

Jesus' Teaching on Hell

We've all been confronted with the idea of "Accept Jesus or burn in hell". But is that a biblical concept or does it come from somewhere else? Having been a church kid since I was about six, I have heard this over and over until I thought it must be so. But now as an older adult I have taken the admonition of Paul to check out everything I believe and this one has a surprising twist.

The short answer is **IT ISN'T TRUE**. But read on and find out why.

Surprisingly, most, if not all, of our popular concepts of hell can be found in the writings of 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 many Christian faiths. Yet none of our concepts of hell can be found in the teaching of Jesus Christ!

The purpose of this study is to briefly analyze the teaching on hell (more correctly Gehenna, the Greek word for which hell is given in the NT), to see whether these popular concepts are grounded in the Bible.

If we strive for open-mindedness and truly want to know what the Bible teaches, consider the following:

We do not start our Christian lives by working out our faith for ourselves; it is given to us by Christian tradition, in the form of sermons, books and established patterns of church life and fellowship. We read our Bibles in the light of what we have learned from these sources; we approach Scripture with minds already formed by the mass of accepted opinions and viewpoints with which we have come into contact, in both the Church and the world.

It is easy to be unaware that it has happened; it is hard even to begin to realize how profoundly tradition in this sense has molded us. The Bible warns us not to become enslaved to human traditions. We may never assume the complete rightness of our own established ways of thought and practice and excuse ourselves from the duty of testing and reforming them by Scriptures.

We are reminded of Biblical injunctions to test everything proposed for our belief. Paul told the Corinthians, in 2 Cor. 13:5 *Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves. Do you not realize that Christ Jesus is in you—unless, of course, you fail the test?*

Again, in Eph. 5:8-10, Paul directed the Ephesian Christians to be involved in the same testing: *For you were once darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Live as children of light (for the fruit of the light consists in*

all goodness, righteousness and truth) and find out what pleases the Lord.

In New Testament times, one was only a disciple of Christ when he was willing to examine himself, his beliefs, and everything proposed for his belief as a child of light. Nothing less is required now.

Hell vs. Sheol and Hades

We first begin by eliminating a mistranslation in many versions of the Bible. Three different words in the Bible are translated as hell: sheol, hades, and gehenna.

Sheol Hades, Used of Anything Unseen

We begin with the word **hades**, a word for which hell is given in many translations. Its root meaning is "unseen," which occurs only eleven times. It is translated as "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 1 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.

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 the Old Testament, the word for which hell is given 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 — "6 feet under".

Sheol and Hades Used of National Judgments

Many times the Bible uses the word sheol of national judgments, i.e., the vanishing of a nation. In Isa. 14:3-15,

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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 in Greek mythology

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. 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.

We need to make sure that our ideas concerning hades and sheol 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 KJV

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 2 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.

The Popular Concept of Hell was Unknown in 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. 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!

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. Isn't 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 descendants, 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: *You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.* They found that the result 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, *Now you are under a curse and driven from the ground, which opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand.*

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.

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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, ¹⁵ *But the Lord said to him, "Very well, anyone who kills Cain will suffer vengeance seven times over." Then the Lord put a mark on Cain so that no one who found him would kill him.*

If, with no warning, Cain was going to receive eternal fiery torment, would those who killed him receive seven times endless fiery torment?

Let's not make light of endless torment, It's just remarkable that God hadn't said a word about it thus far in the Biblical narrative.

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. 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 kind of righteous judge explains the law and known penalty, while carefully concealing a much more awful penalty? 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 in every case. 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 was it never there? Our present concept of hell and endless torment was never there 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.

Under the Mosaic Law

Most of us are familiar with the blessings and cursing's 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?

In summary, the popular concept of hell is not found anywhere in the Old Testament..

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 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

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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 Thayer, *Origin & History*, 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.

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.

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.

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 threatening's 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, etc, are all fables, as is also all the ancient theology. These things the legislators used as scarecrows to terrify the childish multitude."

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, etc, 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 acfabulis*).

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."

Mosheim. Errors of a very pernicious kind had infested the whole body of the people (the Jews). There prevailed among them several absurd and superstitious notions concerning the divine nature, invisible powers, magic, etc, 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.

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 Babylon captivity,

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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.

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 four hundred year period between the testaments.

Background of Gehenna

Gehenna, the word hell is given for 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 2Ki 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 2Chron. 28:3, idolatrous King Ahaz burnt incense and his children in the fire there, as did idolatrous King Manasseh in 2Chron. 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 23:10), 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 did, as we now see.

"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

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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*)

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.

Gehenna Passages

{for a complete explanation of the 12 occurrences of Gehenna refer to *The Teaching of Jesus* by Samuel G Dawson chapter 13}

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 of fire (Gehenna).

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, illustrations, and ideas come into our minds. None of these came to the minds of Jesus' listeners.

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.

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!

Does the passage teach about an unending fiery hell, or does it fit a national judgment?

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). 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).

In our traditional idea of hell, unending fire after the end of time, we normally don't think of people having their physical limbs 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.

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 (NOTE: not punish nor torment) both soul and body in hell [Gehenna].

Again, Jesus spoke of Gehenna consistently with imminent national judgment on Israel. 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.

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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).*" 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. 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.

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.

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 (Gehenna), into the unquenchable fire.

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 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.

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.

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) 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.

Jesus' Teaching on Hell

Summary of the Twelve Gehenna Passages

From the 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.

The False Concept of Hell

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, stem 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.)

This is only one of a multitude of teachings of hell that have been espoused over the years.

Did all this "Hell & Brimstone" 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*.

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 need to notice other expressions of fiery judgment which we traditionally use to describe hell. These include fire burning to sheol, the worm dying not, unquenchable fire, fire that is not quenched, everlasting fire, weeping and gnashing of teeth, 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.

Jesus' Teaching on Hell

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 Dies 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 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 dies 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.

Jesus' Teaching on Hell

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] 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.

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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 Micah 1:2-7, God said he would melt Israel and Judah. In Psalm 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 Peter 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.

Rules for Translation

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

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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 threatened 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.

Although this paper is quite long it has been condensed from "The Teaching of Jesus" by Samuel G. Dawson – 3rd edition ISBN 978-148272759-3. If this has piqued your interest in the subject I invite you to get the book and study chapter 13; which is 50+ pages long and contains more information and reasoning as to why our current understanding of hell is totally out of sync with the bible.

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 many Christian sources, and their followers in many of today's 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. Our beliefs come from mistranslations by people who had a false conception of the afterlife. 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.