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THE UNDERWORLD OR ITS RULER?
SOME REMARKS ON THE CONCEPT OF SHEOL
IN THE HEBREW BIBLE

Abstract

The literature on the eschatology of the Hebrew Bible has adopted the assumption that she’ol means the underground realm inhabited by the dead. However, in most cases the word allows for dual interpretation: the underworld or the death deity. In favor of the latter speak the passages describing Sheol in terms of a voracious demon. This study therefore has three main objectives: (1) the reconstruction of the meaning of the word she’ol by means of the statistic linguistics; (2) the analysis of two major semantic complexes utilized in the descriptions of Sheol – the topomorphic and the anthropomorphic one; (3) the presentation of additional arguments in favor of the anthropomorphic interpretation of Sheol.

The eschatology of the Hebrew Bible [HB] at times employs the concept of Sheol – most often in the phrase “to descend to Sheol”. In Numbers 16:30-33 Korah is said to be engrossed by earth and cast into Sheol, in Genesis 37:35 Jacob utters that he would descent in grief after his son to Sheol, whereas in 1 Samuel 2:6 Yahveh is described as the sole disposer of life and death, the one who casts into Sheol and brings up from Sheol. The traditional interpretation of these and other passages explains that Sheol is a grim and desolated land below, occupied by the dead who continue their colorless existence irrespective of their earthly conduct. Contrary to this exposition however, the HB supports the

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1 The initial version of his paper has been published as: W. Kosior, The Topomorphic and Anthropomorphic Metaphors of Sheol in the Hebrew Bible (Topomorficzna i antropomorficzna metaforyka Szeolu w Biblii hebrajskiej), in: K. Pilarczyk (ed.), Żydzi i judaizm we współczesnych badaniach polskich, vol. V, Kraków 2010, pp. 27-45.
descriptions of Sheol which suggest that it is something more than just a place. Psalm 49:16 praises Elohim who is said to ransom one’s soul from the hand of Sheol, Proverbs 27:20 acknowledges Sheol’s insatiability whereas Isaiah 5:14 depicts Sheol as a gargantuan monster. One is left with a question concerning the nature of Sheol – is it an underworld populated by the grim shades of the deceased or a demonic creature with a special taste for the dead?

This problem has been addressed by numerous academic works but although both types of the descriptions of Sheol have been acknowledged, there is a vivid preference for the topomorphic understanding of this term. The scholars usually resort to one of the three main approaches. According to the first one, the word “Sheol”, along with “Gehennah” denotes the underworld inhabited by the dead or their souls. The demonic descriptions of Sheol are ignored and some go as far as to identify Sheol with “hell” understood as the place of eternal torment designed for the notorious transgressors. As stated by the second approach, Sheol is a place sometimes described as a supernatural entity. Even then however, it is just a literary tool of presenting various impersonal phenomena in the poetic parts of the HB. Moreover, although the ancient Near Eastern texts provide some support for the demonic interpretation of Sheol, the comparative material is believed to be unsatisfactory. The third approach presents the least “traditional” interpretation. Accordingly, Sheol is usually understood as a place and only sometimes anthropomorphized. Yet, contrary to the second option, the literary parallels are considered to be sufficient to hypothesize about Sheol as one of the chthonic deities of the era. Although each of the group takes a different

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stance towards the anthropomorphic interpretation of Sheol, they share the basic assumption concerning the inherent priority of the topomorphic meaning. Accordingly, the “default” interpretation of Sheol is that of the underworld, whereas any other has the status of a poetic cleverness aimed at evoking the religious imagination. On the other hand however, there are several arguments against the status quo. Firstly, the presence of the anthropomorphic descriptions supports the hypothesis of the Sheol-demon rather than refutes it. Secondly, the peripheries of the HB often convey more ancient and original ideas and the “flamboyant” accounts of Sheol may in fact recall some primeval traditions.\(^5\) Last but not least, most of the passages quoted from the biblical sources are ambiguous on the linguistic level and allow for both topomorphic and anthropomorphic interpretation.

