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"The Conquered Grave"

H.L.Ellison /1/

It would appear that the subject of life after death was one that could not become the subject of normal revelation until it was made clear by the Lord of Life Himself, but those who took the power and love of God seriously were allowed flashes of insight into what would be, however little they might understand how much was actually involved.

The OT and Death

One of the more remarkable features of the OT as a whole is its attitude towards death. It shows no trace of the Egyptian concern with the after-life and seems to be indifferent to the preservation of the body, though it does expect that the corpse should be interred with reasonable respect. The only examples of embalming seem to be Jacob and Joseph, which can be best explained by a conforming to the position they occupied in Egyptian society. It is interesting, though probably not significant, that when the time to leave Egypt came, Moses is said to have taken Joseph's bones, not body, with him (Exodus 13.19).

On the other hand, though it is clear that Israel shared the general Semitic concept of Sheol, the realm of the dead, there seems to have been no preoccupation with its nature. The AV rendered Sheol equally by grave and hell - three times pit - the former of these failing to bring out the force of the name, for there is a generally used word for grave, the latter proving seriously misleading, as some of the less informed devotional speculations on our Lord's descent into 'hell' show.

The general use of Sheol in RSV and so frequently in NEB has hardly caught on, and so TEV and NIV have abandoned its use. The former, however, is superior, when it renders "the world of the dead" in contrast to the latter's 'grave' with Sheol in the margin. This has led to the unpardonable rendering in Psalm 139.8

"If I make my bed in the depths" (NIV), for the margin "Sheol" will to the uninitiated be inadequate to bring home that the Psalmist is writing about death.

There are in fact only two passages which set out to give a more detailed picture of Sheol. One is the highly poetic taunt-song over the king of Babylon (Isaiah 14.4-21), where only the extreme literalist is likely to take it as a picture of Sheol as it appears to the eye of the dead. This is even more so in Ezekial 32.17-32 with its tidy national compartments.

More typical is Job's picture of the mass of the dead, where both earthly differences and experiences have ceased to be meaningful (Job 3.11-19). This is essentially the same as Hezekiah's cry, "Sheol cannot thank thee, death cannot praise thee, those that go down to the pit cannot hope for thy faithfulness" (Isaiah 38.18).

This is a picture that springs directly from the Hebrew concept of man. Man is not an immortal soul or spirit that has temporarily entered a house of clay, but a being (nepheesh) that has come into existence through the breath of life entering the body (Genesis 2.7). He can look to the world above through his spirit and to the world around through his body. When the spirit returns to God and the body to dust, the nepheesh has not, as some maintain, ceased to exist. Its actions and experiences have so moulded the personality that it persists, though in shadowy form, unable to communicate with God or man.

That is presumably why the Bible does not tell us more about the dead, for we should not have been able to understand it, if it had. It is a form of existence we cannot picture. It is worth noting that none of the few that returned to life either in the OT or the NT had apparently any description of their experiences to pass on, and so sleep remains the outstanding description of those who have died in Christ. Though we know the first-begotten of the dead

the First-fruits of them that have fallen asleep, it is well to see how God gradually lifted his people to a fuller hope for the dead, though for the majority there remained only the resigned acceptance of inevitable death, with the hope of a full life first, and it may be a living on in their children and children's children. For those who were given a fuller hope it was the fruit of communion with God, of spiritual anguish and necessity.

Job (19.23-27)

When Job burst into his triumphant words, "I know that my Vindicator lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth...then from (or without) my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side", he was arguing from what he knew of God. He could not understand the way that God had treated him - in fact it was never explained to him - but he knew that his friends were desperately wrong both about him and about God.

In his agony, less about himself and more for the honour of God, for he was longing to die and to depart to the realm where the opinions of others would not matter, he suddenly knew that God would vindicate himself and reveal his character to his friends, and in so doing vindicate Job as well. After all, his friends were not self-satisfied atheists or agnostics, but lovers of God who had become enmeshed in men's traditional thinking about him and had thus substituted a waxwork dummy for the living reality. Just because God is God, Job knew that though he would be dead, he would have to share in that vindication, though he knew not how.

David (Psalm 139:8)

The same consciousness that God is really God and at least part of what this involved was also to lay hold on David. In Psalm 139 we have a most remarkable testimony to the omnipotence, omniscience and omnipresence of God, which has not been surpassed by any other passage in Scripture. Though some hesitate to

ascribe it to David, we should do well to see in it the aged king's meditation on God's hand over his whole life. With a shock he realises that Sheol cannot be outside the control of God and that there are no barriers to his presence there.

He does not draw the logical conclusion, for the reader must be left to draw it himself, but surely it is that the God who has beset him behind and before and laid his hand of power on him all his days, must surely do so too, when he has been laid in his grave and descended to the realm of the dead. It was not given to him to know how God's control and fellowship would work there, but it was sufficient for him to know that death would not mean separation from the one he had sought to serve, however imperfectly, all his life.

