

Unquenchable Fire

B Y E . A N N I J U D K I N S

Though the Bible is far from expansive on the subject of hell, it can guide us in answering some of our most insistent questions. But we are required to be careful and faithful readers to determine what Scripture really does say, instead of what we think it should say.

We are uncomfortable talking about hell. When we talk with Christians, it may be tolerable because we believe we are exempt from hell based on our response to God's faithfulness in Jesus Christ. The discussion turns a corner, however, when we begin thinking of loved ones, family members or close friends, who do not share our Christian faith. Their eternal fate causes us great anxiety. For years we may pray for their salvation and try to explain the gospel to them with little or no results. We cannot bear to consider their eternal separation from God, or from us.

Most Christians believe that hell will be a place of suffering and everlasting torment for those who have died without Christ. They believe that this teaching is from the Bible, though the Bible is far from expansive on this subject. Hell, as the place of weeping and gnashing of teeth, is not mentioned in the Old Testament. The term "hell" derives from "Hades," a Greek term that appears only ten times in the New Testament. Yet to understand the meaning of Hades in those passages, we should first explore their background in the Hebrew beliefs about the afterlife expressed in the Old Testament.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND

The Hebrew word "Sheol" is used sixty-five times to denote the place of the dead. An early belief was that all the dead descend to Sheol (Job 7:9), which is a region in the depths of the earth (Psalm 86:13) that is filled with darkness and gloom (Lamentations 3:6) and silence (Psalm 115:17).

Gates or bars prevent its prisoners from escaping (Isaiah 38:10; Job 17:16). Twenty times when Sheol is mentioned, death is mentioned in the same or previous verse in similar language; the two become practically synonymous.

Here we find no conception of life after death. Dead persons become mere 'shades' as they descend to Sheol, where they remain only until they fade from the memory of those still living. This explains why having children was so crucial; for in many instances they are the only ones who will continue to remember and thereby grant a bit of existence to their departed parents.

In later times belief in resurrection and eternal life grew. At the resurrection the soul would be raised from Sheol, the body would be raised from the grave, and the two would be reunited. God's judgment of the person would follow. Accordingly, Sheol became only a temporary abode, or a resting place, for all souls after death and before the resurrection (Isaiah 26:19; Daniel 12:2).

By the New Testament period, the idea of eternal punishment in Sheol had emerged. Sheol had become an abode for the wicked dead only; the righteous dead went immediately to heaven (or paradise, which is the restored Garden of Eden).¹

This developing concept of Sheol should not be confused with "Gehenna," a term that appears eleven times in the Old Testament and literally refers to the valley of Hinnom (or, valley of the son of Hinnom), which is located south of Jerusalem (Joshua 15:8; 18:16; Nehemiah 11:30). The valley of Hinnom was infamous as a place of Baal worship (Jeremiah 32:35), but more so as a place of child sacrifice to the god Molech. Though child sacrifice was an abomination to the God of Israel, both King Ahaz and his son, King Manasseh, reportedly made their sons "pass through fire" (2 Chronicles 28:3; 33:6). Later when Josiah became king and implemented his religious reforms, he defiled Gehenna so that child sacrifice could no longer be practiced there (2 Kings 23:10).

According to tradition, after Josiah desecrated the altar at the valley of Hinnom, or Gehenna, it became a continually burning garbage dump for the city of Jerusalem. The prophet Jeremiah proclaimed that the valley of the son of Hinnom would become, in the time of God's judgment, the valley of Slaughter because of all the people who would be killed and cast into its fires (Jeremiah 7:30-34). As the idea of life after death continued to develop, Gehenna's fires became a metaphor for the place of punishment for the wicked, which might occur either at death or after the resurrection and final judgment.

So, originally Sheol was a place for all the dead, but it came to be understood as a place for the wicked dead. Gehenna, though it was literally a valley once notorious for child sacrifice, became a metaphor for fiery judgment for the wicked. As the New Testament era dawns, there is no

unanimity of opinion about what happens to the individual after death; all of these views, as well as others, are current.²

NEW TESTAMENT TEACHINGS

The early view of Sheol echoes through the Apostle Peter's sermon at Pentecost (Acts 2:27,31). Peter declares that Jesus was not abandoned to Hades (Sheol) to "experience corruption," or to fade from existence. Here we find the concept that every individual who dies descends to Hades,

Echoing the thought that Sheol had gates to prevent the dead from escaping, Jesus says that the gates of Hades (or death) will not have power over those disciples who belong to him. As Jesus has the keys to the gates of Hades, he is the one who determines which dead are captured in Hades.

which is not a place of torment, but the natural abode of the dead.