In sum, the view supported by the scholarly literature needs some rectification as the anthropomorphic potential of Sheol seems to be underestimated. This problem shall be addressed in three steps. Firstly, in order to bring the basic meaning of *she’ol* closer, it is crucial to brush it down from later semantic layers that have aggregated over the course of centuries. This task shall be accomplished by means of the statistical and hermeneutical methods which aim at recovering the meaning basing on the quantitative linguistic data and philological analysis.\(^6\) Secondly, the collected evidence shall provide the basis for the elucidation of two elemental sets of metaphors employed in describing Sheol: the topomorphic and the anthropomorphic one.\(^7\) Thirdly, some arguments for the hypothetical priority of the anthropomorphic metaphors of Sheol shall be presented basing on the findings supported by cognitive psychology.

The etymology of *she’ol* is at least unclear. Some scholars derive the word either from the root יִשְׁרָה denoting “being low” or from הָלָם.\(^5\)

\(^5\) For an excellent study on the problem of the inner-biblical reiterations of particularly cumbersome material see: A. Shinan, Y. Zakovitch, *From Gods to God. How the Bible Debunked, Suppressed, or Changed Ancient Myths and Legends*, Nebraska University Press 2012.


conveying the idea of “being silent”. Some others propose זֶהוּ carrying the meaning of “withering” and “stiffing”. The root supplemented by the suffixed lamed would form a construction describing certain state or condition, analogically to the root הָדַע (“to dress vines”) and its derivate, karmel (“garden”). Accordingly, she’ol would transmit the idea of a place of deterioration and waste. Finally, the word is explained by means of the root זָאָו meaning “to inquire” and as such is utilized in the context of contacting the deceased in Deuteronomy 18:11 and 1 Chronicles 10:13. The doubtful etymology of the word along with the fact that she’ol is never preceded by a definite article suggests its foreign origins. Some additional support for this hypothesis comes from the ancient Near Eastern literary materials. For example, the Akkadian plates mention the name šuwala or suwala in reference to a deity responsible for ruling the abode of the dead. As such it might have been loaned by the Hebrews and incorporated into their early belief system.

The word appears 66 times in the HB. According to the Masoretic vocalization of the biblical text there are two forms: the full (זָאָו) and the short (זָאָו).

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8 W. Gesenius, A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament including the Biblical Chaldee, Boston 1844, p. 1033; HALOT 4658, 4661. TWAT, p. 902. Despite the dissemination of the latter proposal, there are at least three arguments against its validity. (1) The instances of זָאָו in the sphere of the hypothetical biblical necromancy are few and far. This means that the root cannot be treated as conveying this specific meaning. Moreover, (2) its utilization in the context of “asking the dead” seems to be a relatively late idea, contrary to the she’ol itself which is most probably of ancient origins. Finally, (3) even if there is some linguistic connection between the two, the direction seems to be the opposite to what is generally suggested in the literature. Respectively, it might be the name of Sheol itself which affected the choice of the particular word in regards to “asking” the dead.

