

# Jesus' Teaching on Hell

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*“Don't you know that hell is just something the Catholic Church invented to scare people into obedience?”*

I was righteously indignant when, a number of years ago, a caller uttered these words on a call-in radio show I was conducting. Perturbed by his haphazard use of Scripture, I pointed out to him and the audience, that hell couldn't possibly be something invented by Catholic theologians because Jesus talked about it. I forcefully read some of the passages where Jesus did, and concluded that hell couldn't possibly be the invention of an apostate church.

I now believe that hell is the invention of Roman Catholicism; and surprisingly, most, if not all, of our popular concepts of hell can be found in the writings of Roman Catholic writers like the Italian poet Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), author of *Dante's Inferno*. The English poet John Milton (1608-1674), author of *Paradise Lost*, set forth the same concepts in a fashion highly acceptable to the Roman Catholic faith. *Yet none of our concepts of hell can be found in the teaching of Jesus Christ!* We get indignant at the mention of purgatory—we know that's not in the Bible. We may also find that our popular concepts of hell came from the same place that purgatory did—Roman Catholicism. The purpose of this study is to briefly analyze Jesus' teaching on hell (more correctly *Gehenna*, the Greek word for which hell is given), to see whether these popular concepts are grounded therein.

## Roman Catholic Teaching on Hell

Section 1035 of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states

“The teaching of the Church affirms the existence of hell and its eternity. Immediately after death the souls of those who die in a state of mortal sin descend into hell, where they suffer the punishments of hell, ‘eternal fire.’ The chief punishment of hell is eternal separa-

ration from God, in whom alone man can possess the life and happiness for which he was created and for which he longs”.

This is the commonly-held view of hell: eternal conscious torment in the spiritual realm, that is, without the physical body, since one is assigned her immediately after death, while his spirit is in his death bed. Is this Bible teaching?

## **Hell vs. *Sheol* and *Hades***

We begin by eliminating the problem the King James Version of the Bible introduced to this study by indiscriminately supposedly translating three different words in the Bible as hell: *sheol*, *hades*, and *gehenna*.

Once we understand the origin of the King James Version, we'll know why the translation “hell” for all of these words, and that none of them should have been, or were, translated “hell.” The King James translators are well known: all 48 of them were in the hierarchy of the Church of England, that part of the Roman Catholic Church that King Henry VIII confiscated from the Pope because the Pope wouldn't let him divorce his wife and marry Ann Boleyn. Hence the King James Version was essentially a Roman Catholic translation. Most of us wouldn't touch a translation with all the translators from the same denomination with a ten-foot pole. In this study, we'll see that the concept of hell was substituted for the Greek word Gehenna, which is what the Roman Catholic Church had done the previous century.

Hell, a theologically loaded word that carried with it the concept of eternal torment in the spiritual realm, was substituted for the proper name Gehenna, a word not meaning eternal conscious torment in the spiritual realm at all. Had it not been for such substitutions, none of us would have concluded that Jesus ever taught anything about eternal conscious torment in a spiritual state.

The Jews of Jesus' audience well knew of the destruction that had taken place there in 586 BC by the Babylonian Nebuchadnezzar. In Jesus' time, Gehenna was a proper name for a valley located on the South and East of Jerusalem. It didn't need translating any more than Bethlehem did, and it didn't mean hell any more than Bethlehem did.

Those scholars had a bad habit of that sort of thing. They translated *presbuteros* (elders) as *priests*, *pascha* (Passover) as *Easter* (once), and *baptizo* (dip, plunge, immerse) as *baptism* (to slip their sprinkling and pouring for baptism into the Bible), and substituted the “divine pro-

nouns” (thee, thou, and thine) for us rather than translating consistently. In each case, they substituted theologically-loaded words for the originals.

To be fair, Catholics aren’t the only ones to pull such stunts. In Ac. 8.20, where Peter said to Simon the sorcerer, “thy silver perish with thee,” *Today’s English Version* has him telling Simon to “go to hell.” The word *hell* is not there in your Bible; the translators just substituted it, and that’s just the point. *Hell*’s not in any of them. It was just substituted for *Gehenna* in Bibles with Roman Catholic influence.

## **Sheol, Hades, Used of Anything Unseen**

We begin with the word *hades*, a word for which hell is given in the King James Version. Its root meaning is “unseen,” which occurs only eleven times. The King James Version translates the word “hell.” However, the correct translation is *hades*, or the unseen. The Bible doesn’t use *hades* exclusively for a place of punishment. Luke 16 pictures righteous Lazarus there. Acts 2.27, 31 says Jesus went there. In I Cor. 15.15, Paul used the same word when he said, “O *grave*, where is thy victory?” In Rev. 1.18, Jesus said he had the controlling keys of death and *hades*, the unseen, and in Rev. 6.8, death and *hades* followed the pale horse. Finally, in Rev. 20.13, 14, death and *hades* gave up the dead that were in them, and were then cast into the lake of fire. These verses illustrate that *hades* refers to anything that is unseen.

*Hades*, a Greek word, and *Sheol*, a Hebrew word, are generally regarded as synonyms. This is confirmed in the *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Old Testament Hebrew Bible, where *Sheol* is translated as *Hades*.

W. E. Vine, in his *Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* says:

Hades corresponds to ‘Sheol’ in the OT and N.T., it has been unhappily rendered ‘Hell.’ It never denotes the grave, nor is it the permanent region of the lost; in point of time it is, for such, intermediate between decease and the doom of Gehenna, the signification of the temporary destiny of the doomed.” (pp. 517-518)

In the Old Testament, the word for which hell is given in the King James Version is *sheol*. The King James Version translates *sheol* as “hell” 31 times, “the grave” 31 times (since someone in the grave is unseen), and “the pit” three times.

Yet in the Old Testament *sheol* was not exclusively a place of punishment, for faithful Jacob was there (Gen. 37.35, 42.38, 44.29, 31).

Righteous Job also longed for it in Job 14.13. David spoke of going to *sheol* in Ps. 49.15, and Jesus went there, Ps. 16.10 and Acts 2.24-31. In all these cases, these men were “unseen” because they were dead.

## ***Sheol* Used of National Judgments**

Many times the Bible uses the word *sheol* of national judgments, i.e., the vanishing of a nation. In Isa. 14.13-15, Isaiah said Babylon would go to *Sheol*, and she vanished. In Ezek. 26.19-21, Tyre so vanished in *sheol*. Likewise, in the New Testament, in Mt. 11.23, 12.41, Lk. 10.15, and 11.29-32, Jesus said that Capernaum would so disappear. These nations and cities didn't go to a particular location, but they were going to disappear, and they did. They were destroyed. Thus, *sheol* is used commonly of national judgments in both the Old and New Testaments.

## **Hades Used of National Judgments**

Like its companion word in the Old Testament, *hades* was also plainly used of national judgments in the New Testament. In Mt. 11.23 and Lk. 10.15, Jesus said Capernaum would go down into *hades*, i.e., it was going to vanish.

About *hades* in Greek mythology, Edward Fudge said:

In Greek mythology Hades was the god of the underworld, then the name of the nether world itself. Charon ferried the souls of the dead across the rivers Styx or Acheron into this abode, where the watchdog Cerberus guarded the gate so none might escape. The pagan myth contained all the elements for medieval eschatology: there was the pleasant Elysium, the gloomy and miserable tartarus, and even the Plains of Asphodel, where ghosts could wander who were suited for neither of the above...The word *hades* came into biblical usage when the Septuagint translators chose it to represent the Hebrew *sheol*, an Old Testament concept vastly different from the pagan Greek notions just outlined. *Sheol*, too, received all the dead...but the Old Testament has no specific division there involving either punishment or reward. (Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* [Houston: Providential Press, 1982], p. 205.)

We need to make sure that our ideas concerning *hades* come from the Bible and not Greek mythology. We have no problem using *sheol* the way the Old Testament used it, or *hades* as the New Testament used it. Both refer to the dead who are unseen, and to national judgments.

## **Tartarus Is Also Translated *Hell* In the King James Version**

In II Pet. 2.4, we read:

For if God spared not angels when they sinned, but cast them down to hell, and committed them to pits of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment;...

The Greek word translated “pits of darkness” here, the only time it’s used in the Bible, is *tartarus*. Again, the KJV gave us *hell* for free, there being no reason to translate it so. The passages speak of angels that were being punished when II Peter was written, to show that God knew how to treat disobedience among angels. It says nothing about fire, torment, pain, punishment of anyone else, or that it will last forever. It simply doesn’t pertain to our subject.

## **The Popular Concept of Hell Unknown to the Old Testament**

Before we move to the gospel’s teaching on hell, we want to think further concerning that the word *gehenna* (popularly mistranslated hell, as we’ll see) didn’t occur in the Greek Old Testament, the *Septuagint*. Let’s take a few paragraphs to let the significance of that fact soak in. In previous editions of this material, I merely remarked that prominent Old Testament characters like David and Abraham never heard the term or its equivalent. They were never threatened with eternal torment in hell or heard anything like our popular concept now. However, *Gehenna*’s absence in the Old Testament is a much more serious omission than that. It shows that the Jews of Jesus’ time didn’t associate Gehenna with or as being an other-worldly place! (The concepts in this section are suggested by Thomas B. Thayer in his 1855 Edition of *Origin and History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment*.)

## **Before the Mosaic Law**

### **Adam and Eve in the Garden**

When God placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, he never mentioned the concept of eternal torment to them. Read for yourself—it's just not there. Don't you think it strange that as human history began on this planet, while God explained which tree they could not eat of, that he didn't give the parents of all mankind some kind of warning about eternal punishment, if there was potential for it to be in their future, and the future of all their posterity?

Most think eternal torment will engulf the vast majority of mankind, nearly all of Adam and Eve's descendents, yet here's a father, God, who didn't warn his children of the potential of what might befall them. What would you think of a father who told his young child not to ride his bike in the street, and if he did, he would get a spanking. Suppose he also planned to roast him over a roaring fire for fifty years? After he spanked him, would you think him a just father for not warning his child? Can you think of an apology or a defense for him? Yet to Adam and Eve, the father of all mankind failed to mention a much greater punishment than the death they would die the day they ate of the forbidden tree. Was this just a slip of the mind on God's part, to not mention at all the interminable terrible woes that lay ahead for the vast majority of their descendants? No, God announced to them a tangible present punishment the very day they committed the sin: "In the day thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die." They found that the wages of sin was death.

### **Cain and Abel**

The same is true with Cain and Abel, a case of murder of a brother. Surely, we would think that God might roll out the threat of eternal torment that Cain was to receive as a warning to all future generations. In the whole account, there's not a hint, not a single word on the subject. Instead, Cain is told, "And now art thou cursed from the earth...When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth." Again, Cain received an immediate, tangible physical punishment administered, with absolutely no warning of future eternal torment. Like Adam, Cain heard none of the dire warnings preached from pulpits of the fiery wrath of God, tormenting his soul throughout eternity.

Now, if Cain were to receive such punishment from God without warning, would God be a just lawgiver and judge to impose additional,

infinitely greater punishment with no word of caution whatsoever? In Gen. 4.15, God said, “Therefore, whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him seven-fold.” If, with no warning, Cain was going to receive eternal fiery torment, would those who killed him receive seven times endless fiery torment?