Just as death and Sheol were companion terms in the Old Testament, they also appear together in the New Testament. In the book of Revelation, Hades is mentioned four times, and each time it is connected with death. Jesus declares that he has the keys of Death and of Hades

(1:18); presumably he acquired these when he descended into Hades and conquered it at his own death. Interestingly, in the other three passages in Revelation, both Death and Hades are personified. They ride on a pale green horse and are given authority to kill one-fourth of the earth's population (6:8). Death and Hades give up the dead that are in them, though there is no mention of whether these dead people are righteous or wicked (20:13); they are merely the dead who are now to be judged for their deeds. Finally, Hades and Death themselves are thrown into the lake of fire, which is the second death (20:14). All of these references seem to follow the earlier concept of Hades (Sheol), as the place where all individuals go after death.

When Peter recognizes that Jesus is the Messiah, he responds, "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matthew 18:18). This echoes the Old Testament thought that Sheol had gates to prevent the shades from escaping. Jesus says that the gates of Hades (or death) will not have power over the church, which is to say, the gathered community of disciples who belong to him. Even as Jesus has the keys to the gates of Hades (Revelation 1:18), here he is the one who determines which dead are captured in Hades.

In Jesus' parable of the rich man and Lazarus, angels carry Lazarus to Abraham's bosom (presumably meaning Paradise), while the rich man is

tormented in Hades (Luke 16:19-31). This separation of the wicked and righteous after death represents the later view of Hades (Sheol). Likewise in Jesus' warnings to the unrepentant cities, Hades is not a place for all of the dead, but only for those who do evil (Luke 10:13-15; Matthew 11:20-24). Jesus says that Capernaum will not be exalted, but rather "will be brought down to Hades" in judgment.

Thus, the New Testament offers no single account of Hades; in some passages it is an abode for all of the dead, and in other passages, a prison for the wicked.

The other Old Testament term, "Gehenna," occurs eleven times in Jesus' teachings recorded in the synoptic gospels, for a place of fire where God casts those who are judged to be wicked. Several of these refer to cutting off a member of one's body—an eye (Matthew 5:29; 18:9; Mark 9:47), hand (Matthew 5:30; Mark 9:43), or foot (Mark 9:45)—rather than for the whole body to be "thrown into hell (Gehenna)" and "go to the unquenchable fire." Jesus describes Gehenna as the "hell of fire" (Matthew 5:22; 18:9). We are not to fear anyone who can only kill the body, but the one who can destroy both body and soul in hell (Matthew 10:28; Luke 12:5). Jesus asks how the scribes and Pharisees will avoid the judgment of Gehenna, and he calls them the children of hell (Matthew 23:15).

In describing the tongue's capacity for wickedness and sinfulness, the book of James calls the tongue a fire whose flame is "set on fire by hell." This is the single reference to Gehenna outside of the synoptic gospels.

Other words or descriptive phrases used in the Bible for the abode of the dead inform our understanding of hell. In the Old Testament, we find the "pit" (Psalm 16:10), "Abaddon" (Psalm 88:11), the "grave" (Psalm 88:11), "death" (Psalm 6:6), "the depths of the earth" (Psalm 95:4), the "dust" (Job 21:26), and "the land of silence" (Psalms 94:17). Some descriptions in the New Testament are "under the earth" (Philippians 2:10), "the bottomless pit" or "the abyss" (used nine times in Revelation), "the lake of fire" (Revelation 20:10), "the outer darkness" (Matthew 8:12), "the deepest darkness" (Jude 13), and "Tartaros" (2 Peter 2:4). In addition to these terms, there are numerous other allusions.

In the New Testament, then, Hades is the "provisional place of the ungodly between death, resurrection, and final judgment" while Gehenna is the "eternal place of the wicked after final judgment."³ Unfortunately no distinction is drawn between Hades and Gehenna in most English translations of the New Testament; the two are conflated and rendered simply as "hell."⁴

ANSWERING OUR QUESTIONS ABOUT HELL

We have many questions about hell: Why does it exist? Who are the 'wicked' that go there? Is hell itself eternal? Is it a place of everlasting or temporary suffering? To what can we compare hell's torment? Many of us

gather answers from popular culture, in movies or novels. Perhaps we are instructed through sermons or theology classes. However, have we studied Scripture carefully and honestly, seeking to understand the nature of hell? Probably not, for hell is a subject that we do not enjoy contemplating.

To see how our conception of hell might be shaped by these biblical passages, consider perhaps our most insistent question: "What happens to

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the wicked after they die?" Christians today, for the most part, believe that hell is a place of everlasting torment for the wicked. They are in good company; Tertullian, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin, and John Wesley subscribed to this traditional view. Another stream of thought, however, arose as early as the first century. Beginning at least with Justin Martyr

(c.100-165), some Christians believed in a type of *conditional* immortality: though wicked individuals would be tormented after death, this torment would one day cease. Let's look at this debate between the theologians, whom I will call "traditionalists" and "conditionalists."

