

SHEOL IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

In the Revised Version of [Gen. 37:35](#), the words of Jacob to his sons and his daughters, after Joseph's coat dipped in blood, had been shown to him, are rendered, "I will go down to the grave to my son mourning," *Sheol* being translated, *to the grave*. The Common Version reads, "I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning,"--the only change made by the Revisers consisting in a substitution of *to* for *into* and *unto*. But they have inserted in the margin the following explanation of *the grave*: "Heb. *Sheol*, the name, of the abode of the dead, answering the Greek *Hades*, [Acts 2:27](#)." This explanation is correct and sufficient; but the necessity of making it, and of referring to it in subsequent passages, shows that the translation was not esteemed wholly satisfactory.

It is not, therefore, surprising that the same word has received other translations, after the manner of the Common Version. For instance, in the account of the overthrow of Corah, Dathan and Abiram (See [Num. 16:30,33](#)), it is translated, *the pit*, probably because this expression was supposed to agree with the form which was given to the judgment of God, viz., "The earth opened her mouth and swallowed them up... and so they...went down alive into the pit." But while retaining this translation, the Revisers have admitted the need of some explanation by inserting *sheol* in the margin, yet without referring as they should have done, to the passage in Genesis where this Hebrew word is explained by them as "the name of the abode of the dead." For how can the word *Sheol* shed light on the English expression, unless its meaning is known to the reader? And if it could be assumed that the English reader would know the meaning of *Sheol*, why should not the word have been put in the text, instead of the margin? Without a reference to [Gen. 37:35](#), the marginal *sheol* is practically useless to an English reader.

Indeed, we find such a reference in [Isa. 5:14](#), where the word is translated *hell*; for the margin accompanies this third rendering by the following note: "Or, the *grave*, Heb., *sheol*. See [Gen. 37:35](#)." With this note the reader, provided he consults the margin, and then examines the explanation in Genesis to which he is referred, will obtain a tolerably correct view of the meaning.

Briefly, then, the treatment of *sheol* in the Revised Version is as follows: It is translated *the grave*, fifteen times ([Gen. 37:35](#); [42:38](#); [44:29,31](#); [1 Sam. 2:6](#); [1 Kings 2:6,9](#); [Psa. 141:7](#); [Prov. 30:16](#); [Eccl. 9:10](#); [Cant. 8:6](#); [Isa. 38:10,18](#); [Hos. 13:14](#)); *the pit*, five times ([Num. 16:30,33](#); [Deut. 32:22](#); [Psa. 55:15](#); [86:13](#)); and *hell* fifteen times ([Isa. 5:14](#); [14:9,11,15](#); [28:15,18](#); [57:9](#); [Ezek. 31:15,16,17](#); [32:21,27](#); [Amos 9:2](#); [Jonah 2:2](#); [Hab. 2:15](#)). It is also Anglicized as *sheol* in twenty-nine places ([2 Sam. 22:6](#); [Job 7:9](#); [11:18](#); [14:13](#); [17:13,16](#); [21:13](#); [24:19](#); [26:6](#); [Psa. 6:6](#); [9:18](#); [16:10](#); [18:6](#); [30:4](#); [31:18](#); [49:15,16](#); [89:49](#); [116:3](#); [139:8](#); [Prov. 1:12](#); [5:5](#); [7:27](#); [9:18](#); [15:11,24](#); [23:14](#); [27:20](#)). Thus it is translated in thirty-five places, and Anglicized in twenty-nine. And it is noticeable that all the passages in which it is Anglicized (including [2 Sam. 22:6](#) -- [Psa. 18:6](#)) are poetic. It is also noticeable that all the passages in which it is translated *hell* are in prophetic books (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Amos, Jonah, Habakkuk).

But is there any sufficient reason for this varied treatment of the word? We could answer this question in the affirmative, if there were evidence, (1) that in the Hebrew language *sheol* had more than one meaning--e.g., a primitive meaning and a derivative, or (2) that in the progress of religious knowledge among the Jews, it exchanged one signification for another, or (3) that it always had an indefinite, shadowy meaning, dependent on the context. Upon examination, however, we do not discover in the Old Testament use of the word evidence that it had more than one signification, or that its latter signification was different than its earlier.

*Sheol* is represented in some of them as vast, cavernous, unfilled. In it the dead are spoken of as asleep, or inert, or as deprived of the honor and power which they had in life, ([Isa. 14:9,11,15](#); [Ezek. 31:14-18](#); [Amos 9:2](#); [Jonah 2:2](#); [Hab. 2:5](#)). We are unable to discover any valid reason for rendering the word *hell*, rather than *pit*, in these passages, or indeed any reason for translating [R829 : page 4] it at all, which would not require its translation in any of the places where it is treated as a proper name.

The statement in the Preface to the Revised Version is as follows: "The Revisers, therefore, in the historical annotations have left the rendering 'the grave' or 'the pit' in the text, with a marginal note 'Heb. *sheol*' to indicate that it does not signify 'the place of burial;' while in the poetical writings they have put most commonly 'sheol' in the text and 'the grave' in the margin. In [Isa. 14](#), however, where 'hell' is used in more of its original sense, and is less liable to be misunderstood, and where any change in so familiar a passage, which was not distinctly an improvement would be a decided loss, the Revisers have *contented* themselves, with leaving 'hell' in the text, and have connected it with other passages by putting 'sheol' in the margin," (p. 7). The reasons here assigned for leaving the translation 'hell' in the text, do not seem to us very cogent, and the neglect to allude in any way to the twelve other places in which the same translation is retained, is remarkable. Probably, however, it was thought that the explanation of their course with [Isaiah 14](#), would be considered, without remark, as applicable to the other cases. But it would have been better to have represented the Hebrew word everywhere by *Sheol* or *Hades*, its Greek equivalent.

Notwithstanding the criticism which we have ventured to make on the treatment of *sheol* in the Revised Version, we desire to say that, as far as we have been able to examine that Version, it is a great improvement on the one in common use. Though more changes, wisely made, would have been welcome to many scholars, it was certainly better to err on the side of caution than on the side of rashness. And in spite of all the just or unjust criticism upon it, the Revision is a work of high and reverent scholarship, contributing to a more correct view of the original text.--*Alvah Hovey*.

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