

HELL – A CENTURIES OLD FALSE TEACHING

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INTRODUCTION



I grew up with this terrifying concept of the hell, a place of eternal torment. You either believed in Jesus the Christ, or you would go to this fiery hell to burn forever. Preaching, whether formal in the church or informal in discussions between people, often took on the form of turn or burn statements. The visualmedia also confronted us increasingly with pictures of this awful place of ever burning lava. Whenever we encountered the word ‘hell’ in the Bible, this was the image we saw. Bible translations continued to lead us along this way.

In the past decades video material and television broadcasts especially, turned on the pressure even more with stories of people who had allegedly been to hell. I do not look upon such people’s spiritual experiences in a derogatory way, but I do believe that their visions were fed by the subconscious mind from the teachings of many years.

After all, the Bible (correctly understood) should be the plumb-line against which any doctrine or teaching is to be tested.

Slowly but surely I started to realise that we are often in a grip of wrong understanding. Revelation 20:13 & 14, for example, read as follows in the King James Version: “*And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; and death and **hell** delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works. And death and **hell** were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death*”. This has been corrected in the New King James Version, with the word hell having been replaced by the word *hades*. The old Afrikaans Version of 1933 already used the more correct translation of “*doderyk*” instead of “*hel*”, which would be ‘realm of the dead’ in English.

It was certainly a huge disillusionment for me at age 70 to realise that the concept of hell is actually unbiblical. I wish to provide a concise explanation of my understanding in this regard with this article

TRANSLATION ERROR

You will not find the expression in the Hebrew Tanakh (Old Testament). It is also not in the Old Testament of my old Afrikaans Translation (1933; 1956). The relevant Hebrew word (*sheol*) that appears 65 times in the Old Testament, was rendered ‘doderyk’ meaning realm of the dead throughout.

What we have in these portions of the Scriptures is the old dispensation concept of a temporary destination for the soul at one’s death here on earth, called *sheol* in Hebrew (Old Testament) and *hades* in Greek (New Testament). *Sheol/Hades* was understood in the Old Hebrew Covenant Dispensation to be a temporary holding place (or prison) in which the souls of the deceased were in two divisions or sections (the righteous and unrighteous) with an unbridgeable separation between them. Here they awaited the resurrection and judgment that would come on the prophesied Day of the Lord (see Mal 4:1, for example). The image is described in 1 Kings 2:10, for example: “*So David slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David*” (King James Version). The New English Translation renders this verse, “*Then David passed away and was buried in the city of David.*” As you can see the image or idea of ‘sleeping with his fathers’ has completely disappeared.

Such unfortunate translations in various Bible versions have not only hidden the concept in its

correct biblical applications from us, but have also contributed to continued embedding of the false doctrine in our minds.

WORDSTUDY AND –CONCEPT BACKGROUND

Internet searches indicate different explanations for the presence of the hell concept in the Christian environment. For the purposes of this article it is sufficient to state that the modern concept of the hell was introduced over time from pagan mythology into Christian doctrine. The word is used 31 times in the King James Bible to translate the Hebrew *sheol*. According to this mythology it was the place where demons and the spirits of the deceased were to be found. Statements by so-called “church fathers” and other leaders in the early church seemingly contributed to the establishment of a fear mentality by which control was exercised over the people.

Wherever the expression ‘hell’ is found in versions of the New Testament, it is often used as translation for three different Greek words, viz. *Hades*, *Gehenna* en *Tartarus*. Let us examine these expressions and their use in New Testament writings.

Tartarus

This word is used in 2 Peter 2:4 only and refers to a dark holding place for the angels that sinned against God, awaiting their judgment.

Hades

The word *Hades* is found eleven times and also carry the meaning of the realm of the dead, but there is no reference to the presence of Satan, demons or eternal torment of the human soul. The resurrection and judgment mentioned in Revelation 20 was the Old Covenant Judgment that took place with the presence (second coming; *Parousia*) of Jesus in judgment and destruction of Jerusalem and the temple, forty years after His crucifixion. After this event one does not find references to a temporary domain of the deceased again. *Hades* was destroyed (Rev. 20:14). The concepts of the resurrection and judgment which would come was therefore rooted in the concept of *sheol/hades* and were completed with its destruction. (Our article on the Great White Throne Judgment, expands on these concepts. It is available on our website).

Read Daniel 12 as well. It also refers to the end of that dispensation. Note the statement in Daniel 12:1,2:” *and at that time thy people shall be delivered, every one that shall be found written in the book. And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.*” It is important to note that this is a prophecy to the Old Covenant people Israel – actually the tribe of Judah - and not to other nations and people. Neither is there any mention of eternal torment in a place called hell.

