

THE DESTINY OF THE DAMNED

Introduction

One of the hardest questions a believer in Christ is asked is, “How can a God of love allow so much evil and suffering to take place?” However, there is an even harder question to which many Christians have no satisfactory answer at all. It is, “How can a God of love deliberately torment unbelievers for ever in hell, especially if they have never heard of Jesus?” I hope that this little book will provide you with an answer to the second question at least.

Words

“When I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean – neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

Words are like curtains: they can shut out the light or let it in. In the original Hebrew and Greek of the Bible there are several different words for where people go when they die. Gehenna has a very different meaning from Sheol and Hades, and none of them means what is popularly thought of as hell. Nevertheless the Authorized (King James) Version translates all three words as ‘hell’. This is confusing and it obscures the truth. Even my favourite Revised Standard Version translates Gehenna as hell.

Let’s begin by drawing the curtains apart to see what these various words meant.

(i) Sheol

The Hebrew word ‘Sheol’ literally means ‘the unseen state’. It is used as a synonym for death. After God had delivered David from all his enemies he sang, *“the cords of Sheol entangled me, the snares of death confronted me.”* (2 Samuel 22.6) Describing a ‘loose woman’ Proverbs 5.5 says, *‘Her feet go down to death; her steps follow the path to Sheol.’*

However Sheol also seems to be regarded as a place beneath the earth. *‘If I ascend to heaven, thou art there! If I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there!’* (Psalm 139.8) *“Son of man, wail over the multitude of Egypt, and send them down... to the nether world, to those who have gone down to the Pit... The mighty chiefs shall speak of them, with their helpers, out of the midst of Sheol: ‘They have come down, they lie still, the uncircumcised, slain by the sword.’”* (Ezekiel 32.18,21)

In the Old Testament Sheol is everybody’s destiny at death, at least until a day of judgement comes. In itself it is neither good nor bad. *‘There the wicked cease from troubling, and there the weary are at rest. There the prisoners are at ease together; they hear not the voice of the taskmaster. The small and the great are there, and the slave is free from his master.’* (Job 3.17-19)

(ii) The Pit

‘The Pit’ is an expression often used in the Old Testament as a synonym for Sheol. *‘O Lord, thou hast brought up my soul from Sheol, restored me to life from among those gone down to the Pit.’* (Psalm 30.3) To the evil city of Tyre God said, *“...I will thrust you down with those who descend into the Pit, to the people of old, and I will make you to dwell in*

the nether world, among primeval ruins, with those who go down to the Pit, so that you will not be inhabited or have a place in the land of the living.” (Ezekiel 26.20)

(iii) The dust

The Old Testament teaches that when we die our bodies decompose, but our spirits live on in a state akin to sleep, awaiting a day of judgement. ‘...when thou takest away their breath, they die and return to their dust.’ (Psalm 104.29) ‘...the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it.’ (Ecclesiastes 12.7) ‘...for now shall I sleep in the dust.’ (Job 7.21 AV) ‘...many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.’ (Daniel 12.2)

With none of these Old Testament words is there any suggestion of punishment, flames or torture following death.

(iv) Hades

In the New Testament the Greek word *hadēs* literally means ‘the unseen world’. Hades is the exact equivalent of Sheol. In Psalm 16.10 David had declared, ‘...thou dost not give me up to Sheol, or let thy godly one see the Pit.’ When Peter quoted the Greek version of this same Psalm in Acts 2.27 he said, ‘For thou wilt not abandon my soul to Hades, nor let thy Holy One see corruption.’ Hades is Sheol.

Again it seems to be regarded as a place. “And you, Caperna-um, will you be exalted to heaven? You shall be brought down to Hades.” (Luke 10.15) “...I will build my church, and the powers of death (Greek: ‘gates of Hades’) shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16.18) However it is not identical to death, because Revelation 20.14 speaks of Death *and* Hades.

Hades is the place or state into which people enter at death to await the day of judgement; at least it is if they don’t die as believers in Jesus Christ.

Hades will continue to exist until the day of judgement. After that, when no further people will be born and death will be abolished, Hades will be destroyed. ‘And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. ...Death and Hades gave up the dead in them, and all were judged by what they had done. Then Death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire.’ (Revelation 20.12-14)

(v) Gehenna

The other Greek word translated in the Authorized Version as ‘hell’ is *geenna*, which is normally pronounced and written as ‘Gehenna’.

Gehenna was a rubbish tip outside Jerusalem, a place more accurately known as the Valley of Hinnom. It’s still there, to the south-west of the old city of Jerusalem, but nowadays it’s mostly covered by grass. It is not some place ‘under the earth’, neither is it the opposite of heaven. Whenever Jesus used the word ‘Gehenna’ he meant simply ‘the rubbish tip’. Bible commentators generally agree that the valley was used to dispose of animal carcasses, rubbish and perhaps also the corpses of executed criminals. They were either burned up or eaten by maggots, so it was an appropriate word for a place of destruction. In the first century one corner was used as a proper burial ground, and the Jewish historian Josephus recorded that the tomb of Annas the high priest was located there.

