Job presents Sheol’s environment in three other passages. The first of which, 10:20-22, describes Sheol as a land of utter darkness. Four different Hebrew words are used for darkness to express its totality (אֱלֹהִים, צָלָמָה, עַל-פָּה, פֶּשֶׁן). The words have the direct meaning of darkness, the physical absence of light, with the exception of צָלָמָה, which is the combination of two words (צל + מות, for “shadow of death”). צָלָמָה carries more of conceptual meaning of the presence of darkness, such as the one a human may feel on the brink of death. So dark is the realm of the dead to Job that the darkness humans know on earth is like light compared to Sheol’s sheer blackness (v. 22). The author also describes Sheol as a land of chaos, literally “not order” (וָאַלָּמָה).

One explanation of the chaos could be related to creation. The subterranean regions of the earth such as the primeval oceans were often conceived as chaotic in biblical

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114 פֶּשֶׁן, too, is presented in Exod 10:21 as darkness that can be felt.
literature. The watery earth is ָם הָבָרָת in Gen 1:2, words associated with chaos. God is also depicted as fighting and defeating sea monsters such as Leviathan in Ps 74:13-14, a text that many scholars view as about the creation of the earth. Since Sheol was understood as subterranean, the realm could be synonymous with this primeval ocean chaos, perhaps reflected by the volcanic activity or ocean springs that continue to operate underneath the earth both at the time of the book’s writing and today. The reader sees a description of such geological activity in the poem about wisdom later in the book where the subterranean is described as being turned by fire, producing jewels and gold (28:5-6). A complication with connecting the chaos in Sheol with that of creation, however, is that the words used for Sheol’s chaos in Job 10:22 are not used in any of the creation texts.

A better explanation for the chaos of Sheol lies in its complete lack of social organization. The equality among the departed in Sheol was very significant phenomenon to the Hebrews, as above the ground society was organized by different social classes. Kings, counselors, soldiers, prophets, priests, farmers, merchants, the poor and the enslaved were all to be found in ancient Israel. To have all persons on equal footing was not organized to the ancients because inequality among the classes was believed to be the way that God had ordained society. Sheol disrupted this order, and as such it was chaotic. The picture of chaos in Sheol also has nothing to do with violence. There was no deity there who needed to be confronted and defeated, unlike Apep in the Egyptian underworld or Mot in the Canaanite one. Rather, Sheol’s chaos in Job 10:22 is a reference to the realm’s social disorder.

The next passage about the environment within Sheol is found in 17:13-16. In context, Job prays for relief from his circumstances. He uses abundant personification in
vv. 13-14 by referring to Sheol as his house, the pit as his father, and the worm as his mother or sister. The tripartite construction here of Sheol, pit and worm seems to reveal three aspects of death in Job's understanding. Sheol is the place to which the dead go, the pit is where they are buried, and the worm is the agent of the body's decomposition in the ground. Given the parallel structure of v. 13 (“If I look to Sheol as my house,/ if I spread my couch in darkness”), the description of Sheol as a dark, resting place emerges, which Job presents as an alternative to his shattered life on earth.

V. 16 mentions the bars of Sheol (שֵׁלוֹם), although translations vary. The word can mean “parts” and appears in Exod 27:6 and 37:4 where it refers to the poles of acacia wood inserted into the ark for its transportation. If is rendered here as bars, they would represent Sheol’s confining nature in securing its inhabitants inside. The sense of confinement here and elsewhere in the book is not to be understood as solitary confinement such as a jail cell where there is little space to move around. Rather, the bars or bolts function as synecdoche for the gates of Sheol themselves. That is, the realm of Sheol cannot be escaped from, even if its inhabitants can move around freely within its wide limits. The imagery is similar to the city of the dead in Mesopotamian thought, which was conceived of as having seven walls and seven gates with no hope of escape.

As briefly mentioned in Part I, Section IVc, the Hebrew Bible does not have an idea of restless ghosts who failed to enter Sheol for a lack of proper burial and who would

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115 Contrary to later, sensationalized Christian belief, the worm was never a symbol of torture for the departed wicked in the Hebrew Bible. Even in Isa 66:24, the most popular passage where the worm symbol regarding the dead appears, the reference is to bodily decomposition of dead soldiers lying on the ground, not to any departed person.

therefore trouble the living like the Mesopotamians and Egyptians believed.\textsuperscript{117} Even in the necromancy episode of I Samuel 28, the departed Samuel was called forth from Sheol, having to be conjured up in order to visit the land of the living. Since Samuel received proper burial (I Sam 25:1, 28:3), his appearance in the Endor narrative would not have been perceived as a restless ghost of an unburied person even if the author believed such a reality were possible. Rather, what the reader finds is that Samuel’s appearance required special stirring, and his recalling seems to have been counterfeit in nature through the devices that the medium used. The case for counterfeit activity lies in the fact that the word used for the recalled Samuel in I Sam 28:13 is אלהים, which is used for divine beings but not for humans. There is otherwise no evidence for an Israelite belief in the possibility of recalling a departed person to give an omen. As a result, the bars of Sheol in Job 17:16 may allude to the permanent confinement that the dead were subject to in ancient Israelite thought. Every person went to Sheol upon death, its bars closed in behind and no one came out. Jonah’s words in Jonah 2:6 that the bars (בריח) of the underworld closed him in forever, when comparing his experience in the belly of the fish to the experience of Sheol, concurs the idea in Job that the.lexolumbia was a symbol of inescapability from the underworld.

