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BRIDGES FOR PEACE

Israel Teaching Letter

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WHERE DO WE GO WHEN WE DIE?

Reconciling Jewish-Christian Concepts



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WHERE DO WE GO WHEN WE DIE?

Reconciling Jewish–Christian Concepts



There is a long-standing joke that nothing is sure in life except death and taxes. To be accurate, there may be a few places on earth where taxation doesn't exist. In that case, that leaves the only "sure thing"—death.

Across the Jewish and Christian faiths, there is general agreement that there is a separation of the spiritual being from the physical body at the end of our lives called death. According to the Bible, what follows death is eternal reward for the righteous and eternal punishment for the wicked. What lies between death and the resurrection is the "intermediate state" as the theologians label it or *olam haba*, the "world to come," according to the rabbis.

When one begins to read through the Bible and confronts this topic, it can get very confusing. Assuming most of those reading this teaching letter are Christians, it is safe to assume we've all grown up to believe that it is all very simple—heaven for the good folks, hell for the bad folks. And yet the various Bible versions have words like Sheol, Hades, Gehenna, the Valley of Hinnom, Paradise, and Abraham's Bosom among others. Yeshua's (Jesus's) teaching on the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) is particularly confusing for Christians. Is He teaching truth or merely referencing a common folktale? Most of the confusion comes not only from a lack of solid Bible study, but also from a lack of understanding the Jewish thoughts behind the text.

This teaching letter will look at the various elements of the intermediate state through their names and functions and attempt to pull the various elements into a single cohesive picture that unifies the Jewish and Christian concepts as revealed in the Bible.

An important concept that must first be addressed is that of progressive revelation, a gradual unfolding of God's truth over a period of time. God's plan of redemption was clearly in place before the world was even created (Gen. 3:15; 1 Pet. 1:20; Rev. 13:8), even though the specifics of His plan took millennia to be revealed. In the same way, the revelation of people's intermediate state between life and resurrection was a spiritual reality that started with a basic understanding and gradually developed into the concepts we have today.



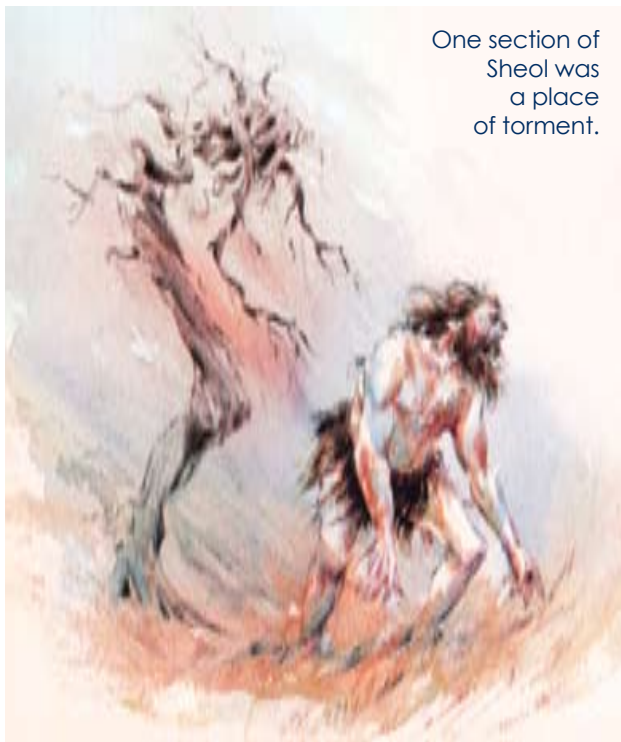
Beginning with the Jewish Concepts of Death

Sheol. Sheol became synonymous with the grave, the abode of the dead. Just as people's physical bodies were placed down in the ground at death, so the soul descended until it entered the place of the dead, Sheol. It is understood today to be a "deep, dark, abyss beneath the center of the earth, tenanted by departed spirits..." (*Nelson's*). It is far away from the realm of the living and especially heaven, yet it still is under God's jurisdiction and subject to Him as part of His creation. According to Scripture, Sheol has bars and gates and is a place of silence, rest, abandonment, even torment. Individuals, though disembodied, can still experience various stimuli and carry an awareness of their location, situation, and future. Once a person was consigned to Sheol by physical death, they could not return to the realm of the living except through God's permission. Examples are Samuel (1 Sam. 28), people in the Older Testament that various prophets raised from the dead, Mary's brother Lazarus, and the many that Yeshua also raised from the dead.