I’m not making light of endless torment, I’m just pointing out that it’s remarkable that God hadn’t said a word about it thus far in the Bible story.

### **Noah and the Flood**

When we come to Noah and the flood, God noted that “every thought of man’s heart was only evil continually,” and that “the earth was filled with violence, and all flesh had corrupted his way upon the earth.” If not before, wouldn’t this be the ideal time to reveal eternal torment ahead for nearly all inhabitants of the earth? If any circumstances warranted such punishment, this would be the time, would it not? However, Noah, “a preacher of righteousness,” didn’t threaten endless punishment to evildoers. If warnings of such punishment serve to turn man aside from his evil way, surely this would have been the time to have revealed it, but there’s nary a whisper of it. Instead, they were destroyed by the flood, a physical, tangible punishment for their sin, with absolutely no warning of endless torment. Nor was there such a warning when mankind inhabited the earth again after the flood. One word from God might have set the world on an entirely different course. Surprisingly no such word was given.

### **Sodom and Gomorrah**

We could go on with the story of Sodom and Gomorrah, the physical destruction of the cities and their inhabitants, with not even a rumor of endless future torment that we probably think they unknowingly faced. What would we think if our government passed a new law with a huge fine as the punishment, but when a guilty party was found, he paid the fine, but also had to serve endless torment that the citizens had no warning of? What kind of judge explains the law and known penalty, while carefully concealing a much more awful penalty? What would the penalty of a few thousand dollars matter in a case where he was also going to be tormented horribly and endlessly? Yet the popular concept is that the Sodomites were sent into such a judgment.

We could go through the accounts of the builders of the tower of Babel, the destruction of Pharaoh and his armies, and Lot’s wife, yet we would notice the same thing. All these received a temporal physical

punishment, with no mention of an infinitely greater torturous punishment awaiting them in the future.

Was this teaching deliberately excluded from the record, or did it never belong? We know that it isn't there. Neither the word *gehenna* nor the concept of endless torment was given in the millennia before the giving of the Law of Moses. From the creation to Mt. Sinai, there was simply no insinuation of it in the entirety of human history up to that time. By the conclusion of this study, we'll see that God never had a plan of inflicting such dreadful torment on the people of his own creation.

## Under the Mosaic Law

Most of us are familiar with the blessings and cursings Moses pronounced upon the Israelites in Deuteronomy 28-30 before they entered the promised land. If the Jews were disobedient to God, he promised them every conceivable punishment: he would curse their children, their crops, their flocks, their health, the health of their children, the welfare of the nation, etc. He foretold that they would even go into captivity, and would have such horrible temporal physical judgments to drive them to eat their own children. Among such an extensive list of punishments that would come upon his disobedient people, God uttered not even a whisper of endless torment upon them in any case of rebellion. All these physical, temporal judgments would take place in this life.

We could multiply such cases of temporal punishments for rebellion, corruption, and idolatry under Moses. He spelled them out in minute detail. The writer of Hebrews (in 2.2) said: "...the word spoken through angels (the Mosaic Law) proved steadfast, and *every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward...*" As we've seen, the punishment was physical and temporal with no promise of endless torment whatsoever. Endless torment was simply unknown under the Law.

The question now arises, did every transgressor and disobedient Jew receive just punishment, or not? If they did, will their punishment continue to be just if in the future, they will also receive endless torment in "hell" that they were never told of and knew nothing of? If so, will eternal torment on top of their just physical temporal punishment still be just? It cannot be, can it? How can adding infinite torture in the future that they knew nothing of to a just punishment they received in the past under the Old Testament still be just?



In summary, the popular concept of hell is not found anywhere in the Old Testament. The word *gehenna* is not even contained in the Greek Old Testament; endless conscious torment is nowhere to be found in its pages.

## **Where Did the Concept of Endless Torment Originate?**

As we've seen, it most certainly did not originate in the Old Testament, either before or during the Mosaic Law. A great deal of evidence (more than we'll give here) suggests that it originated in Egypt, and the concept was widespread in the religious world. Augustine, commenting on the purpose of such doctrines, said:

This seems to have been done on no other account, but as it was the business of princes, out of their wisdom and civil prudence, to deceive the people in their religion; princes, under the name of religion, persuaded the people to believe those things true, which they themselves knew to be idle fables; by this means, for their own ease in government, tying them the more closely to civil society. (Augustine, *City of God, Book IV*, p. 32, cited by Thomas B. Thayer, *Origin & History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment*, [Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1855] p. 37)

Contriving doctrines to control people? Who would have believed it? Well, the Greek world did, the Roman world did, and evidently between the testaments, the Jews got involved, as well, as the concept of endless torment began appearing in the apocryphal books written by *Egyptian Jews*.

Thayer wrote further:

Polybius, the historian, says: "Since the multitude is ever fickle, full of lawless desires, irrational passions and violence, there is no other way to keep them in order but by the fear and terror of the invisible world; on which account our ancestors seem to me to have acted judiciously, when they contrived to bring into the popular belief these notions of the gods, and of the infernal regions. B. vi 56. .

Livy, the celebrated historian, speaks of it in the same spirit; and he praises the wisdom of Numa, because he

invented the fear of the gods, as “a most efficacious means of governing an ignorant and barbarous populace. *Hist., I 19.*

Strabo, the geographer, says: “The multitude are restrained from vice by the punishments the gods are said to inflict upon offenders, and by those terrors and threatenings which certain dreadful words and monstrous forms imprint upon their minds...For it is impossible to govern the crowd of women, and all the common rabble, by philosophical reasoning, and lead them to piety, holiness and virtue-but this must be done by superstition, or the fear of the gods, by means of fables and wonders; for the thunder, the aegis, the trident, the torches (of the Furies), the dragons, &c., are all fables, as is also all the ancient theology. These things the legislators used as scarecrows to terrify the childish multitude.” *Geog., B., I*

Timaeus Locrus, the Pythagorean, after stating that the doctrine of rewards and punishments after death is necessary to society, proceeds as follows: “For as we sometimes cure the body with unwholesome remedies, when such as are most wholesome produce no effect, so we restrain those minds with false relations, which will not be persuaded by the truth. There is a necessity, therefore, of instilling the dread of those *foreign* torments: as that the soul changes its habitation; that the coward is ignominiously thrust into the body of a woman; the murderer imprisoned within the form of a savage beast; the vain and inconstant changed into birds, and the slothful and ignorant into fishes.”

Plato, in his commentary on Timaeus, fully endorses what he says respecting the fabulous invention of these foreign torments. And Strabo says that “Plato and the Brahmins of India invented fables concerning the future judgments of hell” (Hades). And Chrysippus blames Plato for attempting to deter men from wrong by frightful stories of future punishments.

Plutarch treats the subject in the same way; sometimes arguing for them with great solemnity and earnestness,

and on other occasions calling them “fabulous stories, the tales of mothers and nurses.”

Seneca says: “Those things which make the infernal regions terrible, the darkness, the prison, the river of flaming fire, the judgment seat, &c., are all a fable, with which the poets amuse themselves, and by them agitate us with vain terrors.” *Sextus Empiricus* calls them “poetic fables of hell;” and *Cicero* speaks of them as “silly absurdities and fables” (*ineptiis ac fabulis*).

Aristotle. “It has been handed down in mythical form from earliest times to posterity, that there are gods, and that the divine (Deity) compasses all nature. All beside this has been added, after the mythical style, for the purpose of persuading the multitude, and for the interests of the laws, and the advantage of the state.” *Neander’s Church Hist.*, I, p. 7. (*Origin & History*, 41-43.)

Mosheim, in his legendary *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History*, described the permeation among the Jews of these fables during the period between the testaments:

Errors of a very pernicious kind, had infested the whole body of the people (the Jews—SGD). There prevailed among them several absurd and superstitious notions concerning the divine nature, invisible powers, magic, &c., which they had partly brought with them from the Babylonian captivity, and partly derived from the Egyptians, Syrians, and Arabians who lived in their neighborhood. The ancestors of those Jews who lived in the time of our Savior had brought from Chaldaea and the neighboring countries many extravagant and idle fancies which were utterly unknown to the original founders of the nation. The conquest of Asia by Alexander the Great was also an event from which we may date a new accession of errors to the Jewish system, since, in consequence of that revolution, the manners and opinions of the Greeks began to spread among the Jews. Beside this, in their voyages to Egypt and Phoenicia, they brought home, not only

the wealth of these corrupt and superstitious nations, but also their pernicious errors and idle fables, which were imperceptibly blended with their own religious doctrines. (Mosheim's *Institutes of Ecclesiastical History*, Century I pt. I chap. ii.)

A similar statement is made in an old *Encyclopedia Americana*, cited by Thayer:

The Hebrews received their doctrine of demons from two sources. At the time of the Babylonish captivity, they derived it from the source of the Chaldaic-Persian magic; and afterward, during the Greek supremacy in Egypt, they were in close intercourse with these foreigners, particularly in Alexandria, and added to the magician notions those borrowed from this Egyptian-Grecian source. And this connection and mixture are seen chiefly in the New Testament. It was impossible to prevent the intermingling of Greek speculations. The voice of the prophets was silent. Study and inquiry had commenced. The popular belief and philosophy separated; and even the philosophers divided themselves into several sects, Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes; and Platonic and Pythagorean notions, intermingled with Oriental doctrines, had already unfolded the germ of the Hellenistic and cabalistic philosophy. This was the state of things when Christ appeared. [*Encyclopedia Americana*, art. "Demon," cited by Thayer (*Origin & History*, p. 120)].

Note that Luke wrote in Ac. 7.22 that "Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians," yet knowing the Egyptian concepts, he gave not a whiff of endless torment in any of his writings.

Thus, we see that the concept of endless torment after life was not found in the Old Testament. It evidently crept in among some Jews during the period between the testaments.

Thayer summarizes the intertestamental period on this subject in the following words:

The truth is, that in the four hundred years of their intercourse with the heathen, during which they were without any divine teacher of message, Pagan philosophy and superstition had, so far as regarded the future

state, completely pushed aside the Law of Moses and the Scriptures of the Old Testament, and set up in place of them their own extravagant inventions and fables respecting the invisible world. (*Ibid.*, p. 53)

In the 16<sup>th</sup> century, Roman Catholicism substituted the word hell for Gehenna. Strangely, the word originally carried no connotation of eternal conscious torment in the spiritual realm. The word meant “a cover.” Our word helmet came from this word, and farmers would use “a cover” over their potatoes to protect them from freezing in the winter.

## The First Use of *Gehenna*

Most of our modern translations no longer translate *hades* and *sheol* with the word “hell.” Additionally, modern translations are no longer substituting the word “hell” for the proper noun Gehenna. We now want to examine the 12 passages where the remaining Greek word, *gehenna*, that is still commonly rendered “hell.” (We will further discuss whether this is an appropriate translation near the end of this study.) As we look at these 12 passages, notice if the passage mentions anything about eternal conscious torment in the spiritual realm, or does that meaning occur to us because of the substitution of the theologically-loaded word hell that Roman Catholicism inserted to produce that very result? Notice the first occurrence of this word in the Bible in Mt. 5.21-22. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said:

Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, that every one who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment; and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council; and whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of the hell (*gehenna*—SGD) of fire.