It is worth mentioning, however, that the LXX translates the Hebrew in Job 17:16 differently. As seen in the NETS, Job mentions his hope and his goods in the preceding v. 15, and he then asks the rhetorical question if they will descend with him to the underworld in v. 16. The LXX thus translates ברי in v. 16 not as bars but as “with me” (lit. “at my side,” combining the preposition ב and the noun יד with the first person singular suffix). The idea here is that if Job enters the underworld, all hope is lost. He expects no

\textsuperscript{117} Saggs, “Ancient Semitic Conceptions,” 164-165.
continuance of earthly living, and even his possessions he cannot take with him. Regardless which translation is favored, the meaning is the same – the situation in Sheol is hopeless because there is no return to life on earth.

In 30:23, the reader finds a very important symbolization of Sheol as a house. Job describes Sheol in the verse as the house that God sends all the living. In contrast to 17:13 where Job also refers to Sheol as a house, its dark environment is not expressed here. The house symbolism seems to convey communal overtones given the familial and congregational meaning attached to the Hebrew בית. Since Sheol’s community shares the experience of death, they belong to the same house in a sense. The verse aligns with the content in 3:13-19 where the small and the great are together and Job rests next to kings and counselors, displaying imagery of communal sleep such as that found in a household. Two words of particular importance in the verse are מועד בית, which appear together only here in the Hebrew Bible. The RSV and JPS Tanakh render it as the “house appointed” or the “house assigned” to all the living, respectively. מועד can also be translated as “meeting house,” which V.B. Reichert notes is a defensible translation for the phrase citing medieval rabbi Rashi.  

One cannot help but wonder if the phrase is in some way associated with the tent of meeting (אהל מועד) that is mentioned over one hundred times in the Mosaic Law. The tent of meeting was the house of worship for the community and took its place in the center of the camp (cf. Num 2:2). Complicating a possible connection is that there are no references to temple worship or God’s covenant with Israel anywhere in the book. While the author was likely of quite knowledgeable of Israelite worship practices given his use of the divine

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name (cf. 38:1) and his awareness of Hebrew wisdom traditions, he chooses not to mention them due to his unique purpose in addressing universal matters throughout the story. Another key difference also is that the author uses the standard בית for house, whereas in the Law the place of meeting is specifically the “tent”, אהל. As a result, the author may therefore be juxtaposing Sheol, the house of the dead, with the tent of meeting, the house of worship. If the author of Job did intend any connection between the מועד בית and the מועד אהל, it would have been for its irony considering that Sheol was a place utterly absent of worship (cf. Ps 6:5).

The most noteworthy part of Job referring to Sheol as a house is therefore the irony of the characterization to the reader. Besides the communal aspect of Sheol, there is otherwise no attribute of the realm that would resemble בית to the Hebrew people. There was no worship or service towards the LORD in Sheol, contrary to the function of the faithful Israelite household (cf. Josh 24:15). There were no relationships with others or shared emotions (Eccl 9:6), unlike what we see from Naomi’s household in the story of Ruth (Ruth 1:15-17). There was no pilgrimage to Jerusalem where one’s household would eat and drink together in the LORD’s presence, celebrating the blessings of the harvest at a festival like the Feast of Booths (cf. Deut 13:15). All meaningful parts of life that the Hebrew household encapsulated were utterly absent in Sheol. Sheol was truly a distortion then of בית and not a representation of it. The realm was in no way a positive goal or destination for human life. The author of Job knows this, and to effectively display the magnitude of Job’s anguish, he flips the Hebraic worldview upside down and presents Job longing for Sheol in the book as if it were a hopeful destination (cf. chapter 3).
What we can therefore gather from these passages about the environment of Sheol is that all of the deceased were there, free from one another’s oppression and equal to one another regardless of social standing while alive. Such equality was chaotic to the Israelites who viewed differing social classes as organized and the way that God ordained society. The dead were also at ease, alleviated from the burdens of life and in a state of rest. Extreme darkness characterizes Sheol, which is depraved of the light of life and its bars confine and prove inescapable once inside. The communal nature of Sheol is expressed by its symbolization as a house, but the realm is actually the antithesis of all that mattered to a Hebrew household.

