What Does the Bible Say About Hell (Old Testament)

Introduction

1. Dr. Long proposed a question regarding Hell, and if I understood it correctly it revolved around where the unsaved go upon their death—is it Hell, the Lake of Fire, or some intermediate place before these?
2. Rather than just answer that question, I thought it would be a good to broaden the discussion and look at what the Bible says about Hell
3. The Bible has quite a bit to say about Hell, and Jesus spoke about it often, and as I worked on putting my notes together if felt like it might be best to break it up over two weeks:
   a. Next week we'll be looking at what the New Testament says about Hell
   b. This week we'll be looking at what the Old Testament says about Hell

A. The primary Hebrew word used in the Old Testament "sheol" (pronounced SHEE-ol)

1. While the King James translates Sheol as Hell, almost no other English translations do because the word has a broader meaning that that:
   a. In some instances, it's used as a synonym for death:
      1) 1 Samuel 2:6: "**The LORD kills and makes alive; He brings down to Sheol and raises up.**"
      2) Psalm 18:5: "**The cords of Sheol surrounded me; the snares of death confronted me."**

   b. Sometimes it's used metaphorically when referring to difficulty or distress (Psalm 18:5-6): "**The cords of Sheol surrounded me; The snares of death confronted me. In my distress I called upon the LORD, and cried to my God for help…"**
   c. Finally, it's also used as a reference to a place, specifically the realm or abode of the dead:
      1) Psalm 139:8: "**If I ascend to heaven, You are there; If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, You are there**."
      2) It's routinely depicted as a pit deep within the earth:
         a) Job 33:18: "**He keeps back his soul from the pit, and his life from passing over into Sheol**."
         b) Proverbs 1:12: "**Let us swallow them alive like Sheol, even whole, as those who go down to the pit**;"
         c) Isaiah 14:15: "**Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol, to the recesses of the pit**."
         d) It's used repeatedly with phrase like "**going [or go] down**", "**brought down**", "**thrust down**"

2. How is Sheol described?
    a. Rather than being depicted as a place of fiery torment, Sheol is portrayed as a dark, hopeless place filled with chaos, gloom, and silence (Psalm 88:6; 115:17)
    b. It's a place where the inhabitants are spiritually and morally separated from God (Isaiah 38:18; Psalm 6:5-6), but not necessarily separated from His presence (Psalm 139:8; Amos 9:2)
    c. No one can thank, praise, or hope in the Lord from Sheol (Isaiah 38:18; Psalm 6:5; 16:10)
    d. It is a place of pain and distress (Psalm 116;3), weakness (Isaiah 14:10), helplessness (Psalm 88:4), hopelessness (Isaiah 38:10), and destruction (Isaiah 38:17)
    e. It's a place of captivity from which none can escape on their own (Psalm 18:5; 116:3; Job 7:9)

B. The Old Testament SEEMS (and I stress that word) to present Sheol as the destiny for all men, wicked and righteous alike

1. Some passages describe Sheol as the destiny for the wicked:
    a. Job 24:19: "**Drought and heat consume the snow waters, so does Sheol those who have sinned**."
    b. Psalm 9:17: "**The wicked will return to Sheol, even all the nations who forget God.**"
    c. Psalm 31:17b: "**Let the wicked be put to shame; let them be silent in Sheol**."
    d. We even have a graphic real-life example of this in Numbers 16 when God opens up the earth and sucks Korah and his rebellious followers down to Sheol (Numbers 16:33)

2. Other passages suggest everyone went to Sheol after death, even the righteous:
    a. Psalm 89:48: "**What man can live and not see death? Can he deliver his soul from the power of Sheol?**"
    b. Job, Jacob, righteous King Hezekiah, and even David spoke of going to Sheol after death:
        1) Job 14:13: "**Oh that you would hide me in Sheol, that you would conceal me until your wrath be past, that you would appoint me a set time, and remember me!**"
        2) Genesis 37:35: When Jacob thought Joseph had been killed he said, "**…I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning**"
        3) In Isaiah 38:1-11, King Hezekiah spoke of dying prematurely and wrote, "**In the middle of my life I am to enter the gates of Sheol; I am to be deprived of the rest of my years…**'"

    c. One of the most interesting passages has to do with the prophet Samuel (1 Samuel 28):

1) The Philistines gathered to attack Israel and King Saul is freaking out because the LORD did not answer him when he inquired on him
2) So, Saul sought out a medium to conjure up the prophet Samuel who was no longer alive and this is recorded in 1 Samuel 28:7-20 (READ):
   a) Some suggest it wasn't Samuel but a demon that the woman conjured up, but everything about the passages suggests it was actual Samuel
      - The woman is genuinely shocked (12)
      - Saul recognized him as Samuel (14)
      - The text refers to him as Samuel (15): "**then Samuel said to Saul**…"
      - Her speaks on behalf of the Lord (16-19)

   b) Samuel appears to be in Sheol:
      - He rebuked Saul for disturbing him and "**brining me up**" (15)
      - He informed Saul that he and his sons would soon be with him (a reference to their deaths at the hands of the Philistines)

3. However, there are passages that indicate the upright would not remain in Sheol, but would be redeemed and delivered:
   a. Proverbs 15:24: "**The path of life leads upward for the prudent, that he may turn away from Sheol beneath**."
   b. Job referred to God hiding and concealing him in Sheol, but that God would set a time to release or renew Him (Job 14:13-14), and even spoke of his future resurrection (Job 19:25-26)
   c. David was confident that God would not abandon him in Sheol but rescue His life from the power of Sheol (READ Psalm 16:10, 49:15)
   d. Daniel also spoke of a time when "**those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake**" (Sheol) to "**everlasting life**, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt" (12:2-3)
   e. Isaiah also spoke of those in Sheol being resurrected (26:19): "**Your dead will come back to life; your corpses will rise up. Wake up and shout joyfully, you who live in the ground! For you will grow like plants drenched with the morning dew, and the earth will bring forth its dead spirits**."