Hades/Hell—Sheol is translated in the Septuagint with the Greek word Hades, and both Hades and Hell carry the same connotation as the "holding place" of the dead, both wicked and righteous, and should not be confused with the ultimate destination for the wicked.



Gehenna/Gehinnom/Valley of Hinnom. The Valley of Hinnom is located in Jerusalem, southwest of the Old City and most likely the border between the tribes of Benjamin and Judah in biblical times. This infamous area was "the place where the Jewish apostasy, the rites of Molech, were celebrated (1 Kings 11:7). It was converted by King Josiah into a place of abomination, where dead bodies were thrown and burned (2 Kings 23:13–14). Hence, the place served as a symbol, and the name was appropriated to designate the abode of lost spirits" (*New Unger's Bible Dictionary*). Gehinnom was also used as the city garbage dump, which had



One section of Sheol was a place of torment.

long-burning fires consuming refuse. Yeshua Himself used this image as a very fitting illustration of the wicked person's ultimate destiny (Matt. 23:33).

Even though Sheol is the resting place of both the righteous and wicked dead, a revelation began to emerge about the time of the prophet Daniel and the intertestamental period. Daniel wrote, "*And many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, some to shame and everlasting contempt*" (Dan. 12:2). The idea that the wicked and the righteous did not share the same fate, and not even the same residence, began to grow. "During the intertestamental period, the Jewish concept of Sheol had progressed to the stage where it was believed that Sheol had two distinct compartments, or sections. One section was a place of torment to which the wicked went, while the other was a place of conscious bliss, often called 'Abraham's Bosom' or 'Paradise,' to which the righteous were carried by angels..." (Pyles). The compartments were adjacent to each other, yet completely distinct.

This is further reinforced by extra-biblical writings such as the *Book of Enoch*. Though non-canonical, Enoch reflects this intertestamental Jewish view and is worth consideration since it gives us insight into Hebraic understanding and bridges the gap with the Christian concepts.

And thence I went to another place, and he showed me in the west [another] great and high mountain [and] of hard rock. And there was in it four hollow places, deep and wide and very smooth. How smooth are the hollow places and deep and dark to look at. Then Raphael answered, one of the holy angels who was with me, and said unto me: "These hollow places have been created for this very purpose, that the spirits of the souls of the dead should assemble therein, yea that all the souls of the children of men should assemble here. And these places have been made to receive them till the day of their judgment and till their appointed period [till the period appointed], till the great judgment (comes) upon them."...Then I asked regarding it, and regarding all the hollow places: "*Why is one separated from the other?*" And he answered me and said unto me, "These three have been made that the spirits of the dead might be separated. And such a division has been made (for) the spirits of the righteous, in which there is the bright spring of water. And such has been made for the sinners when they die and are buried in the earth and judgment has not been executed on them in their lifetime. Here their spirits shall be set apart in this great pain till the great day of judgment and punishment and torment of those who curse forever, and retribution for their spirits. There He shall bind them forever" (1 Enoch 22:1-4, 8-12a, italics added).

By Yeshua's day, the concept of a subdivided Sheol was acknowledged by the fact that the resting place of the righteous took on a couple of designations, Abraham's Bosom and Paradise.

Abraham's Bosom. Abraham's Bosom became synonymous to the afterlife for a righteous person. This developed out of the idea, based on the Hebrew Scriptures (Gen.-Mal., Tanach), of "going to be with one's fathers" at death. This can be seen as far back as Genesis 47:30 where Jacob asks his son Joseph to swear to bury his body in Canaan once he has "joined his fathers," i.e. died. Since Abraham was the epitome of a righteous person, being personally declared righteous by God Himself, it was reasonable to assume that a righteous person would arrive in the same location where Father Abraham was resting. "The phrase 'to be in one's bosom' applies to the person who so reclines



Photo by Joel Fishman

at the table that his head is brought almost into the bosom of the one sitting next above him. To be in Abraham's bosom signified to occupy the seat next to Abraham, i.e., to enjoy felicity with (him)" (*New Unger's Bible Dictionary*).

Paradise. The word "paradise" was originally a Persian word meaning "an enclosed or walled orchard" or "a garden with fruit trees." Traditional Jewish theology held that the dead descended to Sheol. After the emergence of belief in the resurrection, however, this view was drastically modified. In the period between the Old and New Testament, Jewish people believed that, after the resurrection, the righteous would go to Paradise, a place much like the Garden of Eden before the Fall" (*Nelson's*). Paradise also became synonymous with Abraham's Bosom, both being a resting place for the righteous in their intermediate state.