The spatial nature of Sheol pertains to verses that cast Sheol’s dimensions as a place within space or describes its conceptual relationship to God. In 11:5-8, Zophar argues that God is knowledgeable of Job’s hidden sin given God’s magnificent wisdom and that seeking an audience with God is impossible. Zophar states in v. 8 that God’s magnificence is both higher than the heavens and deeper than Sheol (משאול). To the ancient Hebrews, the sky and heavens extended indefinitely above the earth, and wherever they reached their limit, God’s domain of the highest heavens began (cf. Ps 115:16). Likewise, Sheol was perceived to extend indefinitely in the opposite direction beneath the earth. The vastness of the earth’s depths are acknowledged later in 38:16 where they are depicted rhetorically as unable to be traversed. To the author of Job, Sheol’s depth was equivalent to or interchangeable with the seemingly boundless geological depth of the subterranean, and the inextricable link between Sheol and the subterranean was probably due to the fact that the dead were buried in the earth. The significance of mentioning Sheol’s depth was most likely to emphasize its power in consuming the life of the person, prompting the reader to view the power of Sheol no less than the awe of the great, geological deep.

In chapter 14, Job presents a conceptual view of Sheol that is quite distinct from its other appearances in the book. V. 13 reads, “O that you would hide me in Sheol,/ that you would conceal me until your wrath has past,/ that you would appoint me a set time, and

119 Whether or not the ancient Hebrews viewed the earth as flat does not seem to affect how deep they thought the subterranean was, which to them was deeper than humanly conceivable. For the sake of the discussion, the author of Job knew that the earth was suspended in space, attesting that God “hangs the earth upon nothing” (26:7). Isaiah also speaks of God sitting upon the “circle of the earth” (Isa 40:22), although the word for circle, עución, can have an alternate meaning of horizon or vault, the latter of which would imply more of a dome shape.
remember me!” While a resurrection motif could be construed from the verse, Job’s words seem to function hypothetically. He reasons that if the living are with God above the surface of the earth, then the dead must be hidden from him underneath it. He therefore envisions Sheol as a place where he could hide from God and escape his punishment until it passes. The confusion mixed into Job’s reasoning cannot be understated, however, as other places in the book record him stating that Sheol is wide open before God (cf. 26:6). What we find in this verse then is an example of Job’s frustration, wishing for a circumstance that he knows is impossible. His wish is to temporarily relocate to the realm of the dead without dying and then be brought back to life on earth in better circumstances. While a case could be made that Job was genuinely wishing for death here given similar wishes in chapter 3, and his hope to be brought back at an appointed time would therefore imply resurrection, the focus certainly seems to be more theoretical in nature about how he could escape God’s current punishment without actually dying. The famous passage in 19:25-27 about Job seeing God after he dies is probably another example of a hypothetical circumstance that Job did not believe would happen but still wished for nonetheless. Other uses of contrary-to-fact type circumstances appear in the book such as Zophar’s instance of a man being born to a donkey in 11:12. However, it is worth noting that Zophar rejects this instance, whereas Job’s hypothetical yearnings are usually left open by the author.

In 26:5-6, Job uses personification to portray Sheol’s weakness before God.120 The passage states, “The shades below tremble,/ the waters and their inhabitants./ Sheol is

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120 Philip Johnston attests that these words are actually Bildad’s, not Job’s. He sees the first four verses of the chapter as Job’s questions, and then v. 5 – 14 as Bildad’s answers. Due to the problems governing the composition of the book, it is not definitive who is speaking here and in other portions of the book’s speeches. However, most translations favor Job as the one speaking throughout chapter 26. See Johnston, *Shades of Sheol*, 117.
naked before God, and Abaddon has no covering.” The Hebrew word in v. 5 translated as “shades” is רפאים (Rephaim) were two different groups in the Hebrew Bible: mighty warriors from ancient times and the dead inhabitants of the underworld.\textsuperscript{121} It seems that the word was originally used exclusively for the warrior group and then was extended to speak of the dead. The Hebrew writers wanted to stress the utter weakness that they viewed all of the dead as possessing, so they took the name for the mightiest men who once lived and used it sarcastically for the dead to mock their weakness. By presenting dead as trembling in Sheol, the author of Job reveals the distinct Hebrew idea of the dead as unimposing and even timid, which contrasts sharply with Israel’s neighbors who feared and appeased them.

What v. 5 offers us regarding Sheol’s spatial location is again its synonymy with the subterranean as the dead, the waters and the waters’ inhabitants are all grouped together. The waters’ inhabitants (שכניהם) seems to simply be a reference to fish and other sea creatures, although it may also refer to the mythical sea creatures of Rahab and Leviathan who appear a few verses later in vv. 12 – 13. Philip Johnston speculates if the author perceived Leviathan’s realm as including Sheol and not simply limited to the water.\textsuperscript{122} There is not enough evidence to make such a case. What is interesting, however, is that Leviathan is depicted as an enemy of God in Ps 74:13-14 and likewise is Rahab in Ps 89:10 and Isa 59:9-10. It is therefore unsurprising that these mythical sea creatures are associated with the realm given that Sheol is under the earth, away from God’s presence on

\textsuperscript{121} For references to the Rephaim as a warrior group, see Gen 14:5 and Deut 2:9-11, 18-21. The Rephaim were reckoned for their great height, and a Rephaite king in particular who the Israelites defeated, Og of Bashan, was said to have a bed of gigantic size (Deut 3:11).