(vi) Hell

The English word 'hell' originally meant much the same as Sheol or Hades, the netherworld of the dead. But in the Middle Ages it came to mean something far worse. The terrifying paintings of hell produced during mediaeval and Renaissance times reflected and reinforced a belief that the final destiny of the wicked is to be tormented for ever in the presence of the devil and his angels. However Michelangelo's fresco of the *Last Judgement* on the wall behind the altar in the Sistine Chapel is particularly frightening, not because it depicts horrible demons toasting human beings for supper as some earlier paintings did, but because the terrified men and women on the wrong side of Jesus at Judgement Day appear so lifelike. Of course it was in the interests of the mediaeval church to propagate such beliefs and at the same time to teach that salvation was found only in the church. It ensured faithful church attendance and full offering plates!

There is no evidence in the Bible that hell as it is popularly envisaged is a real place at all. Genesis says that in the beginning God created the heavens and the earth, not heaven and earth and hell. Still less is hell a place inhabited by Satan and his demons. In the book of Job, Satan is either talking to God in heaven or poking around on the earth. Paul wrote that the spiritual hosts of wickedness dwell in the heavenly places (Ephesians 6.12), and Revelation chapter 12 says that Satan and his angels will be in heaven, along with Michael and other angels, until Resurrection Day. The same chapter then says that after Resurrection Day Satan and his angels will be thrown out of heaven and come down to the earth. Nowhere does the Bible say that Satan inhabits a fiery place called hell.

So when Jesus says in Mark chapter 9, verses 47 and 48, "*And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into hell, where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched,*" the word translated as 'hell' is 'Gehenna', and he was simply saying, "It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown on to the rubbish tip..."

With regard to the undying worm and unquenchable fire, Jesus was quoting the last verse of the book of the prophet Isaiah. God had been telling Isaiah what life would be like when Israel's enemies had finally been defeated. He concluded, "*And they shall go forth and look on the dead bodies of the men that have rebelled against me; for their worm shall not die, their fire shall not be quenched, and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh.*" (Isaiah 66.24) It's vital to see that this verse says the bodies of the rebellious men being consumed by worms and fire were dead bodies, not living bodies. There is no hint in this passage that the men who had rebelled against the Lord were somehow going to live in torment for ever, rather the opposite. The idea was that the worms wouldn't die and the fire wouldn't go out until the dead bodies had been entirely consumed.

Similarly, in Jeremiah 17.27 the Lord declared to the ancient Jews, "*...if you do not listen to me... then will I kindle a fire in [Jerusalem's] gates, and it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem and shall not be quenched.*" That prophecy of Jerusalem's destruction was fulfilled when the Babylonians torched the city. However, the fire they lit is not still burning today, so was the prophecy wrong? No. The Lord's word to Jeremiah never meant that the fire would burn for ever. It meant that no one would be able to quench its flames until they had completed their task of destruction.

It was these Old Testament pictures that Jesus was recalling in order to make his vivid point that it is better to make any sacrifice necessary to eliminate sin and enter the kingdom of God than to face the dreadful alternative of an ignominious, complete, final and permanent end to one's life from which there could be no escape.

It's true that Revelation chapters 19, 20 and 21 speak of a 'lake of fire', into which will be thrown Death, Hades, Satan and everyone whose name is not written in the book of life. However it's no more necessary to think that this will be a literal lake burning with fire than it is to think that the antichrist will be a beast with ten horns and seven heads as Revelation 13.1 says he will be.ⁱ When Jesus warned his hearers that the unrighteous would be thrown into Gehenna he did not mean it literally. The Valley of Hinnom is probably no more than half a mile square, so there wouldn't be room in it for every unbeliever or wicked person who has ever lived to be burned up or eaten up there. Jesus used the word 'Gehenna' metaphorically, so John could equally have used the phrase 'the lake of fire' metaphorically. After all, you can't literally throw death anywhere, let alone into a lake, yet according to John death was thrown into the lake of fire. (Revelation 20.14) Throwing death into a lake of fire was merely a symbolical way of saying that death would come to an end, as indeed Revelation 21.4 says it will. So when John wrote that those whose names were not written in the book of life would follow Death and Hades into the lake of fire, he was saying in a symbolical way that they too would come to an end. The 'lake of fire' is a metaphor for a place of destruction. It doesn't even have to be a real place at all.

ⁱ Some Bible commentators such as William Barclay take the view that the beast does not even symbolize a man, but the Roman Empire. That may have been John's intention, but even if it was I believe it will find a more significant fulfilment in the coming 'man of lawlessness' whom Paul spoke of in 2 Thessalonians 2.3.