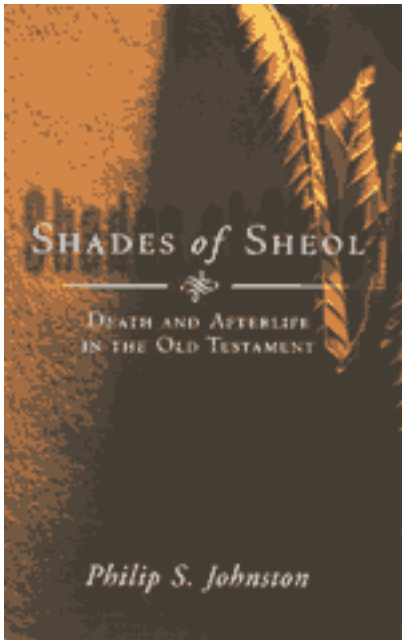


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Johnston, Phillip S.

Shades of Sheol: Death and the Afterlife in the Old Testament

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Shades of Sheol is a tightly organized volume with four main sections dealing with (A) death in general, (B) the underworld or the realm of the dead, (C) the dead and their connections with the living, and (D) the afterlife. The book is based on research Johnston conducted for a master's thesis (Belfast, 1988) and a doctoral dissertation (Cambridge, 1993). Johnston succinctly presents his perspective at the outset: "Israel's religious writers were not particularly concerned with the underworld or with the dead. They related to Yahweh in this life, and were relatively uninterested in the life hereafter" (18).

Section A (chs. 1–2) treats the biblical descriptions of death and examines Israelite mourning and burial practices based on the literary and archaeological evidence. This material sets the stage for the rest of the study and in many ways simply surveys the topics and evidence that are treated more rigorously in subsequent chapters. Johnston surveys the vocabulary of death and how the related terms and themes are used in the Hebrew Bible. This treatment amounts to a theology of death in the Hebrew Bible. Definitions of the various terms are organized thematically around issues of causes, results, destiny, and the like. The author makes little use of literary distinctives; poetry, prose, and priestly prescriptions are cited side by side as if these literary genres present data in the same way with the same purposes. The unfortunate methodological oversight

in this study, and it occurs throughout the book, is that the author fails to exploit the artifactual evidence for all that it has to offer. In fact, the author tends to dismiss archaeological evidence too summarily and in the end has created a presentation of afterlife beliefs that is largely limited to what is presented in the Hebrew Bible.

Section B (chs. 3–5) examines the Israelite perspectives on the underworld or realm of the dead. Johnston notes that the afterlife is not a “major or repeated theme in the Hebrew Bible.” It is true that discussions about the dead or their fate are not prominent in the Hebrew Bible. That is not to say, however, that this theme was unimportant to ancient Israelites. The amount of space the Hebrew Bible dedicates to these themes is not necessarily a reliable indicator of their importance to ancient Israelites or, for that matter, even to the biblical authors/editors themselves. This section also suffers from a lack of serious attention to what archaeological evidence has to contribute to discussions about death, burial, funerary cults, and so forth.

Section C (chs. 6–8) explores the relations between the living and the dead, namely, the practices that the living use to maintain a connection to the dead. Here is where Johnston’s reconstruction of ancient Israelite funerary practices is clearly out of step with most of modern scholarship, both that by biblical scholars and by archaeologists. Johnston’s assessment of the textual evidence leads him to conclude that the dead in general and that consulting or fearing the dead “were of minimal importance” (149; cf. 166) and that cultic practices honoring the dead were of “marginal importance” (195). All these claims run counter to trends in modern scholarship on ancient Israelite religion. To his credit, Johnston interacts with these trends and their proponents, but he typically dismisses contrary proposals too quickly as “unconvincing,” “hypothetical,” or “inconclusive.”

Section D (chs. 9–10) examines Israelite perspectives on the afterlife, with specific attention to the origin of the belief in the resurrection of the dead. Although Johnston provides a balanced presentation of the Hebrew Bible’s overall lack of interest in or knowledge of the idea of resurrection, his reconstruction is designed to show that the theological apex is reached when Israelite conceptions of afterlife include a belief in physical resurrection (i.e., Dan 12:1–3). Johnston maintains that the Israelite belief in resurrection was principally the product of inner-Israelite developments and was only at best secondarily influenced by non-Israelite religions, that is, by non-Deuteronomistic Yahwism or the religions of Israel’s neighbors. Johnston stresses that late biblical images of the afterlife did not derive from the belief systems of Israel’s immediate neighbors or regional overlords. His lack of true appreciation for the value of the afterlife beliefs of ancient Israelites is clear and is biased toward what later became popular Jewish and Christian conceptions. With regard to the resurrection motif he notes, “[h]ere at last was