\textsuperscript{122} Johnston, \textit{Shades of Sheol}, 117.
What is clear from the verse is that the dead are presenting as trembling before God in v. 5a and the picture is extended to ocean wildlife in v. 5b, which may include mythical sea monsters given their appearance in the large passage (vv. 12-13) and given their appearance as God's foes elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.

V. 6 then gives the reader important information about Sheol in its relationship to God: it lies naked before him. Job rebuts his own assertion from 14:13 that that he could be hidden from God in Sheol by now expressing that God has full view of its inhabitants. The key theme in the verse is the shame of the dead, which continues from the preceding v. 5 about the ירהש trembling. As a body without clothes brings shame, so does Sheol without its covering of earth reveal that the dead are entirely unintimidating and weaker than the living. The word Abaddon (אֲבַדָּן) appears in parallel form to Sheol in the verse. Its exact meaning is uncertain with possibilities including from “destruction,” “loss,” “forgetfulness,” and “perishing.” Many translations such as the RSV, NRSV, NAB, ESV and JPS Tanakh keep it as a proper place name, “Abaddon,” whereas the JPS (1917), KJV, NKJV and NIV simply call it “destruction”. Given Abaddon's parallelism with Sheol including its equal description of being naked or uncovered, it seems that the word is simply an alternate name for the abode of the dead. The Hebrew words for pit (חלות) and grave (קבר), which are

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123 While the name Rahab is also used figuratively to refer to Egypt in the Hebrew Bible (cf. Ps 87:4, Isa 30:7), many scholars believe that its appearance in Ps 89:10 and Isa 59:9-10 is a reference to the mythical sea monster who bears the name. See Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, Michael Fishbane, *The Jewish Study Bible: Jewish Publication Society Tanakh Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) 888, 1382.

both used as the place where the dead are buried, show how different terms are commonly used in the Hebrew Bible to refer to the same object.\textsuperscript{125}

The reader finds poetic descriptions of Sheol’s spatial nature in 28:5 and 28:20-24, which are part of Job’s poem on wisdom. 28:5 speaks to the magnificent, geological activity that transpires under the earth’s surface. The verse describes how the area is turned by fire, which could be a reference to magma and its behavior deep underground. The realm of Sheol may have become synonymous with heat and fire due to its location under the earth where natural elements like sulfur are at work. The author in no way implies that fire burns in Sheol, however. In 28:20-24, Job speaks of Sheol’s incapability in comparison to God. The author personifies Sheol as being unable to locate wisdom whereas God can, and God states:

\begin{quote}
Where then does wisdom come from?
And where is the place of understanding?
It is hidden from the eyes of all living,
and concealed from the birds of the air.
Abaddon and Death say,
‘We have heard a rumor of it with our ears.’
God understands the way to it,
and he knows its place.
For he looks to the ends of the earth,
and sees everything under the heavens. (28:20-24)
\end{quote}

The theme of concealment reappears in this passage. Wisdom is hidden from all eyes, even that of the birds who can see far and wide when in flight. Marvin Pope states that Abbadon and Death’s personification of hearing about wisdom’s place “with [their] ears” connotes second-hand or hearsay information, meaning that the netherworld only has a vague,

\begin{footnotes}
\footnotetext[125]{While שמחת and קבר refer directly to the physical place where the dead are buried, אבaddon and שאול relate more to the conceptual place where the departed reside.}
\end{footnotes}
incomplete idea of where wisdom’s abode is. As hidden as Sheol is presented in the Book of Job, it is still less hidden than wisdom. Abaddon is therefore overshadowed by God’s power, since only God knows the way to wisdom’s place. The statement that God sees everything under the heavens also places Abaddon within the limits of creation and puts it in a subservient place to him. The passage actually does the same for wisdom too, which is significant given the divine characteristics wisdom is given in other texts (cf. Prov 8:27 where Lady Wisdom is stated as being present while the heavens were created).