Linguistically it is impossible to decide a priori whether the closing words of Psalm 23 should be rendered "for ever" or "so long as I live". If, however, we attribute this psalm to David's old age, the vision we meet in Psalm 139 would strongly support the rendering "for ever". To the sentimentalist the picture of the shepherd lad, little thought of by his large family, comparing himself to the sheep for which he was responsible and looking to God to guide him through life, is most attractive. But to me it has always seemed more probable that we have in this psalm the aged king, who for forty years has been the shepherd of his people, acknowledging that he has had a shepherd all this time, so that he had been able to be a king after God's own heart, because God had been his king throughout. If that is so, we may see him expressing his confidence that when he lays down his ruler's staff, he will pass into the eternal dominion of his God, where he should behold his face in righteousness and be satisfied (psalm 17.15)

Asaph (Psalm 73.21-25)

Anyone who studies the Asaph psalms more closely

will soon convince himself that they cannot be the work of one individual alone. Chronological factors demand this conclusion. In other words, just like the psalms of the sons of Korah they are the work of a family of Levitical singers. But just as there are valid reasons for believing that Psalms 74 and 79 have a common author, so it is virtually certain that Psalms 77 and 73 sing of one man's experience.

In Psalm 77 we find him racked with illness and fighting desperately against a despondency which threatens to destroy his faith. In Psalm 73 he has recovered sufficiently to resume his Levitical duties only to face an even greater challenge to his faith. He finds that those who, by the simple popular theology we find in Job, should be suffering, are in fact prospering, while he has been near the gates of Sheol.

For the problems of life he finds an answer in the mystery of death. It is not merely that there is sudden and unexpected destruction for the wicked (vss 18-20). The God who has been with him all along, will lead him to glory, which in the context can surely not be confined to this life. He comes to realise that in the light of God all that earth can offer - and it is much - fades into insignificance (vs 24,25).

Here we are not far from the NT revelation, "Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb.12.2)

Isaiah (chs 25,26)

Up to this point we have dealt with those who were brought to realise that death could not bring a communion with God begun on this earth to an end. But there is no indication that they had any idea of how this was to be brought about.

In Isaiah 24-27 we have the prophet's vision of the

universal Day of the Lord. There are many who maintain that it cannot have been written by Isaiah and that it must be much later. Such a view gives no explanation as to how it came into its present position in the careful arrangement of chs. 1-35, nor can anything be pointed to which is out of keeping with the time of Isaiah and his stress on the Day of the Lord. As so often in this type of vision we have a strange mixture of sharp cut and extremely vague pictures, but out of them all we learn clearly that we are concerned with God's judgments, victory and the establishment of his perfect kingdom on earth.

So in 25.6-8 we find the millennial feast on Mount Zion, not merely for Israel but for all peoples. The feast implies fellowship and covenant relationship (Exodus 24.9-11). Sin has been conquered at long last; the curse of Eden is no more, and so death comes to an end. God has triumphed completely. In 26.12 the prophet turns specifically to Israel, which was mentioned only in passing in 25.8. When he says, "O, Lord Thou wilt ordain peace for us", the better rendering is "prosperity" (NEB). God shows the triumph he has gained in and through his people by the prosperity he grants them. That is followed by the confession that it has been God's doing throughout, and that his people were so often unfaithful (26.13-15)

The confession goes even deeper in vs 16-18. In the light of God's victory anything that Israel may have accomplished was mere wind. Though it is not expressed in words, behind all this there is a deep sense of tragedy. God has won the victory, but generations have fallen by the way without even the consolation of feeling that they had contributed something to the ultimate victory.

This is something that those who delight in painting the work of the church in the darkest colours, in assuring us that there are more non-Christians in the world than ever before, that the institutional church, whatever they may mean by the term, has lost any value that it may once have had, seem to forget. It is not

the church or Israel that brings in the day of salvation. It is God's work, Christ's victory. We must be grateful, if at the end of the day we can say, "We have stood fast" (Ephesians 6.13,14).

To the prophet, looking back in sorrow on the history of his people, God suddenly gives the vision that the triumphal fellowship banquet is not only for those who happen to survive as a remnant in the final judgments. The righteous dead too will share in the victory(vs.19), for they will rise. Here is the resurrection of the body in which those who share in God's victory will share.

For many tradition seems to have been too strong, and especially among the Sadducees there were many even in the time of Christ who had not grasped this truth. But while Ezekial 37.1-14 is, as is so often insisted, a picture of national, not individual resurrection, the picture could hardly have meant much to the exiles in Babylonia unless the concept of the resurrection of the individual's body had come to mean something to many. And so a hope that had attached itself at the first to the godly Israelite has in Daniel 12.2 extended to all. It is not, as is often suggested, a resurrection of the very good and very bad. The "many" in this passage is as in Isaiah 53.12 "all" and they are very many.

God has not stripped death of its mysteries. There is much that we can affirm only at our peril, much that we shall not know until we, like so many before us, have to taste it. But we do know that our Lord has the keys of Death and Hades (Sheol), and that we go to be with Him, the Lord of Life, who lives for evermore. Though we know not what to expect as we await the resurrection call, let us never forget that God is God, and so it will surpass all that we expect or think.

Note

1. We are grateful to the Editor of the "Hebrew Christian" for permission to print this article; Mr Ellison is member of the International Hebrew Christian Alliance, sometime missionary in Poland and Rumania, lecturer in the London School of Divinity and London Bible College, and author of numerous books and articles.