When Jesus used the term “hell” in these verses, he actually used the Greek word *gehenna* for the first time in inspired writing. Notice carefully that Jesus didn’t say what Gehenna was. He said nothing about eternal conscious torment in the spiritual realm. He just said that certain folks were in danger of the Gehenna of fire, which is what the Jews and I understood: a fiery judgment coming on Jerusalem, whose

rubble would end up in Gehenna. Yet most of us, when reading these verses, take those traditional concepts from it simply because the theologically-loaded word hell is there. It was loaded with concepts not found in the word gehenna by our Roman Catholic friends.

Scholar Ed Stevens has said that “these twelve verses demonstrated that gehenna refers primarily (if not exclusively) to the place in the unseen spiritual realm where the souls of the unredeemed will be consciously punished forever.” (*Fulfilled! Vol. XI, No. 2, Summer 2016 issue, pp. 10-11*) It’s very easy to see if this claim is true. We’ll just keep reading the twelve passages and see if we see eternal conscious torment in the spiritual realm in even a single one of them.

We want to begin with this first occurrence of *gehenna* and then study all of its occurrences in the New Testament. In this way, we can determine the totality of the Bible’s teaching on what is now commonly called hell.

## **The Message of John the Baptist and Jesus**

To understand Jesus’ first use of *gehenna* in the Sermon on the Mount, we must first have his ministry, and that of his contemporary, John the Baptist, in their proper contexts. We saw there that Malachi prophesied the coming of John the Baptist, and that Jesus confirmed that fulfillment by John. John’s preaching consisted of announcements of an imminent (“the axe lieth at the root of the tree”) fiery judgment on Israel if she didn’t repent. This was the same fiery judgment of which Malachi had spoken, and said that John would announce. With this idea of imminent fiery judgment in the context, John continued in Mt. 3.11-12:

I indeed baptize you in water unto repentance: but he that cometh after me is mightier than I, whose shoes I am not worthy to bear: he shall baptize you in the Holy Spirit and in fire: whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly cleanse his threshing-floor; and he will gather his wheat into the garner, but the chaff he will burn up with unquenchable fire.

Al Maxey, a serious student of these matters, has noticed the following about the word translated “burn up” here:

This is the Greek word *katakaio* which means “to burn up; consume.” It signifies to completely, utterly, totally destroy with fire. It is enlightening, in the context of this study, to note that this word is used in the LXX (Septuagint) in Exodus 3:2 where Moses beholds a burning bush --- “The bush was burning with fire, yet the bush was NOT consumed. (Al Maxey, “The Consuming Fire, Examining the Final Fate of the Wicked in Light of Biblical Language,” *Reflections #46*, June 6, 2003.)

Hence John and Jesus said the wicked would be consumed with unquenchable fire, yet we popularly read it to mean they will not be consumed, thinking folks in hell will no more be consumed than the burning bush was!

Remember this “unquenchable fire.” It will figure in our study throughout. It is the fire spoken of by Malachi, John, and Jesus.

## **Old Testament Background of *Gehenna***

Gehenna, the word hell is given for (NOTE: I’m not saying “hell” is a translation for Gehenna, for it’s not, as we’ll soon demonstrate) in the New Testament, is rooted in an Old Testament location. It is generally regarded as derived from a valley nearby Jerusalem that originally belonged to a man named Hinnom. Scholars say the word is a transliteration of the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom, a valley that had a long history in the Old Testament, all of it bad. Hence, *Gehenna* is a proper name like the Rio Grande Valley of Texas and New Mexico. This being true, the word should never have been translated “hell,” for as we’ll see, the two words have nothing in common.

We first find Hinnom in Josh. 1.8 and 18.16, where he is mentioned in Joshua’s layout of the lands of Judah and Benjamin. In II K. 23.10, we find that righteous King Josiah “defiled Topheth in the valley of the children of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter to pass through the fire to Molech.” Josiah, in his purification of the land of Judah, violated the idolatrous worship to the idol Molech by tearing down the shrines. Topheth (also spelled Tophet) was a word meaning literally, “a place of burning.” In II Chron. 28.3, idolatrous King Ahaz burnt incense and his children in the fire there, as did idolatrous King Manasseh in II Chron. 33.6. In Neh. 11.30, we find some settling in Topheth after the restoration of the Jewish captives from Babylon. In Jer. 19.2, 6, Jeremiah prophesied calamity coming upon

the idolatrous Jews there, calling it the valley of slaughter, because God was going to slaughter the Jews there, using Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. In Jer. 7.32, Jeremiah prophesied destruction coming upon the idolatrous Jews of his day with these words:

Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that it shall no more be called Tophet, nor the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter; for they shall burn in Tophet, till there be no peace.

Notice the mention of Topheth, “the place of burning,” again. Isaiah also spoke of Topheth this way in Isa. 30.33, when he warned the pro-Egypt party among the Jews (i.e., those trusting in Egypt for their salvation from Babylon rather than God) of a fiery judgment coming on them. In Jer. 19.11-14, Jeremiah gave this pronouncement of judgment by Babylon on Jerusalem at the valley of Hinnom:

And the houses of Jerusalem, and the houses of the kings of Judah, shall be defiled as the place of Tophet, because of all the houses upon whose roofs they have burned incense unto all the host of heaven, and have poured out drink offerings unto other gods.

From these passages we can see that, to the Jews, the valley of Hinnom, or Topheth, from which the New Testament concept of *Gehenna* arose, came to mean a place of burning, a valley of slaughter, and a place of calamitous fiery judgment. Thus, Thayer in his *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, said, concerning *Gehenna*:





Gehenna, the name of a valley on the S. and E. of Jerusalem...which was so called from the cries of the little children who were thrown into the fiery arms of Moloch, i.e., of an idol having the form of a bull. The Jews so abhorred the place after these horrible sacrifices had been abolished by king Josiah (2 Kings xxiii.10), that they cast into it not only all manner of refuse, but even the dead bodies of animals and of unburied criminals who had been executed. And since fires were always needed to consume the dead bodies, that the air might not become tainted by the putrefaction, it came to pass that the place was called *Gehenna*.

Actually, since *Gehenna* was a proper name of a valley, it would have been called *Gehenna* whether or not any idolatry, burning, or dumping of garbage had ever occurred there, and it was, as we now see.

Fudge said concerning the history of the valley of Hinnom:

The valley bore this name at least as early as the writing of Joshua (Josh. 15:8; 18:16), though nothing is known of its origin. It was the site of child-sacrifices

to Moloch in the days of Ahaz and Manasseh (apparently in 2 Kings 16:3; 21:6). This earned it the name “Topheth,” a place to be spit on or abhorred. This “Topheth” may have become a gigantic pyre for burning corpses in the days of Hezekiah after God slew 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in a night and saved Jerusalem (Isa. 30:31-33; 37:26). Jeremiah predicted that it would be filled to overflowing with Israelite corpses when God judged them for their sins (Jer. 7:31-33; 19:2-13). Josephus indicates that the same valley was heaped with dead bodies of the Jews following the Roman siege of Jerusalem about A.D. 69-70...Josiah desecrated the repugnant valley as part of his godly reform (2 Kings 23:10). Long before the time of Jesus, the Valley of Hinnom had become crusted over with connotations of whatever is “condemned, useless, corrupt, and forever discarded.” (Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* [Houston: Providential Press, 1982], p. 160.)

We need to keep this place in mind as we read Jesus’ teaching using a word referring back to this location in the Old Testament.

## **The Twelve *Gehenna* Passages in Chronological Order**

### **Mt. 5.21-22**

In Mt. 5.21-22, Jesus used *Gehenna* for the first time in inspired speech:

Ye have heard that it was said to them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: but I say unto you, that every one who is angry with his brother shall be in danger of the judgment, and whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of the hell (*Gehenna*—SGD) of fire.

As we mentioned earlier in our study of this passage, Jesus actually used the Greek word *Gehenna* for the first time in inspired writing. The word had never occurred in the Greek Old Testament, the *Septuagint*. When we read the word hell, all kinds of sermon outlines, illustra-

tions, and ideas depicting eternal conscious torment in the spiritual realm come to the fore of our minds. None of these came to the minds of Jesus' listeners, for they had never heard the word before in inspired speech. It is very significant that the word did not occur even once in the *Septuagint*, quoted by Jesus and his apostles.

I suggest that to the Jews in Jesus' audience, Jesus' words referred merely to the valley southeast of Jerusalem. In their Old Testament background, *Gehenna* meant *a place of burning, a valley where rebellious Jews had been slaughtered before and would be again if they didn't repent, as Malachi, John the Baptist, and Jesus urged them to do*. Jesus didn't have to say what *Gehenna* was, as it was a well-known place to the people of that area, but his teaching was at least consistent with the national judgment announced by Malachi and John the Baptist. The closest fire in the context is Mt. 3.10-12, where we've seen that John announced imminent fiery judgment on the nation of Israel.

While we may not be familiar with the development of the concept of hell as eternal conscious torment in the spiritual realm, and its substitution for *Gehenna* by Roman Catholicism, let's be assured that the Jews who heard Jesus use the term *Gehenna* for the first time assuredly knew what the punishment of *Gehenna* was. Listen to Jeremiah's prediction of Babylonian punishment of Jerusalem in 586 BC, which the Jews of Jesus' day were assuredly familiar with (Jer. 19.1-9):

1 Thus says the LORD, "Go and buy a potter's earthenware jar, and take some of the elders of the people and some of the senior priests. 2 "Then go out to the valley of Ben-hinnom, which is by the entrance of the potsherd gate; and proclaim there the words that I shall tell you, 3 and say, 'Hear the word of the LORD, O kings of Judah and inhabitants of Jerusalem: thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel, "Behold I am about to bring a calamity upon this place, at which the ears of everyone that hears of it will tingle. 4 "Because they have forsaken Me and have made this an alien place and have burned sacrifices in it to other gods that neither they nor their forefathers nor the kings of Judah had ever known, and because they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent 5 and have built the high places of Baal to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Baal, a thing which I never commanded or spoke of, nor did it ever enter My mind; 6 therefore, behold, days are coming, "declares the

LORD,” when this place will no longer be called Topheth or the valley of Ben-hinnom, but rather the valley of Slaughter. 7 “And I shall make void the counsel of Judah and Jerusalem in this place, and I shall cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies and by the hand of those who seek their life; and I shall give over their carcasses as food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth. 8 “I shall also make this city a desolation and an object of hissing; everyone who passes by it will be astonished and hiss because of all its disasters. 9 “And I shall make them eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and they will eat one another’s flesh in the siege and in the distress with which their enemies and those who seek their life will distress them.”

When Jesus’ listeners heard the word Gehenna from the lips of Jesus, they didn’t think of eternal conscious torment in the spiritual realm, or even the word hell (which wouldn’t be formulated for nearly sixteen centuries), but they thought of the slaughter the Babylonians visited on their Jewish ancestors six centuries before. Jesus was threatening impenitent Jews of his day with the same slaughter in his generation. They had seen it all before, but no one had called Gehenna hell, and wouldn’t until the 16<sup>th</sup> century AD, when it was used to threaten European Catholics unless they purchased indulgences to protect them from its punishment. Many European cathedrals were built with those indulgences.