Progressing into the Christian Concepts of Death

Yeshua Himself not only confirms this in His teaching, but the Gospel narratives are the bridge between the seeming differences of the Old Testament revelation of the intermediate state and the New Testament revelation. The primary sources for this teaching are Yeshua's parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19–31) and the record of Yeshua's last hours on the Roman cross (Luke 23:40–43).

In the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, both individuals die, but end up in completely different locales: the rich man in Sheol/Hell and Lazarus in Abraham's Bosom. While the parable's primary goal is to teach the lesson of trusting God's Word when we have the chance in this life, Yeshua does affirm the contemporary understanding of the intermediate state, that there is an actual Sheol divided into two compartments for the wicked and righteous. Additional details are filled in. Hell is a place of intense, hot torment resulting in great thirst, while Abraham's Bosom is a place of cool rest and comfort. Both characters had the ability to communicate, yet the separation between the two is a chasm that is impossible to cross. Thus by His own words, Yeshua affirms the divided Sheol concept. But one might argue, "Isn't Yeshua just borrowing a folk idea for the sake of illustration?"

The answer is apparent during Yeshua's crucifixion. During the course of His execution, two criminals are also crucified on either side of Yeshua. According to Luke, one criminal reviles Yeshua, while the other speaks in a repentant manner, resigned to his impending death. The repentant criminal turns to Yeshua and asks, in faith, for Yeshua to remember him when He receives sovereignty over the Messianic kingdom, to which He replies, "*Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise*" (Luke 23:43). If taken within the context of the afterlife revelation at that time, Yeshua is telling the criminal that upon death, they will both be going to the same place, Paradise, a.k.a. Abraham's Bosom.



Painting depicting the Rich Man and Lazarus

Hell is a place of intense, hot torment resulting in great thirst, while Abraham's Bosom is a place of cool rest and comfort.

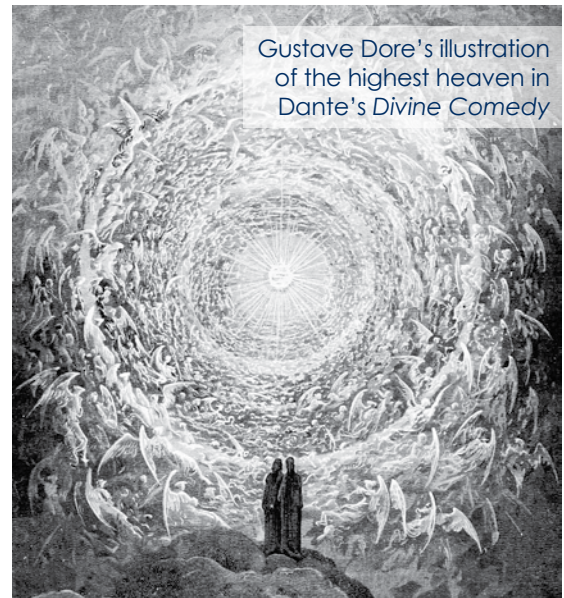
“Assuredly, I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise.”

Luke 23:43



If this were simply a story, it would be hard for many to believe that Yeshua, who claimed to be the Truth, would tell a lie to a dying man based on a simple folktale. On the contrary, for many Christians, this further establishes the truth of the Rich Man and Lazarus account even to the details. On the third day after His crucifixion (Luke 24:7), Yeshua rose from Paradise, assumed His glorified body (John 20:19, 26), walked among His disciples for 40 days (Acts 1:3), and ascended to heaven to be seated at His Father’s right hand (Acts 1:9; Col. 3:1). However, a further reading of the Christian Scriptures reveals a curious change in the intermediate state of the righteous.

The apostle Paul records a very fascinating experience for the church at Corinth. *“I know a man [Paul] in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven...And I know that this man...was caught up to paradise”* (2 Cor. 12:2a, 3a, NIV). He is caught *up* to the “third heaven.” According to basic theology, “heaven” is also divided. The “first” heaven is the literal sky above the earth. The “second” heaven is a region above our sky, but below the “third heaven,” which is the actual location of God’s throne room. Paul equates the third heaven with Paradise—not a paradise, but *the* Paradise, the dwelling place of the righteous. So the question emerges, Are there two paradises, one Jewish and one Christian, or did Paradise/Abraham’s Bosom somehow become relocated to the third heaven?



