

When trying to figure out where the Christian ideas of heaven and hell came from, an obvious place to start is with the Hebrew Bible. Jesus himself held to the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures. To be sure, there was not a completely fixed canon in his day, which all Jews everywhere agreed to. But virtually all Jews we know of ascribed to the high authority (and Mosaic authorship) of the Torah (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy); and most Jews - including Jesus - also considered the prophets authoritative; Jesus also accepted the authority of the book of Psalms and a probably number of the other books. It was not until a century or so after Jesus that most Jews agreed on virtually all the books of what we now think of as the Hebrew Bible - but Jesus and his followers would have accepted most of them.

That means that the views found in these books were highly influential on what Jews like Jesus would have thought about most theological topics. And so, what does the Hebrew Bible teach about the afterlife?

To start with I can make two very basic points:

1. There is not just one view about the afterlife in the Hebrew Bible. The Bible contains lots of books written by lots of authors at different periods of time and in different places for different audiences. Naturally there were various views about many, many things, including the afterlife.
2. But one view that is NOT represented in the Hebrew Bible is the later Christian notion of heaven and hell, that is, heaven as a place of eternal reward for souls that are faithful to God (or who have lived good lives) and hell as a place of eternal punishment for souls who are not faithful (or good).

Both points, especially the second, may come as a surprise to modern casual readers of the Bible, especially Christians who naturally assume that their own views of the afterlife are the views set forth consistently in the Bible. But

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