Hence John and Jesus said the wicked would be consumed with unquenchable fire, yet we popularly read it to mean they will not be consumed, thinking folks in hell will no more be consumed than the burning bush was!

Let’s notice the other *Gehenna* passages to ascertain more about Jesus’ use of *Gehenna*. As we do so, let’s analyze each passage thus: Does the passage teach things we don’t believe about an unending fiery hell, but which fit national judgment in *Gehenna*?

### **Mt. 5.29-30**

The next passage is Mt. 5.29-30, where Jesus used *Gehenna* twice when he said:

And if thy right eye causeth thee to stumble, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee

that one of thy members should perish, and not thy whole body go into hell (*Gehenna*—SGD). And if thy right hand causeth thee to stumble, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not thy whole body go into hell (*Gehenna*—SGD).

In the traditional idea of hell, unending fire after the end of time, we normally don't think of people having their physical limbs in the spiritual realm at that time. This is not an argument, but just the realization that we don't think in terms of some people being in heaven with missing eyes and limbs, and some in hell with all of theirs. As William Robert West said in his excellent work on the nature of man, "No one that I know of believes that the 'soul' shall 'enter into life,' which he or she says is in heaven, with a hand of that soul in hell." (William Robert West, *If the Soul or Spirit Is Immortal, There Can Be No Resurrection from the Dead*, Third Edition, originally published as *The Resurrection and Immortality* [Bloomington, IN: Author House, September 2006].) Notice also that Jesus didn't mention souls punished consciously forever in a single one of these six "eye, hand, and foot" passages.

In Mk. 9.43, "*unquenchable fire*" doesn't mean eternal fire, but fire that you can't quench or put out. It's used of national judgment in Ezek. 20.47-48, on Israel in Amos 5.5-6, on Jerusalem in Isa. 66.15-16, and of Babylon's burning of Jerusalem in Jer. 21:10-14. Of course, none of those fires were eternal; none of them are still burning!

However, these words do fit a national judgment. It would be better to go into the kingdom of the Messiah missing some members, than to go into an imminent national judgment of unquenchable fire with all our members. This was equivalent to John's demand that his Jewish audience bring forth fruits worthy of repentance or receive imminent unquenchable fire. The whole body of a Jew could be cast into the valley of *Gehenna* in the fiery judgment of which John spoke.

## **Mt. 10.28**

The fourth time Jesus used *Gehenna* was when he said:

And be not afraid of them that kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell [*Gehenna*—SGD].

Again, Jesus spoke of *Gehenna* consistently with imminent national judgment on Israel. Note that he didn't say, "I will warn you whom to fear: fear the One who after He has killed the body, will punish your soul consciously eternally," as many read it. The concepts of conscious, soul, eternal, and torment are not in this passage, either. I'm afraid they are just thinking of those things as they read these verses, which say no such thing! This verse is often used to affirm that the soul of man cannot be destroyed, that we're all born with an eternal soul, and it's that soul that we think Jesus spoke of in this verse. This directly contradicts the plain language of Jesus. If the body and soul of man cannot be destroyed, the language of Jesus has no meaning whatsoever! To help us understand Jesus' teaching here, let's briefly review the Bible's teaching concerning man being a living soul. The word *soul* in the Old Testament comes from the Hebrew *nephesh*, which fundamentally refers to man's animal life, i.e., the life he shares with all animals. Hence, in Genesis 2.7, we read:

And Jehovah God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.

Here, Adam consisted of (1) a physical body, composed from the earth, which was not living. However, when God gave this body (2) the breath of life, Adam was a living soul (*nephesh*). It's interesting that the term *nephesh* is applied to animals many times in that same creation chapter. For example, in Gen. 2.19, it's applied to animals: "Let the waters swarm with swarms of living creatures (*nephesh*)." In Gen. 1.21, the same word is translated *living creature*: "And God created the great sea-monsters, and every *living creature* that moves wherewith the water swarmed." In Gen. 1.24, it's again translated *animals*: "And God said, Let the earth bring forth *living creatures* after their kind, cattle, and creeping things, and beasts of the earth." In Gen. 1.30, it's translated *life*: "And to every beast of the earth, and to every bird of the heavens, and to everything that creeps upon the earth, wherein there is *life*." Hence, the term *a living soul*, is applied to animals as well as man. They are all *living souls*."

Since both animals and man are living souls or beings, we can read the Bible's saying that souls (*nephesh*) can be smitten with the sword and utterly destroyed, as in Josh. 11.11:

And they smote all the *souls* [*nephesh*] that were therein with the edge of the sword, utterly *destroying*

them; there was none left that breathed: and he burnt Hazor with fire.

Thus, as Israel invaded Canaan, the national judgment they were carrying out on the inhabitants was referred to as destroying their souls with their swords. It was not eternal conscious torment in a spiritual realm as many imagine in Mt. 10.28. When Ed Stevens asserts, “The physical valley of Hinnom did not affect the soul,” (*Ibid.*) surely he’s forgotten these occurrences of this very thing in Joshua, and therefore his conclusion that “therefore, gehenna must be a spiritual place in the unseen realm in which souls are brought to everlasting ruin in the after-life” doesn’t follow at all. A similar usage of souls in the same context is in Josh. 10.35, 39:

...and they took it [the city of Eglon] on that day, and smote it with the edge of the sword; and all the *souls* (*nephesh*) that were therein he utterly *destroyed* that day, according to all that he had done to Lachish.

...and he took it [the region of Debir], and the king thereof, and all the cities thereof; and they smote them with the edge of the sword, and utterly *destroyed all the souls* that were therein; he left none remaining: as he had done to Hebron, so he did to Debir, and to the king thereof; as he had done also to Libnah, and to the king thereof.

Likewise in Lev. 23.30, we read of the penalty for working on the Day of Atonement:

Whosoever *soul* [*nephesh*] it be that doeth any manner of work in that same day, *that soul will I destroy* from among his people.

In none of these examples was the word *soul* referring to an immortal part of man. Significantly, this usage is how the Jews listening to Jesus in Mt. 10.28 and Lk. 12.4-5 would have understood such language. They knew from their Old Testament background that God could, and had many times, destroyed both bodies and souls in various national judgments.

The question arises, “What’s to keep anyone else from carrying out such judgments of destroying both bodies and souls?” The answer is absolutely nothing, if they’re capable of doing it. Not everyone is, and

this passage doesn't say that only God is capable, does it? We may have thought that only deity could destroy a soul because thought *soul* implied an immortal part of man. However, that wasn't what any of these passages contemplated. The same comments apply to the following passage.

## Lk. 12.4-5

This is the fifth time Jesus used *Gehenna*, when he said: Lk. 12.4-5

And I say unto you my friends, Be not afraid of them that kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom ye shall fear: Fear him, who after he hath killed, hath power to cast into hell [*Gehenna*-SGD]: yea, I say unto you, Fear him.

Here Jesus taught the same thing John taught in Mt. 3.10-12, that only a divine being has the power to cast someone into unquenchable fire. A human can kill you. A divine being can imminently bring an unstoppable national judgment in which a divinely ordained religion would be brought to an end. Notice also that Jesus said that one would be cast into *Gehenna* after he has been killed (Lk. 12.4-5) and that God can destroy both the soul and body in *Gehenna*.

Notice also in verse 49 that Jesus said:

I came to cast fire upon *the earth* (Gr., *ge*, land); and what do I desire, if it is already kindled?

The fiery judgment of which Jesus spoke was not far off in time and place, but imminent and earthly. In verse 56, Jesus noted that the judgment of which he spoke was imminent, for he said:

Ye hypocrites, ye know how to interpret the face of the earth and the heaven; but how is it that ye know not how to interpret this time?

The word for earth in both these verses is *ge*, the standard word for land or ground, not necessarily the planet, which we might think. Thayer defined the word as:

1. arable land, 2. the ground, the earth as a standing place, 3. land, as opposed to sea or water, 4. the earth as a whole, the world. (p. 114)



This is the word used in Mt. 2.6 (the land of Judea), Mt. 2.20 (the land of Israel), Mt. 10.15 (the land of Sodom and Gomorrah), Mt. 11.24 (the land of Sodom), Mt. 14.34 (the land of Gennesaret), Jn. 3.22 (the land of Judea), Ac. 7.3 (into the land which I shall show thee), Ac. 7.6 (seed should sojourn in a strange land), Ac. 7.11 (a dearth over all the land of Egypt), etc. Thus, Jesus again spoke of imminent fiery destruction on the land of Israel, just as Malachi and John the Baptist said he would announce.

### **Mt. 18.9, Mk. 9.43-45**

These verses contain the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth times Jesus used the word *Gehenna*. These are verses like Mt. 5.29-30, which speak of it being better to enter life or the kingdom without some members of one's body rather than going into *Gehenna* with a whole body. However, we want to pay special attention to Mark's account, because in it, Jesus further described *Gehenna*:

And if thy hand cause thee to stumble, cut it off: it is good for thee to enter into life maimed, rather than having thy two hands to go into hell, *into the unquenchable fire* [emphasis mine—SGD].

Notice that Jesus specifically said what's coming in *Gehenna-unquenchable fire*. John the Baptist said he would baptize with unquenchable fire, not necessarily fire that would burn unendingly, but which would not be quenched. Unquenchable fire is unstoppable! It's fiery destruction brought about by a divine being. In Jer. 17.27, God warned the Jews of his time of imminent fiery judgment on themselves:

If ye will not hearken unto me...then will I kindle a fire in the gates of Jerusalem, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, *and it shall not be quenched*.

Likewise, in Jer. 7.20, Jeremiah foretold the same thing:

Therefore, thus saith the Lord God: Behold mine anger and my fury shall be poured out upon this place, upon man, and upon beast, and upon the trees of the field, and upon the fruit of the ground, and it shall burn, *and shall not be quenched*

This unquenchable fire, brought on by the Babylonians, devoured the palaces and gates of Jerusalem during Jeremiah's lifetime, in 586 B.C.

In Ezk. 20.47-48, God promised such a national judgment on Judah:

Hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am about to kindle a fire in you, and it shall consume every green tree in you, as well as every dry tree; *the blazing flame will not be quenched*, and the whole surface from south to north will be burned by it. And all flesh will see that I, the Lord, have kindled it; *it shall not be quenched*.

Of course, Babylon fulfilled these words in the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 B.C. The fire was not quenched, but Jerusalem didn't burn unendingly from 586 B.C. on.

Likewise, in Amos 5.6, God had promised a similar judgment on the northern kingdom at the hands of the Assyrians, fulfilled in 722 B.C.:

Seek the Lord that you may live, lest He break forth like a fire, O house of Joseph, and it consume with none to quench it for Bethel.

The unquenchable fire which consumed Israel was unstoppable, but no one believes it's still burning unendingly. Thus, when Jesus spoke of unquenchable fire in Mk. 9.43, he used language that his Jewish listeners would associate with the national judgments God had brought on nations in the Old Testament.

In fact, they had never heard such language used any other way! Of course, we have, but not from the teaching of the Bible.