the basis for a resolution of the dilemma of Sheol, with its shadowy insubstantial existence, its shadow cast over human life, and its own deep impenetrable shadows, separated from the presence and light of Yahweh” (239). Johnston’s description depicts the principal and long-standing Israelite image of the afterlife as part of a poor, underdeveloped, unsophisticated belief system—a “dilemma.” This is unfortunate, for it is clear that this image served the needs of the ancient Israelites quite well for generations, not to mention the vast number of their neighbors who had similar images of the afterlife.

The value of this book lies in Johnston’s methodical presentation of differing viewpoints on textual and, to a lesser extent, artifactual evidence. One of the book’s striking weaknesses is Johnston’s tendency to dismiss recent approaches to Israelite religion that are becoming increasingly informed by archaeological artifacts. When it comes to archaeological information, he tends to cite or summarize and then dismiss recent interpretations based on that evidence (e.g., 53–62). This is unfortunate, for as much of recent scholarship has clearly demonstrated, Israel’s afterlife images and funerary practices were much more vibrant than Johnston is willing to admit. This results in what is a text-biased reconstruction of ancient Israelite religious practices, and such text-dominated treatments are now woefully inadequate as histories of Israel’s religious practices. Thus, his position is shaped mostly by the final editors of the Bible and their interests. His penchant to discount the importance of funerary practices in ancient Israel and Judah is out of step with mainstream scholarship among both biblical scholars and archaeologists (e.g., Theodore J. Lewis, *Cults of the Dead in Ancient Israel and Ugarit* [HSM 39 Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989]; Elizabeth Bloch-Smith, *Judahite Burial Practices and Beliefs about the Dead* [JSOTSup 123; JSOT/ASOR Monograph Series 7; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992]; Philip J. King and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel* [Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001], especially 363–81).

Johnston began this study by asserting that “[t]his study purposely attempts to read and examine the Hebrew Bible in its own cultural and religious setting, without importing later concepts” (16). The book ends, however, with the following statement regarding the theme of the ultimate resurrection of the dead: “Here indeed was a response to death, though its sting would not be drawn until another era, a new revelation of God, and a specific, momentous resurrection. As the New Testament asserts: ‘Christ Jesus . . . abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel’ (2 Tim. 1:10)” (239). The end of the book thus betrays the author’s ultimate goal: to write an Old Testament theology of death and afterlife as a prelude to a New Testament theology of the same. Most biblical scholars do not image this as the task of scholarship on the Hebrew Bible. Moreover, as noted above, at the outset of the book Johnston clearly stated

his basic thesis: “Israel’s religious writers were not particularly concerned with the underworld or with the dead. They related to Yahweh in this life, and were relatively uninterested in the life hereafter” (18). He later notes that, “[t]hough the Israelites seldom speculated about eternity, one confidently proclaimed: ‘from everlasting to everlasting you are god’ (Ps. 90:2). The words of Jesus (in discussion of resurrection) aptly summarize the Hebrew understanding of Yahweh: ‘He is God not of the dead, but of the living’ (Mark 12:27 etc.)” (39). This New Testament passage is apparently cited here to suggest that even Jesus supports Johnston’s identification of the focal point of Israelite afterlife beliefs. This amounts to scholarship in service of Christian theology, and there certainly is a place in some circles for such scholarship. It appears, however, that this overriding theological interest has led to three weaknesses in this book. First, it may unconsciously motivate Johnston’s dismissal or reinterpretation of the archaeological and biblical evidence that attests a more developed Israelite funerary cult. This evidence indicates that Israelites had a much more lively interest in the dead and the afterlife than Johnston imagines. Second, this theological interest may explain why Johnston concludes that the physical resurrection motif is the product of mostly inner Israelite developments with little to no influence from outside cultures or religions. Johnston seemingly prefers that this belief—one that was to become central to Christianity—should not be the product of outside influences, as if that would make the motif somehow corrupt or foreign. Third, this theological interest is clearly behind his view that belief in the ultimate resurrection of the dead is the apex of ancient Israel’s afterlife beliefs.

These criticisms notwithstanding, *Shades of Sheol* provides a useful discussion of the biblical texts and of many cultic practices that deal with ancient Israel’s afterlife beliefs. This book will be of value to biblical scholars for its discussion of debated topics, to theologians for its attention to theological themes, and to advanced students as an introduction to the textual evidence and the theoretical issues.