Traditionalists, who generally interpret the Bible more literally than the conditionalists, say that Scripture clearly teaches that the unrighteous are destined to "eternal conscious physical and spiritual torment."⁵ Since most of the New Testament references to Hades and Gehenna come from the mouth of Jesus himself, these teachings hold even greater import.

For instance, they point to Matthew 25:31-46 in which Jesus says the "goats," those people whom he does not know, will experience eternal punishment in the "eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels." Traditionalists find confirmation of this in the prophet John's apocalyptic vision that the devil, the beast, and the false prophet will all be thrown into the lake of fire where "they will be tormented day and night forever and ever" (Revelation 20:10). Likewise, Death and Hades will be cast there, too, as well as those whose names are not written in the book of life (20:14-15). According to their reading, the torment in the lake of fire will be continual and is the fate of all the wicked. The type of pain experienced will be physical and emotional.

A number of Christians interpret these biblical passages differently, as supporting a conditionalist view of hell. They emphasize that we are not naturally immortal. (Some traditionalists, on the other hand, assume that

our souls are inherently immortal and thus are destined to exist somewhere, either in heaven or hell, forever.) Human beings are only mortal until, justified by faith, they acquire immortality as a gift of God. “For the wages of sin is death,” the Apostle Paul writes, “but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23). Conditionalists interpret Paul to be saying that the unregenerate will cease to exist (after the resurrection and the judgment), but the righteous will be gifted with eternal life.

Accordingly, for the conditionalists, hell is not “the beginning of an immortal life in torment but the end of a life of rebellion.”⁶ When the Bible describes hell in terms of death, perishing, destruction, or corruption, it suggests that hell marks the end of a wicked person’s existence, not its continuation. This language speaks of the cessation of being, not of everlasting or perpetual existence. Conditionalists caution us not to read eternity into these terms, based on a mistaken preconception about the inherent immortality of the soul.

So, though traditionalists use Revelation 20:13-14 to support their belief in eternal torment, conditionalists use these same verses to maintain their claim that death and hell will one day cease. In the apocalyptic vision, Death and Hades give up their dead, and then they themselves are cast into the lake of fire. Conditionalists interpret this to mean that death and hell will be destroyed forever. Once hell is annihilated, no one can continue to exist there in a tormented state.

Other theologies of hell have been proposed, but the traditionalist and conditionalist views are the most widely accepted among Christians. Perhaps this is because each of them so strongly encourages the evangelical impetus of our faith. The possibility that some people, especially our loved ones, might perish in hell is a great impetus for sharing the gospel with others. From the traditionalist view, we share the good news of Jesus Christ with others so that they, by responding in faithfulness to God, will escape eternal torment in hell. Conditionalists agree that hell will be a time of torment for those who are not spared (though they disagree among themselves about how long this suffering will last). They differ from traditionalists only in regard to the duration, and sometimes the degree, of hell’s torment.

Certainly we must not rely only on this motivation for evangelism, for we will send the world a terribly erroneous message that salvation is little more than a ‘fire insurance policy,’ that we are saved in order to avoid hell and torment, rather than to live in relationship with a loving God.

As mentioned above, other theologies of hell compete with the traditionalist and conditionalist views. One says hell is merely metaphorical with no real existence; another, that the unrighteous are annihilated at death and they have no afterlife at all; still another says that hell is not a place of eternal torment, but of eternal separation from God. Between the

traditional view of hell as a place of eternal physical and emotional torment, and the view that we are annihilated at death and hell does not exist, there is much speculation and disagreement.

With so many questions about hell, we often wish the Bible would offer more details than it does about the afterlife. We must accept that Scripture generally does not speculate about the nature of hell, but rather emphasizes the certainty of God's judgment of wickedness and rebellion. On this point the traditionalist, conditionalist, and some other theologies of hell, converge in agreement.

NOTES

1 This concept is developed in Jewish writings in the period between the Old and New Testaments, especially 1 Enoch. Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31), which is discussed later in this article, notably echoes this concept. For a brief survey, see Richard Bauckham, "Hades, Hell," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), III: 14.

2 The Sadducees and Pharisees disagreed sharply concerning the existence of resurrection, angels, and souls, with the Sadducees holding, generally, to what I have termed the earlier view and the Pharisees, the later (Acts 23:6-10).

3 Duane F. Watson, "Gehenna," in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), II: 927.

4 As a further note, Satan is never associated with Hades (Sheol) or Gehenna in either testament. Biblical texts do not support the view that Satan is the ruler or lord of Hades. Rather, this notion derives from the Greek myth of Hades as the ruler of the underworld.

5 Evangelical Alliance, *The Nature of Hell* (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Publishing, 2000), 69.

6 Clark H. Pinnock, "The Conditional View," in *Four Views on Hell*, ed. William V. Crockett (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992), 137. This is a good volume to explore four important views of hell: literal, metaphorical, purgatorial, and conditional. Each view is defended in an essay by one of four contributing authors and then critiqued by the other three contributors.



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