Thayer mentioned the use of the word unquenchable in the Greek language by Josephus and others:

1. *Strabo*, the celebrated geographer, speaking of the Parthenon, a temple in Athens, says: "In this was the inextinguishable or unquenchable lamp" (*asbestos*, the very word used in Mark iii 12, Luke iii 17, and Mark ix. 43). Of course, all it means is that the lamp was kept constantly or regularly burning during the period alluded to, though extinguished or quenched ages ago.

2. *Homer* uses the phrase *asbestos gelos*, “unquenchable laughter.” But we can hardly suppose they are laughing now, and will laugh to all eternity. *Homer*; on unquenchable

3. *Plutarch*, the well-known author of the biographies familiarly known as “*Plutarch’s Lives*,” calls the sacred fire of the temple “unquenchable fire” (*pur asbestos*, the exact expression of Jesus), though he says in the very next sentence it had sometimes gone out.

4. *Josephus*, speaking of a festival of the Jews, says that every one brought fuel for the fire of the altar, which “continued *always unquenchable*,” (*asbestos aei*). Here we have a union of the word supposed to mean specially endless, when in the form of *aionios*, with the word “unquenchable,” and yet both together do not convey the idea of duration without end; for the fire of which *Josephus* speaks had actually gone out, and the altar been destroyed, at the time he wrote! And still he calls the fire “always unquenchable.”

5. *Eusebius*, the father of ecclesiastical history, describing the martyrdom of several Christians at Alexandria, says: “They were carried on camels through the city, and in this elevated position were scourged, and finally consumed or burned in *unquenchable fire*” (*puri asbestos*).<sup>6</sup> Here, again, we have the very phrase employed by our Lord, and applied to a literal fire, which, of course, was quenched in the short space of one hour, probably, or two hours at the longest. All that is implied is, that it burned till it had consumed the victims. (*Thayer, Ibid.*, p. 68-69.)

These are perfect illustrations of the scriptural use and definition of the word unquenchable. Jesus used the word the way his audience had always heard it used, of something unstoppageable, not endless.

## **Mt. 23.15**

In the tenth time Jesus used *gehenna*, he said:

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye compass sea and land to make one proselyte; and when he is become so, ye make him twofold more a son of hell (*Gehenna*—SGD) than yourselves.

These Jews knew what *Gehenna* was, and Jesus and John had foretold the unquenchable fiery judgment awaiting them there. He told these Jews that they were headed for it, and the people they taught were as well. It is the same national judgment he's been speaking of thus far. It's quite a testimony to the power of the human mind that it can read things like eternal, conscious, and torment into these verses, when not one syllable of them are in the verse, isn't it?

### **Mt. 23.33**

Eighteen verses later, Jesus used *gehenna* for the eleventh time. Continuing in the same address, he said:

Ye serpents, ye offspring of vipers, how shall ye escape the judgment of hell [*Gehenna*—SGD]?

Just three verses later, Jesus said, in Mt. 23.36:

Verily I say unto you, All these things shall come upon this generation.

About these same things, Jesus said in Mt. 24.34:

Verily I say unto you, This generation shall not pass away, till all these things be accomplished.

Thus, Jesus gave the time element when this fiery destruction on the land would be carried out: in that generation, i.e., in the time of his dealing with the then present generation of Jews. To sum up, Jesus threatened the Jews in the environs of Jerusalem that they were headed for the valley named *Gehenna* where there would be *unquenchable fire* (Mk. 9.43) *upon his generation* (Mt. 23.36) *in his generation* (Mt. 24.34), *when God destroys the souls of those of Jesus' generation after killing their bodies* (Lk. 12.5, Mt. 10.28). We cannot make it more precise! If hell is what Jesus said it was, *hell* was the unstoppable fiery destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D.

Another friend of mine, Kurt Simmons (who thinks I'm taking *Gehenna* too literally), asserts that "it seems rather obvious (in Matt 23:33) that he is not talking about the physical valley of Hinnom out-

side Jerusalem.” (*Fulfilled! Vol. XII, No. 2, Winter 2017*) Obvious? Is it just as obvious that Bethlehem or Jerusalem in the gospels are not those literal locations? There’s just as much Bible for asserting that. Until the Roman Catholic Church came along, Gehenna meant Gehenna, yet to Kurt, it’s obvious that it doesn’t. He then makes a powerful-sounding argument that turns out to be a very serious blunder. Based on his assertion that Gehenna was not just the proper name of a literal location, he writes: “The Pharisees could very easily have escaped death or burial in the valley of Hinnom by moving to Rome or some other ancient city, or even by simply dying prior to the Jewish war with Rome . . . .” Kurt’s a brilliant man, but *2000 years before he came up with that argument, our Lord made it clear that this was the very thing he wanted the Jews to do—trust him and get out of Judea!* He warned them to flee Jerusalem to the mountains! Our Lord told them to escape, and the faithful Jews did! Escape from Gehenna was possible! Thus, in Matthew 23:33-36, Jesus warned the Jews that their very generation (and no other) was headed for the judgment in Gehenna, and in 24:34, He said it would occur in His generation (not in any other). He warned them (not us) in 24:15-16 to watch for the sign of His coming, and flee to the mountains. In Luke 21:26, Luke’s account of the same discourse, Jesus warned: “But watch ye at every season, making supplication, that ye may *prevail to escape all these things that shall come to pass*” (Luke 21:26). Kurt is right when he states that if Gehenna was the literal valley outside Jerusalem, the Jews could very easily have escaped death or burial in the valley of Hinnom. You might think Jesus was making my argument, but it’s not true. I’m making His, and using Gehenna just like He was.

Kurt asserts in the next paragraph that “When Jesus asked ‘*how shall you escape damnation of Gehenna,*’ it is clear He alludes instead to the inevitable destruction in the lake of fire.” How does Kurt know this? Unfortunately, he doesn’t tell us, he just asserts it. What do you, the reader, think of it? The term “lake of fire” occurs five times in the entire Bible, all in Revelation 19-20, written nearly forty years *after* Jesus spoke on Gehenna. Is it clear to you that Jesus was alluding to something no one would hear of until 40 years later? People of Jesus’ time hadn’t heard of the lake of fire, and no one on earth did for another forty years. It’s as clear as a bell that Gehenna refers to the lake of fire to someone whose mind is permeated with Roman Catholic teaching instead of just the words of the Savior. You can be a good guy and have a mind like that. Mine was for many years, and still is on other

topics. I'm just not aware of them, yet. We all have traditional "baggage" that can unknowingly color our understanding of Scripture.

Then Kurt asserts that "Gehenna is seen to be a *symbol* (emphasis Kurt's—SGD) for the lake of fire." Kurt has this exactly backward; the lake of fire is symbolic of Gehenna. The lake of fire is the symbol of the real thing, Gehenna. This is established by the following: A) the term "lake of fire" only occurs in Revelation, a book of signs and symbols (which isn't the case in any of the New Testament books in which Gehenna occurs); B) no one on earth could have possibly thought of Gehenna as a sign of the lake of fire, since that term would not be used until forty years after the last time the word Gehenna was used by our Lord. Kurt couldn't have made such an assertion either unless he had help that I think he got from you-know-where. I do think the lake of fire in Revelation *signifies* the unquenchable fiery judgment coming *on* Jesus' generation *in* his generation, but it's a sign of the real thing, Gehenna, not *vice versa*.

### **Jas. 3.6**

There remains but one more occurrence of *gehenna* in the Bible. It's the only time the word occurs outside the gospels, where James, writing to Jews shortly before the destruction of Jerusalem, said:

And the tongue is a fire: the world of iniquity among our members is the tongue, which defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the wheel of nature, and is set on fire by hell [*Gehenna*—SGD].

While this is the only passage speaking of *gehenna* outside the gospels, it is consistent with how Jesus defined it. James condemned misuse of the tongue, specifically in terms Jesus used the first time he used the word in Mt. 5.22, where he spoke of cursing one's brethren putting one in danger of the hell of fire (*Gehenna*—SGD). In Jas. 3.9, James said:

Therewith bless we the Lord and Father; and therewith curse we men, who are made after the likeness of God: out of the same mouth cometh forth blessing and cursing.

Thus, the last time *gehenna* occurred in the Bible, it taught the same thing it taught in the first. Like Jesus, James uses no words like eternal conscious, torment, or spiritual realm. He merely used *Gehen-*

na, which his first century Jewish audience was familiar with. The Jew of Jesus' day who abused his brother with his tongue was in danger of imminent, fiery, national destruction. He was headed for unquenchable fire on his generation, in his generation.

We see the same imminence of this judgment against Jesus' generation of Jews later in James. For example, in Jas. 5.5, James mentioned a day of slaughter coming. In Jas. 5.7, he mentioned the coming of the Lord. In Jas. 5.8, he said the coming of the Lord was "at hand." In Jas. 5.9, he said "the judge standeth before the door."

## Summary of the Twelve *Gehenna* Passages

In none of these *Gehenna* passages do we see anything about eternal conscious torment in the spiritual realm, although we're greatly tempted to read that into them from the theologically-loaded word hell. From these twelve *Gehenna* passages, we learn that *Gehenna* would be the familiar valley on the southwest side of Jerusalem where an imminent fiery judgment was coming on the Jews of the generation in which Jesus was crucified. It was unquenchable fire on that generation in that generation. It was a national judgment against the Jews. *Gehenna* was to the Jews of Jesus' day what it was to the Jews of Jeremiah's day—where the term originated—the city dump! But it entailed all the horror of being rejected and abandoned by God to the merciless enemy who surrounded the gates and who would cause their dead carcasses to be thrown into the burning, worm-infested place. Thus, when Jesus used the term He used it in the same sense that Jeremiah did: as Jerusalem then was abandoned to Babylon's invasion, so Jerusalem of Jesus' day was about to be abandoned to Roman invasion—unless they repented. *None of these hell passages say that anyone of our day can go to hell. None of them associate hell with Satan. None of them say that Satan's domain is hell. Though they speak of men being killed and destroyed in Gehenna, none of them speak of men being tormented there.*

As we've seen, the concept of endless punishment was completely foreign to inspired writing before the Law of Moses, during the Law of Moses, and now we see it's foreign to the teaching of Jesus.

Contrast Jesus' use of hell with traditional preaching on the subject. For example, we quote a Rev. J. Furniss, who said:

See on the middle of that red-hot floor stands a girl: she looks about sixteen years old. Her feet are bare. Listen; she speaks. "I have been standing on this red-hot floor for years! Look at my burnt and bleeding

feet! Let me go off this burning floor for one moment!” The fifth dungeon is the red-hot oven. The little child is in the red-hot oven. Hear how it screams to come out; see how it turns and twists itself about in the fire. It beats its head against the roof of the oven. It stamps its little feet on the floor. God was very good to this little child. Very likely God saw it would get worse and worse, and would never repent, and so it would have to be punished more severely in hell. So God in His mercy called it out of the world in early childhood. (J. Furniss, *The Sight of Hell* [London and Dublin: Duffy], cited by Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* [Houston: Providential Press, 1982], p. 416.)