9 As suggested by the masoretic vocalization of the prepositional phrases.


11 The calculations have been executed by means of the search module of BibleWorks 8.0 and on the basis of the 4th edition of Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia. Accordingly, the results presented in this study may deviate from the data supplied by other treatises. Questionable is for example the instance in Isaiah 7:11 traditionally vocalized as she’alah but due to the semantic parallelism of the sentence usually emended to sheo’lah (and as such counted in the present study). Accordingly, v. 11b reads: “deep to Sheol, exalted to the above”. Cf. P.S. Johnston, ibidem, p. 71 footnote number 6. Entry: זָאָו, TWAT, p. 903.
and the defective one (אָדָםָ). The plene dominates as it occurs 58 times, whereas the defective form appears 8 times: thrice in Genesis, twice in Numbers and once in 1 Kings, Job and Psalms. Notwithstanding the orthographic variant, she’ol is usually considered to be masculine as its morphological form lacks any indications like the final heh or tav which would suggest otherwise. This is the case in 55 instances which do not provide any additional information in regards to the grammatical gender. In 2 occurrences (Job 26:6; Hosea 13:14)\footnote{Hosea 13:14a reads: “from the hand of Sheol I will ransom them, from death I will redeem them”. Here the grammatical gender of she’ol is unspecified, whereas in v. 14b the Masoretic tradition reads “where is your destruction (Heb. qatavkha), [o] Sheol”. Given the consonantal form, the alternative, feminine reading (qatavekh) is also plausible. All citations from the HB are presented in author’s translation unless stated otherwise. The square brackets indicate the words introduced in translation, the curly brackets – the words translated freely, the soft brackets – additional remarks. The priority of the translations was to maintain the inherent ambiguity of the text.} the masculinity of the word is explicitly acknowledged by the respective adjectives and verbs. Peculiarly enough however, 9 times is she’ol utilized as if it were a feminine noun. Such situation takes place in: Deuteronomy 32:22; Job 11:8; Psalms 86:13; Proverbs 27:20; 30:16; Canticles 8:6 and Isaiah 5:14; 14:9; 38:18.\footnote{The first three of these instances together with Isaiah 14:9 share the idea of she’ol being deep and below, whereas the latter speak of “her” in highly anthropomorphic terms.} If to rely on the morphology of the word exclusively, then she’ol should be treated as of masculine gender whereas the usages in feminine would be a deviation, utilized probably for the stylistic purposes.\footnote{Against this assumption is the fact that the conjectural gender of the toponyms in the Semitic languages is in most cases feminine. For the discussion see: E. Lipiński, \textit{Semitic Languages: Outline of a Comparative Grammar}, Peeters Publishers 2001, pp. 235-242.} On the other hand, the number of feminine instances seems to be high enough to challenge the assumption of the exclusively masculine nature of she’ol. By and large, it is next to impossible to arbitrate which grammatical gender should be considered as “default”.\footnote{The issue of the grammatical gender of she’ol is particularly relevant in regards to the languages which differentiate between masculine and feminine inflections. For example, according to the traditional usage in Polish, she’ol inflects as if it was (1) a masculine noun (2) denoting a place. This clearly shows how the assumptions concerning the ontological status of the term are transmitted in its grammatical qualities.}

The repartition of the word is uneven and concentrates in the so called poetic and prophetic books (Fig. 1). In the scope of the whole HB she’ol only once occurs directly in the narrative section – this is the case in
Numbers 16:30-33 describing the horde of Korah being devoured by earth and brought down to Sheol. Apart from this instance, Sheol is always mentioned indirectly: either by means of the poetic style of the passage or by the utilization of the word in reported speech.

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<th>2 Sam</th>
<th>1 Kgs</th>
<th>Job</th>
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Fig. 1. The repartition and percentage of *she’ol* in particular books of the HB

The 66 instances of *she’ol* collected in the above-presented matrix can be furthermore divided into two main groups. The word occurs either in an isolated form or as a part in prepositional, genitive and attributive constructions. Of particular interest here is of course the latter as it sheds some light on the qualities of Sheol and more specifically – utilizes either anthropomorphic or topomorphic metaphors in its description. The group of the prepositional phrases is obviously the largest one and the most evenly distributed. *She’ol* appears with the plethora of prepositions in phrases like *‘el she’ol*, *min she’ol* or *le-she’ol*. Neither of those however determine the status of the object – it can be both a place or a person as well as some more abstract idea. In 11 occurrences *she’ol* appears as *she’olah* and as such has the meaning of “to Sheol” analogically to *‘artzah* (“[towards] earth”) or *baytah* (“[towards] home”). The distribution is concentrated in four books: Genesis 37:35; 42:38; 44:29; 44:31; Numbers 16:30; 16:33; Psalms 9:18; 141:7; Ezekiel 31:15; 31:16; 31:17. What is unique about these phrases is that in the Biblical Hebrew the suffixed directional *heh* accompanying the destination point never gets attached to a personal name of a person.

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16 Note especially the parallelism in v. 30: *u-patztah ha-‘adamah ‘et peyha u-bal’ah ‘otam* and *ve-yardu chayim she’olah*. The verbs applied to *‘adamah* may support the anthropomorphic interpretation of *she’ol* as well.