In Job’s oath of innocence in chapter 31, Abaddon reappears in vv. 9-12 where its location is again presented beneath the earth. Abaddon is presented quite deeply under the earth at that, as it is associated with the far-reaching effects of God’s fire of judgment, which Job says he would receive were he to commit adultery (v. 12 “for that would be a fire consuming down to Abaddon”). The verse shares strong similarities with Deut 32:22 where God’s wrath is depicted as burning to the bottom of Sheol, destroying the earth’s harvests and setting the foundations of the mountains on fire (Job mentions his crops being burned by God’s wrath in v. 12b). The interrelatedness of Sheol, crops and the foundations of the mountains in Deuteronomy is in their shared relationship with the ground, below which is Sheol located and above which are the crops and the mountains. While some might take the fire imagery too far in both verses, interpreting fire to be burning in the realm of the dead and scorching its inhabitants, the literary purpose is certainly that God’s wrath has no limit and neither passage is intended to imply that fire burns in Sheol. God’s power in the Book of Job is constantly praised, and the mention of his fiery judgment reaching Abaddon shows that it can reach the furthest crevice of creation. The

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presentation of Sheol in 31:9-12 is that it is far removed from human reach but not from God’s.

In Elihu’s speech two chapters later, the reader finds an important verse where Sheol may or may not be alluded to in 33:18. Beginning in v. 14, Elihu gives his opinion that God has afflicted Job to prevent him from living a lifestyle without God. Vv. 17 – 18 state that God speaks through warnings to “turn [men] aside from their deeds,/ and keep them from pride,/ to spare their souls from the Pit,/ their lives from traversing the River.” The phrase in contention is the last part of v. 18 (משבר בשלא). The NRSV is alone among critical translations in rendering it “traversing the River.” The NASB takes it as “passing into Sheol,” whereas the RSV and JPS Tanakh take it as “perishing by the sword.” August Konkel maintains that although perishing by sword can be a common meaning of שלח (cf. II Sam 18:14), it does not fit the parallel structure of the verse where Pit precedes it. The author of Job frequently uses parallel terms to refer to the place of the dead (cf. 26:6), so it is likely than an alternate word related to the netherworld was the intention.

As a result, Konkel states that “traversing the River” is the appropriate translation. He points out that שלח was a water canal in other ancient Semitic writings and was used to refer to the river of the netherworld. Norman Habel joins the discussion to reaffirm that שלח literally means “channel” and might be a reference to the mighty river that the dead had to cross in Mesopotamian thought. Marvin Pope also points out that the Akadian cognate words, šalḫu and šiliḫtu, also designate a water conduit or channel which may

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128 Konkel, Job, 198.
129 Habel, The Book of Job, 179.
explain the name basis for the Pool of Shelah in Neh 3:15. As mentioned in Part I, Section Ib, the underworld river in Mesopotamia was powerful enough that crossing it required special assistance from a designated individual to make it to the city of the dead. The author of Job was likely knowledgeable of Akkadian literature, especially if Job was written in the sixth of fifth century BC after Babylon gained control over Judah. Mesopotamian influence is certainly present in the book, including in the setting of the story in the land of Uz, which certainly had points of contact with Mesopotamian history or culture being east of the Jordan. Whether or not the author actually adopted the belief that the dead crossed a river as part of their entry into the netherworld is uncertain. Most evidence would suggest that the statement is poetic considering that no mention of a journey to Sheol is found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, the statement did directly reflect a widely and more firmly held belief by others in the ancient Near East, even if its usage was not intended to be taken literally. What is conveyed by the statement is that Sheol incorporated a significant crossover as part of its reality as it brought the person from the light of life to the land of darkness.

The last passage pertaining to the spatial nature of Sheol is 38:16-18. It is part of the LORD’s speech where he answers Job out of the whirlwind and makes a spectacle of Job’s argument that God is not governing the universe wisely or justly. God exposes Job’s ignorance by stating:

Have you entered into the springs of the sea,  
or walked in the recesses of the deep?  
Have the gates of death been revealed to you,  
or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?  
Have you comprehended the expanse of the earth?  
Declare, if you know all this. (38:16-18)

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130 Pope, *Job*, 250.
Characteristic of the poetic discourse in the book, strong parallelism appears here in God’s speech. The structure of the passage relates the springs of the sea (v. 16a) with the gates of death (v. 17a) and the recesses of the deep (v. 16b) with the gates of deep darkness (v. 17b). In no other passage in the book is Sheol’s relationship with the subterranean region established so clearly. The idea seems to be that the mystery surrounding the geography of the subterranean is equivalent to the obscurity surrounding the realm of the dead. As one departs into the earth upon burial, his experience therein is just as unknown to the living as the springs and recesses of the deep that are also underground. The mention of the gates of death in v. 17 (שערי מות) incorporates elements from 17:16 with the bars of Sheol, as both verses use architectural imagery for the exterior of the realm. On the other hand, the focus of Sheol’s presentation certainly differs here in chapter 38 as the gates of death and deep darkness serve a much different function than the bars of Sheol – the gates convey an entryway rather than serve as a sign of inescapability. The meaning of the passage is that Job is ignorant of where the entrance to the realm of death is just like he is ignorant of how God governs the universe. Raymond Scheindlin notes that the underworld to the Hebrews was not just imagined as beneath the earth’s surface but under the water that is beneath the earth, referencing Ps 136:6 where the earth was spread out on top of the water during creation.131 Due to such incredible depth, the author of Job communicates that only God knows the details of the realm of death.