Charles H. Spurgeon, renowned Baptist preacher, said:

When thou diest thy soul will be tormented alone—that will be a hell for it—but at the day of judgment thy body will join thy soul, and then thou wilt have twin hells, body and soul shall be together, each brimfull of pain, thy soul sweating in its inmost pore drops of blood and thy body from head to foot suffused with agony; conscience, judgement, memory, all tortured. Thine heart beating high with fever, thy pulse rattling at an enormous rate in agony, thy limbs cracking like the martyrs in the fire and yet unburnt, thyself put in a vessel of hot oil, pained yet coming out undestroyed, all thy veins becoming a road for the hot feet of pain to travel on, every nerve a string on which the devil shall ever play his diabolical tune. Fictions, sir! Again I say they are no fictions, but solid, stern truth. If God be true, and this Bible be true, what I have said is the truth, and you will find it one day to be so. (Charles H. Spurgeon, Sermon No. 66, New Park Street Pulpit, 2:105, cited by Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* [Houston: Providential Press, 1982], p. 417.)

Only conceive that poor wretch in the flames, who is saying, “O for one drop of water to cool my parched tongue!” See how his tongue hangs from between his



blistered lips! How it excoriates and burns the roof of his mouth as if it were a firebrand! Behold him crying for a drop of water. I will not picture the scene. Suffice it for me to close up by saying, that the hell of hells will be to thee, poor sinner, the thought that it is to be for ever. Thou wilt look up there on the throne of God and on it shall be written, “for ever!” When the damned jingle the burning irons of their torments, they shall say, “For ever!” When they howl, echo cries, “For ever!” “For ever” is written on their racks, “For ever” on their chains; “For ever” burneth in the fire, “For ever” ever reigns.” (From a sermon preached in 1855, cited by Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* [Houston: Providential Press, 1982], p. 417.)

Jonathan Edwards, famous Calvinist preacher of an earlier century, said:

So it will be with the soul in Hell; it will have no strength or power to deliver itself; and its torment and horror will be so great, so mighty, so vastly disproportioned to its strength, that having no strength in the least to support itself, although it be infinitely contrary to the nature and inclination of the soul utterly to sink; yet it will sink, it will utterly and totally sink, without the least degree of remaining comfort, or strength, or courage, or hope. And though it will never be annihilated, its being and perception will never be abolished: yet such will be the infinite depth of gloominess that it will sink into, that it will be in a state of death, eternal death.

To help your conception, imagine yourself to be cast into a fiery oven, all of a glowing heat, or into the midst of a glowing brick-kiln, or of a great furnace, where your pain would be as much greater than that occasioned by accidentally touching a coal of fire, as the heat is greater. Imagine also that your body were to lie there for a quarter of an hour, full of fire, as full within and without as a bright coal of fire, all the while full of quick sense; what horror would you feel at the

entrance of such a furnace! And how long would that quarter of an hour seem to you! And how much greater would be the effect, if you knew you must endure it for a whole year, and how vastly greater still, if you knew you must endure it for a thousand years! O then, how would your heart sink, if you thought, if you knew, that you must bear it forever and ever! That after millions of millions of ages, your torment would be no nearer to an end, than ever it was; and that you never, never should be delivered! But your torment in Hell will be immeasurably greater than this illustration represents. How then will the heart of a poor creature sink under it! How utterly inexpressible and inconceivable must the sinking of the soul be in such a case. (Jonathan Edwards, cited by A. W. Pink, *Eternal Punishment* [Swengel, PA: Reiner Publications, n.d.], cited by Edward William Fudge, *The Fire That Consumes* [Houston: Providential Press, 1982], p. 417.)

The world will probably be converted into a great lake or liquid globe of fire, in which the wicked shall be overwhelmed, which will always be in tempest, in which they shall be tossed to and fro, having no rest day and night, vast waves and billows of fire continually rolling over their heads, of which they shall forever be full of a quick sense within and without; their heads, their eyes, their tongues, their hands, their feet, their loins and their vitals, shall forever be full of a flowing, melting fire, fierce enough to melt the very rocks and elements; and also, they shall eternally be full of the most quick and lively sense to feel the torments; not for one minute, not for one day, not for one age, not for two ages, not for a hundred ages, nor for ten thousand millions of ages, one after another, but forever and ever, without any end at all, and never to be delivered. (Cited by Gary Amirault, *The Ancient Inventors and Modern Perpetrators of Hell*, p. 4.)

Did all that preaching come from the twelve *Gehenna* passages we've just analyzed? Did *any* of it? We can find none of this language of red-hot floors, dungeons, red-hot ovens, vessels of hot oil, being able to see the throne of God, brick-kilns, torture racks, chains, or great

furnaces anywhere in these twelve passages that deal with the subject of *Gehenna* in the Bible. However, they are easily found in Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *Inferno*. .

Such concepts are also found in Islamic writings:

As for the disbelievers, they know at the moment of death that they are destined for Hell. The angels beat them up on the faces and rear ends (8:50 & 47:27), order them to evict their souls (6:93), then "snatch their souls" (79:1). The Quran teaches that the disbelievers go through 2 deaths (2:28 & 40:11). They will be put to death - a state of nothingness during which they see Hell day and night in a continuous nightmare that lasts until the Day of Judgment (40:46). Hell is not yet in existence (40:46, 89:23). (Dr. Rashad Khalifa., Submission.org)

The reader may wonder, "Well, if Jesus didn't teach that the wicked presently living will finally go to hell, then what did he teach about the final destiny of the wicked?" First, we don't have to know the answer to that question to know that traditional teaching on hell is Biblically bankrupt. Second, Jesus didn't teach anything about the final destiny of the wicked, that is, at the end of time. If we're tempted to use the account of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16), let's recall that in this account, Lazarus, the rich man, and Abraham were all in *hades* (they couldn't be seen), and the passage doesn't address what happens after the end of time at all. Whatever the passage teaches, it doesn't deal with the final destiny of the wicked..

One other observation deserves to be made. As we've seen, the word *gehenna* occurs sparsely in the Bible—none in the Greek Old Testament, and only twelve times in the New Testament, eleven by Jesus, and one by James. Amazingly, the word is nowhere used in the book of Acts. Luke recorded thirty years of preaching by Paul (who claimed to have declared "the whole counsel of God") and others in Acts, yet the word is not used once. Not only does Acts not record any of the teaching on hell that we've just seen samples of, it doesn't even mention the word! The gospel being preached in Acts didn't contain such a concept at all, but it did carry a lot of preaching to Jews about the inescapable fiery judgment that was coming upon them if they didn't repent.

## Other Terminology Commonly Thought to Refer to Eternal Fiery Hell

Now we want to notice other expressions of fiery judgment which we traditionally use to describe hell. These include fire burning to *she-ol*, the worm dying not, unquenchable fire, fire that is not quenched, everlasting fire, weeping and gnashing of teeth, fire and brimstone, rising smoke, no rest day or night, being cast into fire, and melting.

### Fire Consuming a Nation

In Isa. 33.10-11, Isaiah said about Assyria:

Now I will arise, says the Lord, now I will be exalted, now I will be lifted up. You have conceived chaff, you will give birth to stubble; my breath will consume you like a fire, and the peoples will be burned to lime, like cut thorns which are burned in the fire....Who among us can live with the consuming fire? Who among us can live with continual burning?

A careful study of the Old Testament prophets shows these expressions of the Assyrians being consumed by fire, and burned to lime are expressions of national judgment upon that nation. These expressions are similar to Jesus' statement in Lk. 12.49 that he came to send fire on the land of Israel. This is also the Old Testament basis for Jesus' statement to the Jews in Jn. 15.6: :

If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.

Isaiah's language was also similar to that in Dan. 7.9-12, where Daniel foretold the judgment of the beast about to overcome the saints of the Most High:

I kept looking until thrones were set up, and the Ancient of Days took His seat; His vesture was like white snow and the hair of His head like pure wool. His throne was ablaze with flames, Its wheels were a burning fire. A river of fire was flowing and coming out from before Him; Thousands upon thousands were attending Him, and myriads upon myriads were standing

before Him; The court sat, and the books were opened. Then I kept looking because of the sound of the boasting words which the horn was speaking: I kept looking until the beast was slain, and its body was destroyed and given to the burning fire.

This scene portrayed the national destruction of the pagan power attempting to destroy the saints of the Most High. This is the same scene described in Rev. 20.11-15:

And I saw a great white throne, and him that sat upon it, from whose face the earth and the heaven fled away; and there was found no place for them. And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne; and books were opened: and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged out of the things which were written in the books, according to their works. And the sea gave up the dead that were in it; and death and Hades gave up the dead that were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and Hades were cast into the lake of fire. And if any was not found written in the book of life, he was cast into the lake of fire.

Both of these scenes depict national judgments against a nation persecuting God's saints, both have judgment scenes, both have people judged out of things written in the books, and both have those not pleasing God in the judgment being cast into a river or lake of fire. This national judgment goes with John's expressions of imminence in Rev. 1.3 ("the time is at hand"), Rev. 22.6 ("things which must shortly come to pass"), and Rev. 22.10 ("Seal not up the words of the prophecy of this book: for the time is at hand"). Those who take the early date of Revelation (A.D. 67) believe these words refer to the destruction of Jerusalem, while those who take the later date for Revelation (A.D. 90-96) believe these words refer to the destruction of the Roman Empire. Whether they refer to Jerusalem or the Roman empire, they refer to a national judgment.

## **Fire Burning to *Sheol*, Consuming the Earth and Mountains**

This language is generally associated with a fiery judgment at the end of time, and hell. However, in Dt. 32.22, Moses said the same about the punishment God would bring on Israel for her idolatry:

For a fire is kindled in My anger, and burns to the lowest part of Sheol, and consumes the earth with its yield, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.

This language described national judgment that caused a nation to vanish.

## **Worm Dieth Not, Fire Not Quenched**

While this language is generally applied to hell, it's not so used in any of the *Gehenna* passages in the Bible. In Isa. 66.24, we read of God's destruction of Jerusalem in the generation when Jesus was crucified:

Then they shall go forth and look on the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched; and they shall be an abhorrence to all mankind.

This passage contains nothing about conscious suffering, much less enduring to the end of time. Yet this is the same kind of language we saw in Mk. 9.47-48, the passage where Jesus described *Gehenna* with "unquenchable fire." There Jesus said:

It is good for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell; where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.

When Jesus spoke these words, the Bible had never used such language of anything but a national judgment.

## Unquenchable Fire

Likewise, when John the Baptist and Jesus spoke of unquenchable fire, the Jews had never heard such language used of anything but a national judgment. For example, in Ezk. 20.47-48, God promised national judgment on Israel: :

Hear the word of the Lord: Thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am about to kindle a fire in you, and it shall consume every green tree in you, as well as every dry tree; the blazing flame will not be quenched, and the whole surface from south to north will be burned by it. And all flesh will see that I, the Lord, have kindled it; it shall not be quenched.

In Amos 5.5-6, we have the same language used of national judgment on Israel again. God had promised a similar judgment on the northern kingdom at the hands of the Assyrians, fulfilled in 722 B.C.:

Seek the Lord that you may live, lest He break forth like a fire, O house of Joseph, and it consume with none to quench it for Bethel.

In Isa. 66.15-16, 24, Isaiah spoke of New Jerusalem's enemies being burned with unquenchable fire, as he spoke of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in A.D. 70:

For behold, the Lord will come in fire, and His chariots like the whirlwind, to render His anger with fury, and His rebuke with flames of fire. For the Lord will execute judgment by fire, and by His sword on all flesh. And those slain by the Lord will be many....Then they shall go forth and look on the corpses of the men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched; and they shall be an abhorrence to all mankind.