17 E.g. *ba-‘Asher* meaning “at Asher’s [place]” (1 Kings 4:16) or *be-‘eynayha* – “in her eyes” (Genesis 16:4). Of question is however the statistic frequency of such prepositional phrases in comparison to those containing the name of a place.
Thus from the grammatical perspective, *she’olah* cannot refer to anything else than a toponym. In other words, in each and every instance it conveys the topomorphic meaning thus precluding the possibility of the anthropomorphic understanding.

24 times *she’ol* occurs as an element of a genitive or attributive phrase. The repartition of the construction is uneven, yet it is possible to distinguish four main clusters: Psalms, Isaiah, Job and Proverbs – analogically as in the case of the general distribution of *she’ol*. 19 of those instances can be divided into three semantic arrays conveying respectively: (1) the idea of being deep or underneath, (2) topomorphic and (3) anthropomorphic meaning (Fig. 2).

<table>
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<th>Phrase</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>9</strong></td>
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</table>

**Fig. 2. The word *she’ol* in the phrases divided into the semantic clusters**

In terms of sheer numbers the amount of anthropomorphic descriptions is significant. Sheol is either described by means of human qualities (כֹּהֵן, Job 26:6; קֵשֶׁה, Canticles 8:6) or attributed with the elements of human anatomy: womb (לָבָּמ, Jonah 2:3), hand (יָד, Psalms 49:15; 89:48; Oz 13:14) or throat (לָפָנ, 19 Isaiah 5,14) and mouth (לָשָׁן, Psalms 141:7;...

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18 The unclassified are respectively: לָוָא שֵׁאֹל (Psalms 116:3), כֹּהֵן שֵׁאֹל (Ezekiel 32:21), כֹּהֵן שֵׁאֹל (Job 17:16) and כֹּהֵן שֵׁאֹל (Proverbs 7:27). The problematic *chevel She’ol* (2 Samuel 22:6 and Psalms 18:6 parallel to *chevel mavet* in v. 5) is usually rendered as “the cords of Sheol”. Here it is classified as topomorphism on the basis of the meaning of *chevel* as “territory” (e.g. Joshua 17:5). Still one has to keep in mind the broad semantic range of the term allowing for different interpretations. BDB 2773-2780. HALOT 2312-2323. TWOT 592-595.

Isaiah 5:14\textsuperscript{20}). Sporadically is Sheol described topomorphically as having gates (אָרֶגֶן, Isaiah 38:10), being a house (רַחֲמִים, Job 17:13) or a dwelling (אֶצֶּרְתָּן, Ps 49,15).\textsuperscript{21} The category conveying the meaning of “being deep and below” can very well refer to both a place and a demon and as such has no differentiative potential; for sure however, it places Sheol underneath the earth. In sum, whereas most of the occurrences of \textit{she’ol} are isolated, whenever it appears in juxtaposition, its meaning is rather anthropomorphic than topomorphic.

44 times \textit{she’ol} occurs in a sentence as a subject or object juxtaposed with a verb and these are concentrated accordingly in Psalms (9 times), Isaiah (7 times), Job (5 times), Proverbs and Ezekiel (4 times each). There are 24 verbs which appear with \textit{she’ol}. From among, 19 can be divided into three semantic groups\textsuperscript{22} – analogically to the division of genitive or attributive phrases (Fig. 3).

<table>
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Fig. 3. The verbs for which \textit{she’ol} is subject or object divided into semantic clusters

\textsuperscript{16, no. 1/2, 1897.}

\textsuperscript{20} Isaiah 5:14 reads: וְיָדִיעָה שֶפֶלֶת. Formally then it is not a phrase but a sentence, yet the idea of Sheol possessing a mouth is conveyed.


\textsuperscript{22} The remaining 5 (םָאָס, רֹדֶר, נֶפֶשׁ, מֶלֶכֶת, עַלָּב) appear very rarely and convey the general idea of “reaching she’ol” without determining its location.
The most numerous group of the verbs convey the idea of Sheol being below: it can be descended to (יָרָד, יָרֵד, יָרָד, יָרֵד, יָרֵד, יָרֵד) or ascended from (לֶרֶד).