What we can therefore gather from these eight passages on the spatial nature of Sheol is that it was perceived as incredibly deep, concealing its inhabitants so fully that Job wished to be hidden there from God’s wrath. The author is careful to note that one cannot

hide from God in Sheol, however, as it lies open before him. The dead are also not to be feared, for in God’s view the inhabitants of Sheol are actually trembling. Even those who were once the mightiest on earth are now weak compared to the living. While the trembling of the dead is probably to be taken figuratively, it is quite a purposeful statement given the power attributed to the dead in the cultures surrounding ancient Israel. Abaddon’s inability to contain wisdom within its bounds or know its location minimizes Sheol’s magnitude in comparison to God. Although Sheol’s power is not underestimated, it is placed well beneath the LORD’s. The experience of crossing into Sheol upon death is likened to crossing the underworld river in Mesopotamian thought, but the entryway to the realm is just as unknown to the living as the great subterranean deep where the realm is located.

The passages in Job on the fate of the wicked are lengthier in nature than the other passages on Sheol in the book. Five different individuals provide discourses on the subject including Bildad, Zophar, Job, Elihu and God, in that order. With the exception of God’s short address about the wicked’s fate in 40:12-14, the other speakers give a wide perspective for their argument, using excellent poetry and vivid images to present how they believe the wicked come to an end.

Bildad presents traditional wisdom to Job in his first two discourses in 8:11-22 and 18:5-21. In both, he gives the standard reward-for-obedience or punishment-for-disobedience admonition found throughout the Law and the Prophets. In the first in 8:11-22, he maintains that God is just and that if Job is suffering it is because he has committed iniquity. Bildad even brings Job’s children into the discussion to preface his speech, claiming that God brought disaster upon them for sin (v. 4) and calling on Job to repent and find restoration. He then compares those who forget God to reeds without water, which wither and die (vv. 11-13). Bildad finally delivers his thesis statement that “the tent of the wicked will be no more” (v. 22). Ironically, the destiny that Bildad gives for the wicked is the one that Job gave for himself in 7:21 where he said that he shall not be. The negative particle (יִהְיֶה) is the same in both verses with Bildad using the third person masculine singular suffix (וּ), which literally reads “it will not be” (referring to the tent), and Job using the first personal masculine singular suffix (יִהְיֶה), which reads “I will not be.”

Diane Bergant describes how the wisdom principles that Bildad presents would have generally been viewed as trustworthy in ancient Israel. One of author’s functions is to question such principles being that the book is skeptical in nature. Dianne Bergant, Job, Ecclesiastes (Old Testament Message 18; Wilmington: Michael Glazer, 1982) 66.
Given that the tent was a symbol of family and presence on the earth, its disappearance meant that one no longer had a trace in the land of the living. That is the picture that Bildad gives for the wicked’s future, which God blots out and Sheol claims.

In Bildad’s second speech in 18:5-21, he uses several images to show the ways in which God removes a wicked man from the earth: God puts out his lamp (v. 6), tears him from his tent (v. 14), withers his branches (v. 16), drives him out of the world into darkness (v. 18), destroys the memory of his name (v. 17) and leaves him without offspring (v. 19). The destruction of the wicked man here is not simply his removal from the earth but it is also the absence of his descendants, which is significant due to the fact that offspring and name remembrance were forms of afterlife in the ancient world. An interesting note is the mention in v. 14 that the man is brought to the king of terrors (למלך הבהות) after being torn from his tent. Franz Delitzsch interprets the king of terrors as a personification of death, not a demonic god in the underworld. No notion of the latter is found in the book or elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible.133

Zophar addresses the fate of the wicked in 20:6-11. The passage is part of a larger speech where he depicts several misfortunes that God will bring upon the wicked man. He uses the same language in v. 7 of perishing forever that appeared earlier in Eliphaz’ portrayal of the human condition in 4:20. The only difference here is that Zophar augments the phrase and includes “like his own dung” (כגללו) to describe the ways that the wicked man will perish forever. The statement portrays a humiliating ending, which contrasts the merely humble ending for humanity in general frequently seen elsewhere in the book. Zophar then uses a highly poetic style to describe the wicked man’s eradication. He will fly

133 Franz Delitzsch, Biblical Commentary on the Book of Job, Volume 1 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1869) 326.
away like a dream or vision and be gone from his place (vv. 8-9). Moreover, the man will descend into the dust, despite the vigor he once had in his youth, and his children will go into poverty (vv. 10-11). Strong parallels exist between Zophar’s picture of the wicked man disappearing and Psalm 37, a psalm which envisions a future world where the wicked are gone forever and the righteous live prosperously into eternity (cf. Ps 37:10-11). If any notion of an afterlife can be captured from these texts, it centers on the restoration of this world. The underworld could not be a hopeful future for an Israelite in any way. Afterlife ideology in Judaism today refers to the restored world that the righteous will inherit as *olam haba* ("the world to come").