In Jer. 21.10-12, we read of Babylon's burning Jerusalem with unquenchable fire, a national judgment fulfilled in 586 B.C.:

For I have set My face against this city for harm and not for good, declares the Lord. It will be given into the hand of the king of Babylon, and he will burn it

with fire. Then say to the household of the king of Judah, Hear the word of the Lord, O house of David, thus says the Lord: Administer justice every morning; and deliver the person who has been robbed from the power of the oppressor. That My wrath may not go forth like fire and burn with none to extinguish it, because of the evil of their deeds.

Again, at the time John the Baptist and Jesus used this language in the gospels, the Bible had only used it of national judgments.

## **Fire That Is Not Quenched**

The same thing is true of this expression. In Jer. 4.4, Jeremiah used it of the destruction of Jerusalem. In Jer. 21.12, he used it to describe the destruction of the house of David. In Amos 5.5, 6, Amos used it of the destruction of Jerusalem. In II K. 22.17, it's used of the destruction of Judah. In Isa. 34.10, Isaiah used it of the destruction of Edom, and in Isa. 66.24, he used it of the destruction of the enemies of the Messiah's people. See also Jer. 7.20, 17.27, where Jeremiah used it of the destruction of Judah, and Ezk. 20.47-48, where Ezekiel spoke of God's destruction of Jerusalem.

## **Weeping and Gnashing of Teeth**

These words are so often thought of as applying to people suffering unending conscious torment in hell, that it will surprise many to find that the Old Testament used this language exclusively of national judgments.

In Isa. 22.12, speaking of the time Jerusalem would be destroyed by Babylon, Isaiah said:

Therefore in that day the Lord God of hosts, called you to weeping, to wailing, to shaving the head, and to wearing sackcloth.

See also Isa. 16.9, Jer. 9.1, and 48.32. The entire book of Lamentations contains such language as Jeremiah lamented the destruction of Jerusalem by Babylon. In the New Testament, Jas. 5.1 uses the same kind of language to describe the weeping of the rich for fear of God's imminent judgment on Jerusalem:



Come now, ye rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten.

This judgment was also imminent in Jas. 5.5-9, where the day of slaughter was spoken of as at hand, as the judge was standing before the door. John used this same language in Rev. 18.9, of the pagan kings lamenting the destruction of spiritual Babylon:

And the kings of the earth, who committed fornication and lived wantonly with her, shall weep and wail over her, when they look upon the smoke of her burning, standing afar off for the fear of her torment, saying, Woe, woe, the great city, Babylon, the strong city! for in one hour is thy judgment. And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn over her...

On the gnashing of teeth in particular, an adversary about to kill his victim did this in Job 16.9, Ps. 35.16, Ps. 37.12, Lam. 2.16, and Acts 7.54. The Psalmist used it of gnashing of teeth by the victim in Ps. 112.10, where the psalmist said: :

The wicked man will see and be vexed, he will gnash his teeth and waste away: the longing of the wicked will come to nothing.

Thus, when Jesus and John the Baptist issued their warnings of the impending destruction of Jerusalem, they used language that the Old Testament had only used of national destruction.

## **Fire and Brimstone**

In Isa. 34.9, Isaiah used this language of national judgment on Edom:

And its streams shall be turned into pitch, and its loose earth into brimstone, and its land shall become burning pitch.

In Isa. 30.33, Isaiah used it of such a judgment on Assyria:

For Topheth [the place of human sacrifice to Molech, an Assyrian god—SGD] has long been ready, indeed, it has been prepared for the king. He has made it deep

and large, a pyre of fire with plenty of wood; the breath of the Lord, like a torrent of brimstone, sets it afire.

Psalms 11.6 spoke of fire and brimstone on the wicked, Ezekiel 38.22 used this language to speak of national judgment on Gog, a pagan nation opposed to God's people in the restoration after Babylonian captivity. In Revelation 14.9-11, John used fire and brimstone of national judgment on the empire attempting to eradicate the Messiah's people. Scripture uses this language only of national judgment.

## **Rising Smoke**

Isaiah used this language of national judgment against Edom in Isaiah 34.10:

It shall not be quenched night or day; Its smoke shall go up forever; From generation to generation it shall be desolate; None shall pass through it forever and ever.

## **No Rest Day or Night**

Isaiah used this language of national judgment on Edom in Isaiah 34.10, quoted above.

## **Cast Into Fire**

In Ezekiel 5.4-5, this language described Israel being cast into the fire, in her destruction by Babylon:

And take again some of them and throw them into the fire, and burn them in the fire, from it a fire will spread to all the house of Israel...Thus says the Lord God, This is Jerusalem; I have set her at the center of the nations, with lands around her.

Thus, this expression is used consistently of national destruction.

## **Unfruitful Branches to Be Burned Up**

In Ezekiel 19.10-14, Ezekiel used this language of the national destruction of Israel:

Your mother was like a vine in your vineyard, Planted by the waters; It was fruitful and full of branches Because of abundant waters. And it had strong branches fit for scepters of rulers, And its height was raised above the clouds So that it was seen in its height with the mass of its branches. But it was plucked up in fury; It was cast down to the ground; And the east wind dried up its fruit. Its strong branch was torn off So that it withered; The fire consumed it. And now it is planted in the wilderness, In a dry and thirsty land. And fire has gone out from its branch; It has consumed its shoots and fruit, So that there is not in it a strong branch, A scepter to rule. This is a lamentation, and has become a lamentation.

## **Melt**

In Mic. 1.2-7, God said he would melt Israel and Judah. In Ps. 75.3, the Psalmist used this language of the destruction of God's enemies in the Old Testament. Peter may well have used this language of the destruction of Jerusalem in II Pet. 3.10-12. Like all the other expressions, melt portrays national destruction.

In summary, this section shows that none of the language we usually associate with hell is so associated in the Bible, and most of that language was used of strictly national judgments.

## **Is Hell Even a Proper Translation for *Gehenna*?**

Having seen the concept involved in Jesus' use of *Gehenna*, that it was an unstoppable fiery punishment on his generation in his generation, we now ask whether hell is even a proper translation for *Gehenna*. Does our English word "hell" fit the concept of *Gehenna* we find in the teaching of Jesus?

## **Did *Gehenna* Even Need Translating?**

As we have seen, *Gehenna* was the proper name for a location just outside Jerusalem. Why did it even need translating at all? We don't translate other proper names, such as Gethsemane, Calvary, or Bethlehem, all in the vicinity of Jerusalem. People living far away from Jerusalem, say in Ephesus or Rome, might not have known what these

names referred to, but residents of the environs of Jerusalem certainly did, and didn't need the word translated.

When interpreting the Bible, or any other writing, for that matter, *one of the fundamental rules is that we take a passage in its most literal sense unless something in the context forces us to interpret it otherwise.* Thus, we should take any expression as literal, or at face value, unless the evident meaning forbids it. By evidently forbidden, we mean there's evidence that forbids the idea that it should be taken literally. By evidence, we don't mean, "I just hope it's taken figuratively, or I can't figure out what this means; so therefore, it must be figurative." That's not evidence. By evidence, we mean things like the correct definition of a word or something in the context or other verses that demonstrate that it is not to be taken literally.

Applying this rule to the present case, we ask, "Is there evidence that forces us to think that *Gehenna* is anything other than the valley just outside Jerusalem? What is the evidence that Jesus' language cannot mean that?" In the absence of such evidence, Jesus simply warned the Jews in the region of Jerusalem, that unless they repented, their city was imminently to be destroyed.

A second rule for the interpretation of potentially figurative (non-literal) language is that expressions are figurative when the literal meaning would involve an impossibility. Applying this rule to the present case (the interpretation of *Gehenna*), we ask, "Does interpreting *Gehenna* literally involve us in an impossibility? Does interpreting 'Jesus as warning the Jews in the region of Jerusalem that unless they repented, their city was to be imminently destroyed' involve an impossibility?" Of course not, because historically, that is exactly what happened.

A third rule is that a passage isn't literal if the literal view places it in conflict with another. Applying this rule to the present case, we ask, "Does interpreting *Gehenna* literally place these passages in conflict with any others?" Again, the answer is, obviously not, since Old Testament prophets foretold of Jerusalem's destruction (including John the Baptist, and Jesus himself). Why didn't translators obey these rules when interpreting Jesus' teaching on *Gehenna*? Is there anything in the context that forced them to think that *Gehenna* doesn't mean exactly what it says, i.e., a physical, literal location just outside Jerusalem? Of course, people who lived far away from Jerusalem probably wouldn't have known what *Gehenna* was, any more than people outside New York City may not know about Fishkills (the proper name of their municipal dump). But no one outside the region of Jerusalem was threat-

ened by the destruction of Jerusalem. No one in Ephesus or Rome was ever threatened with the prospect of *Gehenna* if he didn't repent. No Gentile was ever threatened with the prospect of *Gehenna* if he didn't repent. We are not threatened with the prospect of *Gehenna* if we don't repent.

As one reviewer commented, "Of all things—*Gehenna* just means *Gehenna!*"

## What Is the Origin of the English Word "Hell"?

Concerning the word "hell," the *Encyclopedia Britannica* says:

Hell, the abode or state of being of evil spirits or souls that are damned to postmortem punishment. Derived from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning "to conceal," or "to cover," the term hell originally designed the torrid regions of the underworld, though in some religions the underworld is cold and dark. (*The New Encyclopedia Britannica*, Vol. 5, 15th edition [Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc.], p. 813.)

Britannica's lexicographer (whose job is to define words as they are now used) correctly defined hell as it's used now as the place of punishment after death. However, notice that the word historically meant "a cover." Our word "helmet" comes from the same origin, as it covers the head. Scholars tell us this word was used in the middle ages of a farmer, who would "hell" or "cover" his potatoes to preserve them during the winter.

*Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* says:

Hell [ME, fr. OE; akin to OE *helan* to conceal, OHG *hella*, hell, to conceal, ON *hel*] heathen realm of the dead, Goth *halja* hell, L *celare* to hide, conceal, Gk *kalyptein* to cover, conceal, Skt *sarana* screening, protecting, basic meaning: concealing. (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged*, editor Philip Babcock Gove, Ph.D. [Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster Inc., 1993], p. 1051.)

Webster agrees that the Old English origin of the word means "cover." This word had nothing to do with a place of punishment or eternal torment. Those connotations came much later, just in time, we

might say, to be corrupted by Roman Catholicism into its present form. To translate "*Gehenna*" (which didn't contain any meaning of eternal torment or punishment), with the word "hell" (which also didn't contain any meaning of eternal torment or punishment) isn't a translation at all, but a substitution of a man-made doctrine into a word convenient to be corrupted.

This would be like the proper noun "Palo Duro Canyon," a familiar feature in the Texas Panhandle near the author's residence. People living far away have never heard of it. If someone translated the words "Palo Duro Canyon" with a completely unrelated word, and then said that new word meant "eternal torment," it wouldn't make sense, would it? That is exactly what happened with the proper noun *Gehenna*, a location familiar with inhabitants of Jerusalem. But to then suggest that the word *Gehenna* should be translated by the word "hell," a word that has none of the meaning of the word *Gehenna*, compounds the problem. "Hell" is not a translation of *Gehenna*, any more than New York is a translation of Jerusalem.