The number of occurrences along with the very balanced repartition of the verbs in connection with she’ol witnesses to its chthonic location. Again, the group of the verbs which describe Sheol in anthropomorphic terms is relatively large in comparison to the remaining ones. There are far too few instances to supply a full-fledged statistics, yet it is still possible to discern two sub-groups. The first one refers to the relation between Sheol, Yahveh and men: Sheol does not praise (יָרָד) Yahveh but Yahveh can ransom (סַפְר) from the hand of Sheol whereas men can make a deal (חֵצה חַם) with Sheol and one’s nefesh can escape (גָּלֶחַ) from Sheol’s hand. The second one comprises of verbs which present Sheol as a devouring monster: Sheol enlarges (רָצַב נְפֶשׁ) her throat, swallows (נָלֵךְ) but cannot satiate (שָׂסָה).

In sum, the statistics show clearly that in most cases she’ol appears in its isolated form whereas juxtaposed usually conveys the anthropomorphic meaning and the idea of being below, what is witnessed by the phrases like yad she’ol or beten she’ol. Similar is the situation with the verbs for which she’ol is the subject, adverbial or object. In the first case, these are mostly the anthropomorphic metaphors like “Sheol does

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23 The idea of “going up” by necessity assumes that she’ol is below. Worth noting is almost complete lack of the verbs suggesting the opposite notion, i.e. “resurrection”. Notwithstanding this scarcity, the sole metaphor of “dying as going down to Sheol” implicitly assumes at least theoretical possibility of “going up”. Besides, whereas the phrase “going down to Sheol” might be taken as a trope of dying, the latter itself may be a metaphor for some other mishap. See: P. van Hecke, *Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible. An Introduction*, in: P. van Hecke (ed.), *Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible*, Leuven 2005, pp. 1-18.

24 Whereas most academicians insist on the solely poetic purpose of such personification, some emphasize the suggestiveness of the language hinting at the demonic nature of Sheol. As one of the scholars puts it, “[w]here cutting a deal with Death and making a pact with Sheol could be understood as simply metaphors used to disparage the prospects of such alliances, the language is suggestive, sinister and foreboding enough, and contains enough peculiar features, to hint that the allegation goes further than that”. J. Blenkinsopp, *Judah’s Covenant with Death (Isaiah XXVIII 14-22)*, “Vetus Testamentum” vol. 50, 2000, p. 474. In other words, the utilization of anthropomorphisms seems rather to support the possibility of demonic nature of Sheol rather than to hinder it.

25 It is worth noting that both חֵצה and בְּרֶד appear juxtaposed with יָרֵד and שָׂסָה respectively. Of relevance here is the fact that the Homeric Iliad (15.187-193) tells of a primeval lottery in which Hades was granted the reign over the underworld. J.N. Bremmer, *DDD*, pp. 382-383.
not praise (烨々) you“ (Isaiah 38:1826). In the second, she’ol is generally the target of moving downwards, while in the third it is an addressee of some action. The most evenly represented idea of Sheol refers to it being deep or underneath, not differentiating however in regards to its anthropomorphic or topomorphic qualities. The most sure linguistic indication of the topomorphic status of she’ol is the presence of the suffixed directional heh which occurs only 11 times.

Sheol then, depending on the context may denote both an underworld as well as some demonic being. A question arises, which of them has the chronological priority. In other words, is this the grim land of the deceased which with time is turned into a demon or vice versa – the voracious beast becomes “depersonalized” and its name is attached to the realm of the dead. Given the highly uncertain dates of the closure of particular biblical books along with the possibility of the modifications introduced to the concluded material it is next to impossible to answer this question basing on the literary methodology alone. However, some additional insight into the problem comes from the sphere of psychology. Various research conducted by the scholars interested in human cognitive development clearly shows that people have the tendency to perceive, describe and interpret the abstract phenomena in anthropomorphic categories. This trait is particularly visible in the early stage of the intellectual progress, e.g. the children’s tendency to attribute volitional qualities to the celestial orbs. The dominant yet not exclusive factor behind this process is the perceived movement of the particular object and the hypothetical assumption that mobility equals life.27 This tendency to attribute anthropomorphic qualities to inanimate objects remains in the adult life as well and is transferred to the level of language. Well known is now classical experiment conceived and executed by F. Heider and M. Simmel at the end of the first half of the XX century.28

