

Is There a "World of the Dead"?

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What are the “shades” mentioned in Isaiah 14:9, RSV?

Some Christians have used this passage and similar ones to postulate that the dead continue to exist in a weak, conscious state. Your question gives me the opportunity to examine the topic a little more carefully. In answering I will say something about the Hebrew term translated “shades,” comment on the passages where it is employed, and draw some conclusions.

1. *Linguistic Comments:* The meaning of the Hebrew term *rēpā'îm*, translated “shades,” is uncertain. Some have suggested that it derives from the verb *rāpā'* (“to heal”), and thus mean “healers.” Others speculate that the verbal root is *rāpāh* (“to be weak”), meaning “weak ones.” The use of a similar root in ancient languages tends to support the derivation from the verb “to heal,” but there is no evidence that the *rēpā'îm* were healers. In the Bible the term is associated with the idea of weakness (Isa. 14:9, 10).

In any case the translation “shades” cannot be supported by the Hebrew language. The connection between the use of the term in Canaanite literature and the Bible is not clear. In the Bible *rēpā'îm* appears in narratives designating an ethnic group, the pre-Israelite inhabitants of Canaan (e.g. Gen. 14:5; 15:20; Joshua 12:4), and also a geographical area, e.g., “the Valley of the Rephaim” (Joshua 15:8). The other usages designate the dead.

2. *Rēpā'îm as the Dead:* All the passages in which the term refers to the dead are found in poetic books. It appears in Isaiah 14:9, in a lament over the death of the king of Babylon (more like a mockery than a lament). The language is highly poetical; trees are personified and rejoice at the death of the king, the grave is described as rising up to meet the newly dead king, and the dead, the *rēpā'îm*, to greet the deceased king. The language is metaphorical, not literal. With ironic tone they tell the king that he is now one of them, weak and covered by maggots and worms. It is an excellent piece of literature in which a powerful person is mocked by describing what figuratively happens when he reaches the grave. It presupposes that the dead are in the grave in total unconsciousness. It does not describe a shadowy existence of human beings in the tomb.

In Isaiah 26:14 the *rēpā'îm* are identified as those who are “dead” and who “live no more” (NIV). The Lord ended their lives. There is no reason to understand the term in this passage as designating anything but death. Isaiah 26:19 emphasizes the fact that the *rēpā'îm* are dead and that only the Lord can and will bring them back to life. It designates the faithful dead of God. Psalm 88:10 uses the term in parallel with the dead and establishes that they cannot praise the Lord.

Job 26:5 describes the *rēpā'îm* as trembling at the presence of God. The poem describes God’s sovereignty over the whole universe, including the dead. They are described poetically as trembling before the Lord. God does the impossible—namely, causes those who are not alive to tremble. In Proverbs 2:18 those who go to the strange woman are walking on the path of death, the path of

the *r^epā'im*, the realm of death, from which no one can return (verse 19). Proverbs 9:18 describes the house of the woman Folly as a grave, and the guests are the *r^epā'im*. The young man who visits her is already considered as dead. Finally, Proverbs 21:16 states that those who reject understanding will join the assembly of the *r^epā'im*, a poetic way of saying that they will die, they will join the dead.

3. *Conclusion:* The fact that *r^epā'im* is used only in poetic contexts suggests that it is employed figuratively. It is a synonym for the dead, those without life in any of its expressions, consumed by worms, and weak precisely because of the absence of life. In none of the passages are they described as having contact with the living or as possessing a special knowledge to share with them. They do not and cannot interact with God by speaking to or praising Him. In short, *r^epā'im* is a poetic term used to designate the dead in general. It seems to describe the dead as those who lack the strength and power of life and who are totally inactive. They are dead!

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