C. This begs the question, were the righteous and unrighteous together in Sheol?

1. Most Bible scholars from the early Church Fathers to today believe that Sheol was divided into two sections separated by a chasm, even though this isn't stated explicitly in the Old Testament:
   a. One section was for the wicked where they experienced the dread and distress of Sheol discussed above; oddly enough, they simply refer to this as Sheol
   b. A second section was for the righteous and it served as a place of rest until their resurrection; most often this is referred to as Abraham's Bosom

2. This concept of two different compartments in Sheol comes from both the Bible and common Jewish belief during the 1st century:
    a. Jesus referred to "**Abraham's bosom**" in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31)
    b. The OT referred to saints being gathered to their ancestors, their fathers, and their people after death and most scholars believe this was in Abraham's bosom:
        1) In Genesis 15:15 God told Abraham, "…**you will go to your ancestors in peace and be buried at a good old age**"
        2) The Bible says something similar about Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Aaron, and Moses all resting or being gathered to their fathers or people (Genesis 25:17; 35:39; 47:30; 49:33; Numbers 20:24; 27:13)
        3) These statements cannot refer to burial because in almost every instance the gathering to their people took place before burial, and many like Abrham, Ishmael, Aaron and Moses weren't actually buried with their fathers or people

    c. A belief in Abraham's bosom was common among Jews in the 1st century:
        1) Josephus described Sheol as having two sides divided by chaos, one for the wicked and one for the righteous who were guided by angels to "the bosom of Abraham" to await their resurrection
        2) Other extra Biblical writings from the time describe something similar (4 Maccabees, Testament of Abraham, Babylonian Talmud, 1st Enoch)

D. Are the Old Testament saints still in Abraham's bosom today awaiting their resurrection?

1. Bible scholars don't agree on this, and to some degree it comes down to how one understands what happened in Matthew 27:50-54 (READ):
    a. First off, did this event include just some of the Old Testaments saints, or all of them?
    b. Second, were they merely resurrected back to earthly life like Lazareth, live for a while only to die again, or were they resurrected with their new spiritual bodies and ascend to heaven with Jesus at His ascension?
    c. Third, what do we do with Daniel 12:2 which says that those who are asleep in the dust of the earth are resurrected after the Great Tribulation during the end times? Is this all OT saints or just those who die at the hands of antichrist during the 70th week and are resurrected at Christ's return (Revelation 20:4-6)
    d. So, scholars are split on whether the Old Testament saints are still in Abraham's bosom awaiting resurrection or in heaven with Jesus

2. The other thing Bible scholars don't agree on is where Jesus went between His death and resurrection, but I believe it's reasonable to assume it was Abraham's bosom:

a. We know He didn't go to heaven during that time because at the tomb He told Mary Magdalen not to touch Him because He hadn't yet been to heaven (John 20:17)
b. Based on where OT saints went, it would seem Jesus went to the righteous side of Sheol and Paul alludes to this in Acts 13:35 when He attributed David's words from Psalm 16:10 to Christ; Paul only quotes part of the verse but the full verse reads: "**For You will not abandon my soul to Sheol; nor will You allow Your Holy One to see decay**"
c. It's possible Jesus was referring to this in Luke 23:43 when He promised the thief on the cross, "**Truly I say to you today you shall be with Me in Paradise**.":
    1) There's debate about this verse, both regarding what Jesus meant by Paradise and where the comma should be placed
    2) Nearly every English translation places the comma before today indicating that the thief would be in Paradise that very day with Jesus: "**Truly I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise**"
        - If Jesus were referring to heaven, this poses a problem because Jesus didn't go to heaven until his ascension some 40 days later
        - However, if Jesus was using Paradise as a synonym for Abraham's bosom (which was common in 1st century Judaism) then He was promising the thief He'd be with Him that very day in Abraham's bosom
        - This would match what we see in the OT regarding the righteous

    3) Other's believe Jesus was referring to heaven, but believe the comma should be placed after today reading, "Truly I say to you today, you will be with me in Paradise", indicating that Jesus was merely promising the man that he would be with Him in Heaven at some day in the future

d. Some claim Jesus went to Hell to declare victory or preach to those in captivity, but this is based on misinterpretations of Ephesians 4:8-10 and 1 Peter 3:18-20

E. Takeaways

1. The first takeaway is that our existence does not end with physical, earthly death:
    a. Every who dies goes somewhere to await resurrection
    b. The Old Testament referred to this as Sheol
    c. For some it was a place of darkness, dread, distress, and distance from God as they awaited resurrection to eternal contemtp
    d. For others, it was Abraham's bosom, a place of peace and rest as they awaited resurrection to everlasting life
    e. These were both described by Daniel and Jesus:
        1) Daniel 12:2: "**Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contem**pt"

2) John 5:28-29: "**Do not marvel at this; for an hour is coming, in which all who are in the tombs will hear His voice, and will come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment**."

2. This leads to our second takeaway which is that even though death is inevitable, there is hope after death:
   a. Both of the passages we just read point to the fact that there is hope for resurrection to eternal life
   b. The Old Testament saints knew they would someday face Sheol (in other words death), but they were also convinced that God would not abandon them to Sheol
   c. God would gather them to their fathers and their people, redeem their souls and resurrect them to everlasting life
   d. The same is true for us today—for those who have placed their faith and trust in Jesus Christ, God will not abandon us to the grave but raise us up to everlasting life