26 In this case she’ol might be a metonymy for its inhabitants analogically to shamaym. Cf. A. Shinan, Y. Zakovitch, ibidem, pp. 48-51.
participants were presented a several minutes length animation of moving geometrical figures and asked afterwards to supply a description of what they had seen on a screen. Even the most “moderate” subject who strived to support a non-animistic description, could not but slip out the acknowledgement of the large triangle’s personality. Additional support for the central place of anthropomorphism among the other metaphors inherent to human mind comes from the sphere of evolutionary psychology. According to the conception of the so called hyperactive agency detection, the species’ perception is naturally “tuned” to recognize animate objects against the inanimate background. The system is very delicate and tends to attribute life to the lifeless objects as well. From the evolutionary perspective however it is much safer to mistaken a stick for a snake rather than other way around – although the former is more energetically expensive.

This human tendency to anthropomorphize the surrounding phenomena finds its particular realization in the idea of Sheol. The processes of dying allow to portray death as “the violent assault and carrying off of the victim by a monstrous being” what eventually leads to the emergence of “a death god or of the daemonic assistant of such a baleful deity.” At the same time, the animization of death allows for affecting it and thus – at least to some extent – controlling it by means of the ritual. Accordingly, Sheol would be primarily a lickerish monster who devours the dead. The latter nevertheless are believed to somehow continue their existence, so Sheol has to have its underworld domain inhabited by the deceased. Finally, the land itself becomes independent and takes over the name of the ruler. Some additional insight comes from the


29 F. Heider, M. Simmel, ibidem, p. 246. Worth noting is the fact that even the authors themselves have not managed to avoid the anthropomorphic descriptions when referring to the experiment.


32 Ibidem, p. 224.
Greek translation of the HB. In most instances LXX renders the Hebrew *she’ol* as *hades*. The latter conveys very similar set of problems: (1) depending on the context it can denote both the underworld and its ruler; (2) apart from several occurrences in the archaic literature the word is generally absent in later mythical elaborations; (3) the clues concerning the hypothetical cult of Hades are scarce. It is thus possible that the choice of this particular word to translate *she’ol* was motivated by the will to sustain the ambiguity of the term.

If to juxtapose the above collected anthropomorphic data coming from various biblical books, then an image of a chthonic supernatural entity emerges. Sheol would accordingly be an insatiate deity residing underneath, craving for human life but at the same time prone to negotiations and eager to receive ransom for the dead. Still however, the data concerning Sheol in the HB is scattered and fragmentary. Thus it is very unlikely that they witness to one coherent image of Sheol. On the contrary, the laconic references are most probably puzzles coming from totally different sets – various traditions describing Sheol by means of anthropomorphic and topomorphic metaphors.

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33 Thrice it is translated as *thanatos* with the latter usually employed to transpose the Hebrew *mot* denoting either “death” or Mot – an ancient chthonic deity. Worth noting is that the Greek literature has the preference for *hades* rather than *thanatos*. P.W. van der Horst, entry: *Thanatos*, in: DDD, pp. 854-855.

34 J.N. Bremmer, entry: *Hades* in: DDD, pp. 382-383. See also the author’s assertion that *hades* had initially denoted a place and only later its ruler.

W piśmiennictwie dotyczącym eschatologii Biblii hebrajskiej przyjęło się założenie, iż sze’ol oznacza podziemną krainę zamieszkiwaną przez zmarłych. Tymczasem większość przypadków zastosowania tego słowa pozwala na jego dwojaką interpretację: jako zaświatów bądź jako bóstwa śmierci. Na rzecz tej drugiej przemawiają dodatkowo fragmenty opisujące Szeol w kategoriach żarłocznego demona. Niniejsze studium ma zatem trzy podstawowe cele: (1) rekonstrukcję znaczenia słowa sze’ol za pomocą metody statystyki językowej; (2) analizę dwóch podstawowych kompleksów znaczeniowych zastosowanych w opisach Szeol – topomorficznego i antropomorficznego; (3) prezentację dodatkowych argumentów na rzecz antropomorficznej interpretacji Szeol.