Job’s first depiction of the fate of the wicked appears in 21:13-21 and is a skeptical response to the wisdom traditions that Bildad and Zophar presented. He maintains that it is actually the wicked who live long, prosperous lives and go down to Sheol in peace (v. 13), even though they reject God throughout all of their days (v. 14). He gives a poignant example of how he has seen the little children of the wicked dancing and frolicking about as the family thrives and enjoys life together (v. 11). Edward Kissane summarizes Job’s perception of the wicked’s lives as one continuous round of merriment. Job then appeals to his experience that the wicked are not often destroyed by God (v. 17), contrary to what his friends argue. He states that the human fate is the same for all. All lie in the dust together with worms covering them, regardless of the lives they lived (v. 23-26).

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Characteristic of Job’s behavior in the book, however, he then changes his position entirely in his second speech regarding the fate of the wicked in 27:7-23.\footnote{It should be noted that some commentators view 27:7-23 as spoken by someone other than Job, possibly Zophar. The debate regarding who is speaking in certain chapters is evidence of the confused state of the speeches in the book.} He wishes for his enemies to be like them and maintains that God takes away their lives (v. 8), apportions their children to war casualty, poverty and disease (vv. 14-15) and removes them from their place in the earth (vv. 20-23). Job’s radical change of position reveals the confusion and inner battle he faces in attempting to understand his misfortunes amidst God’s justice. Moreover, it displays his longing for divine retribution on the wicked who rejected God and are in comfort, yet he lived righteously and is in pain.

Elihu joins the discussion on the fate of the wicked in 36:6-14. He reaffirms the traditional view that the wicked perish, which is in line with Bildad, Zophar and Job’s latter speech on the matter. In Elihu’s speech, he gives an example of a wayward king who God punishes but is quick to restore upon repentance (vv. 7-12). What is important is his mention that if the king refuses to listen, God will bring about his premature end (v. 12). Elihu extends the theme of coming to a premature end to the wicked, whom he states die in their youth and their lives end in shame (v. 14). Many scholars claim that the phrase for “in shame” (בקדשים) is actually a reference to male shrine prostitutes who often died young, shameful deaths due to the lifestyle that their role entailed.\footnote{Among the scholars is Robert Gagnon who maintains that the nature of the qdesim’s work was viewed self-destructively and that their lives were perceived as a miserable experience that led to early death. John Day, on the other hand, is not convinced of the male prostitute interpretation since the Wisdom Literature does not address objectionable cult practices. See Robert A.J. Gagnon, The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001) 67; John Day, “Does the Old Testament Refer to Sacred Prostitution and Did it Actually Exist in Ancient Israel,” (JSOT Supplement Series; 2004) 10} If the author intended such a
reference, Elihu uses as blunt of an example as possible to combat Job’s skepticism towards living righteously.

God finally joins the discussion in 40:12-14. In context, he is responding to Job’s accusation that he is not governing the universe wisely or justly, a response that began in chapter 38. The passage conveys that since Job has no idea about the governance of the universe, exposed by his ignorance of how the Behemoth fits into creation (vv. 15-24), he has no right to criticize the way God handles the earth’s affairs. God presents his rebuke to Job in the form of a challenge:

Look on all who are proud, and bring them low;  
tread down the wicked where they stand.  
Hide them all in the dust together;  
bind their faces in the world below.  
Then will I also acknowledge to you  
that your own right hand can give you victory. (40:12-14)

The overall implication in the passage is that God does in fact bring the wicked to a premature end, considering that it is stated as one of his sovereign abilities that Job lacks. Specifically, God binds the wicked in Sheol to bring them low for their pride.

What is important in this verse is God’s active, doing-away with the wicked, which reveals measures of intervention. The fate of the wicked is therefore unique compared to humanity in general for whom death is the natural ending of life and part of the human condition. A similar verse appears earlier in 38:13 where God is portrayed as grabbing hold of the earth and shaking the wicked out of it at each dawn.

What we can gather from these passages is that Sheol was viewed as the destination of the wicked in a more active way than it was for humanity in general. Bildad’s mention of

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138 The word behind “the world below” is בampton, which literally means “in what is hidden.” The JPS Tanakh translates it as “in obscurity.”
the wicked being torn from their tents and brought before the king of terrors is an example of such divine action. Humiliation is also characteristic of the wicked’s end, as Zophar augments the earlier phrase in the book about man perishing forever to include “like dung” for the wicked. While man inevitably returns to the dust he was taken from, the wicked return there more noticeably and often prematurely. Elihu states that the unrepentant die in their youth, and it appears that he may reference male shrine prostitutes as an example of the short lives that the immoral live.

