

Where did the idea of a “differentiated” afterlife come from? I’m not overly fond of the word “differentiated,” since it’s not one we normally use. But for the moment I can’t think of a better one for the phenomenon I’m thinking of.

An “**und**differentiated” afterlife is one in which everyone has the same experience: there is no difference between one person and the next. It doesn’t matter if the person lived a good life, was kind to strangers, was meek, humble, and mild, did his or her best to help those in need, lived a faithful and loving life OR was a wicked, mean-spirited, arrogant, violent sinner who disrespected others and went out of his or her way to do them harm. The loving and meek, and the despicable and murderous: It doesn’t matter. Both kinds of people end up in the same place and have the same experience after death (in an undifferentiated afterlife).

As we have seen, that was the view of most of the Hebrew Bible. At death, everyone goes to Sheol. It doesn’t matter how much you loved God and your neighbor, it doesn’t matter if you were faithful, religious, and devout, or if you were a truly awful human being. Everyone went to Sheol. There was no reward for the righteous, no punishment for the sinner. One size fits all, for eternity. No differences. Undifferentiated.

A differentiated afterlife is one in which ...

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