Gustave Dore's illustration of the highest heaven in Dante's Divine Comedy



When Yeshua was on earth, He made a very important statement about the demographics of heaven. Yeshua said to Nicodemus, *“No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is, the Son of Man who is in heaven”* (John 3:13). It is evident from this saying that although heaven is populated by many creatures, mankind is not among them, at least up to that point in time. However, mankind’s separation from the literal presence of God was not always so. In the beginning, Adam and Eve walked with God in intimate fellowship, able to fully experience Him with their senses. After the Fall, when sin entered the human race and destroyed our fellowship with God, Genesis illustrates that there was an increasing separation between God and people, the most obvious being physical death. Based on the above points, when people died, they did not go to “be with the Lord,” but instead went to Sheol, the waiting place of all deceased people, either righteous or wicked. Why not? Perhaps the *Torah* (Gen.–Deut.) can best explain.

Moses was told to build a tabernacle exactly like the one God showed him on Mount Sinai. Hebrews tells us that the sanctuary was *“the copy and shadow of the heavenly things”* (Heb. 8:5). That means that the tabernacle and its service is a picture of a reality that we cannot yet see, a reality found in the third heaven. The tabernacle and the service give us the answer. Only a person who is reckoned as holy, the high priest, whose sin is atoned for, may enter the presence of a holy God on *Yom Kippur* (Day of Atonement). The only man that has been able to stand in heaven next to God has been, according to Yeshua, Himself, the Son of Man who was without spot or blemish (Heb. 4:15). The rest of deceased mankind has been consigned to Sheol because atonement had not yet been made for the righteous. The wicked were already lost and reserved for judgment, but the others, though declared right with God through faith, still had the stain of sin upon them, since *“it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins”* (Heb. 10:4).



The Temple Institute, Jerusalem

The tabernacle and its service is a picture of a reality that we cannot yet see, a reality found in the third heaven.

Here we see the scapegoat, a type of Yeshua, being prepared as a sacrifice on *Yom Kippur*.

Therefore, though God could declare people righteous, it was impossible for them to literally dwell in His presence, since *“because in His forbearance He had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished...”* (Rom. 3:25b, NIV), and because sin cannot exist in God’s presence, people who had not experienced absolute atonement could not dwell with God in heaven. It was only when *“God presented Him [Yeshua] as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in His blood”* (v. 25a, NIV) that a way was created to make the righteous truly holy, wiping away all vestige of sin and enabling them to dwell in God’s presence as they had in the Garden of Eden. It is also an interesting parallel that one of the names for Paradise in rabbinic literature is Gan Eden, the Garden of Eden.

So what happened to so drastically change the cosmos? According to Christian theology, Yeshua descended to Sheol on the day of His death, preceding the criminal to whom He had promised to meet in Paradise. Yeshua descends to Abraham’s Bosom/Paradise to announce His victory over sin and death. There is some debate about whether Yeshua preached to the dead (1 Pet. 4:6) and declared the doom of the wicked (3:18–20). Regardless, at that point, the way is now clear for all the righteous dead to realize the fulfillment of their faith, i.e. living with God face to face. Paul quotes Psalm 68:18a in Ephesians 4:8–10 to explain the event of Yeshua rising from Sheol with the righteous dead following him in spiritual state: *“Therefore He says: ‘When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men.’ (Now this, ‘He ascended’—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)”*



The actual place is not transferred, only emptied as the people are relocated. Yeshua is then given His glorified body, a prototype of the resurrection body, as the firstfruits from the dead. The righteous must wait for theirs along with all the redeemed at the resurrection. As God's perfect high priest, Yeshua ascends to heaven to present His atoning blood to His Father in the tabernacle not made with hands. *"For Christ has not entered the holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us"* (Heb 9:24). He then ushers the righteous into His Father's presence. Paradise now becomes the place where God lives with His redeemed people in the third heaven.

In this way, all these Scriptures line up, and we have a solid understanding. When the Bible speaks of Yeshua being at the right hand of the Father (Rom. 8:34), being away from the body and at home with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:8), God's

people now being seated with Christ in the heavenly places (Eph. 2:6), Paradise being in the third heaven, and the wicked remaining in hell awaiting judgment (Dan. 12:2; Rev. 20:14–15), it becomes clear that the progressive revelation of Scripture is coherent and unified regarding mankind's intermediate state.

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All Scripture is taken from the New King James Version, unless otherwise noted.

Many pastors, Bible teachers, and lay people have written and asked if they can use these notes for preaching and teaching. The answer is a resounding "yes"! It is our hope that the information contained herein will be disseminated over and over again, whether through the spoken word or by photocopying and redistributing these teachings. *"For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem"* (Isaiah 2:3).