Another example of this unjustified substitution of a completely unrelated English word for a Greek word is the word "Easter" in Ac. 12.4. The King James Version tells us that Herod arrested Peter:

And when he had apprehended him, he put him in prison, and delivered him to four quaternions of soldiers to keep him; intending after Easter to bring him forth to the people.

The word "translated" Easter is *Pascha*, the standard word for Passover throughout the New Testament. The translators of the King James Version, all members of the Church of England, essentially the English version of the Roman Catholic Church, knew the word "Easter" didn't mean Passover, and didn't have any relation to the Passover. Rather than translate *Pascha* as Passover, they just jammed Easter into its place. The same thing happened when the translators jammed the word hell into the place of *Gehenna*. Hell is no more related to *Gehenna* than Easter is to *Pascha*.

Universalist J. W. Hanson wrote something on this subject worth considering, even though we do not agree with his theory of salvation:

The word should have been left untranslated as it is in some versions, and it would not be misunderstood. It was not misunderstood by the Jews to whom Jesus addressed it. Walter Balfour well says: "What meaning

would the Jews who were familiar with this word, and knew it to signify the valley of Hinnom, be likely to attach to it when they heard it used by our Lord? Would they, contrary to all former usage, transfer its meaning from a place with whose locality and history they had been familiar from their infancy, to a place of misery in another world? This conclusion is certainly inadmissible. By what rule of interpretation, then, can we arrive at the conclusion that this word means a place of misery and death?"

The French Bible, the Emphatic Diaglott, Improved Version, Wakefield's Translation and Newcomb's retain the proper noun, Gehenna, the name of a place as well-known as Babylon.

Dr. Thayer significantly remarks: "The Savior and James are the only persons in all the New Testament who use the word. John Baptist, who preached to the most wicked of men did not use it once. Paul wrote fourteen epistles and yet never once mentions it. Peter does not name it, nor Jude; and John, who wrote the gospel, three epistles, and the Book of Revelations, never employs it in a single instance. Now if Gehenna or Hell really reveals the terrible fact of endless woe, how can we account for this strange silence? How is it possible, if they knew its meaning and believed it a part of Christ's teaching that they should not have used it a hundred or a thousand times, instead of never using it at all; especially when we consider the infinite interests involved? The Book of Acts contains the record of the apostolic preaching, and the history of the first planting of the church among the Jews and Gentiles, and embraces a period of thirty years from the ascension of Christ. In all this history, in all this preaching of the disciples and apostles of Jesus there is no mention of Gehenna. In thirty years of missionary effort these men of God, addressing people of all characters and nations never under any circumstances threaten them with the torments of Gehenna or allude to it in the most distant manner! In the face of such a fact as this can any man believe that Gehenna signifies

endless punishment and that this is part of divine revelation, a part of the Gospel message to the world? These considerations show how impossible it is to establish the doctrine in review on the word Gehenna. All the facts are against the supposition that the term was used by Christ or his disciples in the sense of endless punishment. There is not the least hint of any such meaning attached to it, nor the slightest preparatory notice that any such new revelation was to be looked for in this old familiar word.”

Salvation is never said to be from Gehenna. Gehenna is never said to be of endless duration nor spoken of as destined to last forever, so that even admitting the popular ideas of its existence after death it gives no support to the idea of endless torment. (J. W. Hanson, D.D., *The Bible Hell*, fourth edition [Boston: Universalist Publishing House, 1888. Available on World Wide Web].)

Robert William West gave a good summary of the popular use of the word “hell”:

Hell: No such word was in their vocabulary, and they knew of no such place. No word with the meaning that the English word Hell has now was used, or known about unto long after the Bible. It is not in Greek literature in New Testaments times or before, first century writers did not use it, Josephus, or any other historian of that time did not use it, it is not in the Septuagint. A place where God will torment the lost forever after the Judgment Day was not known about. the concept of the place called hell, or the name hell is not in the bible, and does not occur in any writing of either the Hebrews or the Greeks until long after the Bible. The Old Testament Hebrew, or the New Testament Greek, has no word that is even close to today’s English word “hell.” How do we know about this place called hell? Where did hell come from? It is not in the Bible. Neither is the name “hell” in the Bible. Where did it come from? Not by faith that comes by hearing God’s word. It is from the doctrines and precepts of men [Matthew



15:9]. It was not used in the first century because it was a word that was not in their vocabulary, and a place they know nothing about. (William Robert West, *If the Soul or Spirit Is Immortal, There Can Be No Resurrection from the Dead*, Third Edition, originally published as *The Resurrection and Immortality* [Bloomington, IN: Author House, September 2006] p. 138.)

Echoing West's "No word with the meaning that the English word Hell has now was used, or known about unto long after the Bible, Dr. John Noe says:

there are no equivalent Hebrew words in the Old Testament or Greek words in the New Testament for the present-day term, concept, and eternal place of damnation variously translated (or perhaps mistranslated) as "hell." (John Noe, Ph.D., *Hell Yes/Hell No* [Indianapolis, IN: East2West Press, 2011] p. 23.)

## **Clearest Proof of Roman Catholic Use of Hell vs. Gehenna**

The *Roman Catholic Encyclopedia* offers the clearest proof that Roman Catholicism didn't translate Gehenna with hell. After saying that Gehenna was "south of Jerusalem," as everyone knows, it then wonders, "Where is hell?" Obviously, they're making a distinction between Gehenna and hell! It then offers different views of where hell is:

everywhere  
some far island of the sea  
at the poles of the earth  
the sun  
the moon  
Mars  
beyond the confines of the universe  
within the earth

It then concludes that "no cogent reason has been advanced for accepting a metaphorical interpretation in preference to the most natural meaning of the words of Scripture," which obviously suggests, why not accept Gehenna, as Jesus said? The encyclopedia continues, "hence

we may say hell is a definite place; but *where it is, we do not know,*” although they assuredly know where Gehenna is, and have stated such! Jesus said Jerusalem would end up in Gehenna, and Roman Catholicism substituted hell for Gehenna! It continues:

St. Augustine says: "It is my opinion that the nature of hell-fire and the location of hell are known to no man unless the Holy Ghost made it known to him by a special revelation."

St. Gregory the Great wrote: "I do not dare to decide this question. Some thought hell is somewhere on earth; others believe it is under the earth"

This universal conviction of mankind is an additional proof for the existence of hell. (Even tho no one ever heard of it until the 16<sup>th</sup> Century!)

We merely call to mind the testimony of the martyrs who often declared that they were glad to suffer pain of brief duration in order to escape eternal torments; e.g. "Martyrium Polycarpi", c. ii (cf. Atzberger, "Geschichte", II, 612 sqq.).

The Church professes her faith in the eternity of the pains of hell in clear terms in the Athanasian Creed (Denz., nn. 40), in authentic doctrinal decisions (Denz., nn. 211, 410, 429, 807, 835, 915), and in countless passages of her liturgy; she never prays for the damned. Hence, beyond the possibility of doubt, the Church expressly teaches the eternity of the pains of hell as a truth of faith which no one can deny or call in question without manifest heresy.

(*The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1917), Author: Herbermann, Charles George (1840-1916), Publisher: New York: ROBERT APPLETON COMPANY; Imprimatur: John M. Farley, Archbishop of New York; *Vol 7*, pp. 538-550.)

All this is fine and good, except its basis is entirely Roman Catholicism, not the words of the Savior.

## Summary of Jesus' Teaching on Hell

False theories of eternal punishment of the wicked have done unfathomable damage in the religious realm. Untold millions of people have obeyed God purely out of fear of a false concept of hell. Other untold millions have turned their backs on God because of a false sense of hell, as described by Roman Catholic sources, and their followers in most denominations.

This study shows that when John the Baptist and Jesus used these terms, they used language familiar to the Jews whom they taught. The Jews had heard this language no other way than in scenes of national judgment. While it is easy for us to read these passages from the point of view of enduring conscious punishment, we should read them as the Jews who heard them first.

Rather than our present day beliefs about hell coming from the Bible, the caller to the radio program was right. Our beliefs come from Roman Catholic theologians. As a result of an earlier version of this material, many have asked the author to deal with the final destiny of the wicked. This larger topic is dealt with in the author's *Essays on Eschatology: An Introductory Overview to the Study of Last things*. We can see, if our conclusions are correct thus far, that the subject of the final destiny of the wicked was never part of Jesus' teaching on *Gehenna* or *hell*. That connection was given to us courtesy of Roman Catholicism, just like it gave us purgatory, the sale of indulgences, *Limbo Patrum*, *Limbo Infantum*, etc.

## Comparison of Jesus' Teaching on Gehenna vs. Roman Catholicism on Hell

1. As we've seen in this study, Jesus taught that Gehenna was escapable, while Roman Catholicism teaches that Hell is inescapable.
2. Jesus taught only one future occurrence of the punishment of Gehenna, while Roman Catholicism teaches Hell is eternal and unending.
3. Jesus taught that the punishment of Gehenna was in only in his generation, while Roman Catholicism teaches it's for all generations.
4. Jesus taught that the punishment of Gehenna was a physical judgment, while Roman Catholicism teaches Hell is a spiritual judgment.

5. Jesus warned that the punishment of Gehenna was a regional judgment involving people in Judea, while Roman Catholicism teaches Hell is global and universal.

6. Jesus taught that mortal souls, living humans would go to Gehenna, while Roman Catholicism teaches that immortal spirits will go to Hell.

7. Jesus taught that Gehenna would be physical punishment, while Roman Catholicism teaches that spiritual punishing would be carried out on immortal spirits.

8. Jesus taught that the punishment in Gehenna was to avenge martyrs, while Roman Catholicism makes no connection to avenging martyrs in Hell.

9. Jesus taught that Gehenna was to be the end of Old Covenant Israel, while Roman Catholicism teaches nothing about Hell in relation to Old Covenant Israel.

10. Gehenna was known to Moses and the Prophets, the Roman Catholic concept of Hell is unknown to Moses and the Prophets.

11. Gehenna didn't need translating, Roman Catholicism didn't translate Gehenna, but substituted Hell for it.

12. There was no eternal conscious torment in Gehenna, like there is in the Roman Catholic concept of Hell.

13. The warnings of punishment in Gehenna originated with Jesus, the doctrine of eternal conscious torment originated in Egypt.

14. The location of Gehenna is well known, the location of Hell in the spiritual realm is unknown.

15. Photographs of Gehenna are readily available, while there are no photographs of Roman Catholicism's concept of Hell.

16. All of these characteristics of Gehenna are in the Bible, while none of Roman Catholicism's concept of Hell is in the Bible.

17. *The Roman Catholic Encyclopedia* admits that the Catholic Church knows full well where Gehenna is, but have no idea where hell is, i.e., that hell is not Gehenna, nor is it a translation for Gehenna.

18. Gehenna and Hell are not the same in any way.

For those wanting to delve into this subject further, please see Chapters 15-16, "Lazarus and the Rich Man," and "Immortality and the Afterlife" in *Essays on Eschatology: An Introductory Overview of the Study of Last Things* by Samuel G. Dawson, available at [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)