All speakers in the book acknowledge the phenomenon of God actively supplanting the wicked from the earth except for Job in his first speech where he gives a picture of the wicked living long lives and their children dancing and singing before them. Job later changes his position to align with the others, however, wishing for his enemies to receive the shameful end that he feels has unjustly come upon him. God’s last word that he alone has the ability to bind the wicked in Sheol reveals his active role in judgment. The overarching message regarding the human condition and the fate of the wicked in the book is that death is the destiny of all, but it is the wicked who reach it more abruptly and shamefully. The book also seems to offer a glimpse of a world without the wicked, alluded to at the end of Bildad’s second speech where he states that the wicked are left without offspring. Although the author does not present a belief in an afterlife, Bildad’s statement gives context to what we see in clearer pictures of the world to come, such as in Psalm 37 where the righteous inherit the earth.
Summary

The Book of Job offers a consistent presentation of Sheol while addressing its multifaceted features. The mortal, human condition is emphasized in the book through the symbols of dust and clay, representing the ground that humans will inevitably return to. Man’s final state is presented as in decay. Since resurrection was not a belief at this stage in Israel’s history, death was the complete end of life. Sheol’s effect on the person is described as making the individual no more. The realm swallows the person, removing him irreversibly from the earth. Sheol’s environment is depicted as dark and utterly confined, and its community is shown as equal, free and at rest. Spatially, Sheol was perceived as incredibly deep, synonymous with the subterranean depths of the earth. The realm separated the dead from the living both geographically and conceptually. While Sheol is the destination for all humanity, the book supports the view that the wicked reach it first, often dying young and in shame. God is depicted as playing an active role in the administration of that outcome.

There are significant ways that the Book of Job’s view of Sheol differed from the afterlife views of Mesopotamia, Egypt and Canaan. Job’s words in 7:9-10 that those who go down to Sheol will not come up, return to their houses or be known again in their place stand in stark opposition to the views of Israel’s neighbors. The Egyptians viewed the ba of the deceased as free-roaming, able to leave the tomb and travel through the earth or the sky. The Canaanites envisioned the departed as active members in their homes, conjuring them up through a marzeah to be with the family. Ample grave offerings in Mesopotamia and in Canaan also meant that the dead would be present to aid or protect the living. Job dismisses the reality of any such relationships with the dead. He states in 14:21-22 that if
children come to pay honor to their deceased parents at their grave, they will be unaware of it. The dead do not notice any of the experiences of the living at all according to the author of Job. This sharply contrasts what is found in ancient Egypt, where it was believed that a deceased, close relative such as a spouse could see one's infirmity and be petitioned to heal it.

Job’s presentation in 26:5-6 of the dead trembling is also significant. The Israelites generally viewed the dead as weak and unimposing, while the Mesopotamians, Egyptians and Canaanites performed rituals and made offerings to appease them. There was also no deity in the Israelite underworld that needed to be defeated, unlike Apep in Egypt and Mot in Canaan. The most striking distinction between the Book of Job’s view of Sheol and the Mesopotamian underworld in particular is the social equality that characterized Sheol. In Mesopotamia, the roles of king, priest and peasant simply carried on in the underworld, but in Sheol all were equal regardless of one’s status while alive. Job envisions himself next to kings and counselors of the earth in Sheol. He maintains that the rich and the poor alike are there and that the slave is free from his master. Job describes this disruption of society’s order as chaos since unequal classes in society were thought to be ordained by God. Death was the great equalizer to the ancient Israelites and especially to the author of Job.
Conclusion

The Book of Job presents Sheol as the absence of all things pertaining to life. While Mesopotamia and Canaan shared the same belief as the author that there was no resurrection or immortality for humans, mortality was much more literal in the Book of Job. There was no animated existence in the underworld for the Hebrews like there was to the Mesopotamians and Egyptians. There was also no return for the festivities of the living like there was to the Canaanites. Any attribution of life to the dead in the Book of Job is emphatically denounced. Among ancient Near Eastern stories that explore the ideas of death and the afterlife, Job is most unique in that it does not hold a belief in an afterlife. The epilogue emphasizes this understanding, as it is careful to note the restoration of Job’s fortunes in his lifetime, since there would not be another one.

What makes the book’s view of Sheol so distinct in the context of the ancient Near East is what it does not say about the underworld. The author rarely attributes any type of action to its inhabitants, and he envisions a community that in no way resembles ancient Israel’s. The ancient Israelites would not be satisfied with anything less than the full restoration of life on earth with the LORD. No half-solution was acceptable and therefore not entertained. Sheol was the permanent end of life in the Book of Job. Later in the New Testament, the language in John 3:16 of not perishing but having everlasting life certainly evokes themes from Job. The Johannine writer presents that death is no longer man’s final destiny through belief in God’s Son.
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