Gehenna

Whereas *sheol/hades* referred to a temporary destination for the deceased souls, the concept of *gā-Hinnom* (Hebrew) and *géenna* (*Gehenna*) (Greek) indicated a place or condition of eternal judgment and desolation.

This Greek word is found 12 times. Some sources describe *gā-Hinnom* (*Ge-Hinnom*) as a valley outside Jerusalem that became the local rubbish dump, where even the carcasses of dead animals and bodies of executed criminals were dumped and where the fire was never extinguished – the typical image ascribed to the concept of the hell. According to reports I have read this is not supported by archaeological diggings. Others describe it as the place where apostate Jews sacrificed their children as burnt offerings to the idol Molech. Whichever description is the correct one, sources generally

agree that this place and concept became a symbol of damnation for the Jews over time. It became associated as a place of bodily and spiritual punishment for all evil people.

One does not find the Hebrew concept of *Gehenna* being preached or taught to the Gentiles by the apostles anywhere in the New Testament.

Yes, James used the word in his epistle, but it is important to note that it was addressed to the twelve Jewish tribes in the dispersion. He also used it only as a symbol of the tongue as source of unrighteousness (Jas 3:6).

Jesus used the concept in connection with judgment, but it was in discussions with Jewish audiences only and was descriptive of God's coming judgment upon Jerusalem.

This Gehenna judgment was eventually fulfilled in the year 70 AD with the complete destruction of Jerusalem and the temple by the Roman army. Sources show this destruction was so complete that it took some 200 years before any significant development took place in that site. (You can read more on this in our website article *The New Jerusalem*).

THE SECOND DEATH

In His discussion with the twelve disciples in sending them out (Mat 10:28), Jesus referred to the fact that only God could destroy the human soul. The Greek word *apollumi* that is translated 'perish' in John 3:16 implies **complete cessation of existence**.ⁱ

Considering the fact of the Revelation 20:13-14 declaration that death and *hades* were cast into the lake of fire (i.e. destroyed) after the Great White Throne Judgment, **it seems** (my assumption as it is not spelt out) that the New Testament person who rejects Christ in this life, already receives the second death when he/she dies on earth. Such a person's earthly death therefore means a complete and final death – *apollumi* by own choice, complete cessation of bodily and spiritual existence, something that can only be granted by the Creator of life. Even then, so I believe, everyone who so chooses grieves God, as the Scripture declares in John 3:17 that He did not send His Son to the world [*i.e. humanity*] to judge them, but in order to give them redemption.

There simply are no Scriptural grounds to believe such a person is handed over to eternal torment. Such teachings (doctrines) are human philosophies supported by poor translations. The position becomes even worse if the Calvinistic doctrine of predestination and election is brought into the picture. That would imply we are asked to believe that God decided before the creation of the earth, to make the human in His image, but at the same time decided to condemn some of them through the ages to eternal torment. There are even those who twist the message of Jesus about the wide and narrow roads in Matthew 7:14 to imply that this pre-condemned group will make up the far majority of people.

Such errors in teachings or doctrines destroy the integrity of the Bible as source of truth.

DESCEND TO HELL

In the Reformed church environment I grew up, the apostles' creed was recited by the congregation in every Sunday morning service. It included the statements that Jesus was crucified, died and descended to hell, but rose again from the dead. My research brought to light that there are differences in the wording of the creed between various denominations. Whereas some use the statement of descended to hell, others declare that Jesus descended to the dead. The word used in the Latin version was *infernus*. The **Latin** word **infernus** means "of the lower regions." Using **inferno** to mean "hell" is credited to medieval Italian poet Dante Alighieri.ⁱⁱ

My research also indicated the following:

- Speculations that the twelve articles of this creed was contributed by the twelve apostles of Jesus is not supported by credible evidence. It is a later product.
- The ‘descended to hell’ article is seemingly connected to 1 Peter 3:18-20: *“For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God, being put to death in the flesh, but quickened by the Spirit: By which also he went and preached unto the spirits in prison; Which sometime were disobedient, when once the longsuffering of God waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was a preparing, wherein few, that is, eight souls were saved by water.*
- There are differences of opinion on what exactly Peter meant and consequently one also finds considerable speculation in this regard.
- The only other applicable Scripture reference mentioned by one source, is Luke 23:43 (*“And Jesus said unto him, Verily I say unto thee, Today shalt thou be with me in paradise”*). I regard this as a reference to *Hades* and it does not have our modern hell-meaning. The description of *hades* in W.E. Vine’s dictionary has a specific reference to application in the time before Jesus’ ascension.ⁱⁱⁱ William Mounce’s dictionary confirms that *hades* *“(…) is conceived as an underground prison with locked gates to which Christ holds the key.”*^{iv}

The declaration that Jesus descended to hell is just one more example of twisted perception formed by human interpretation error and embedded in Christian teaching. To conclude this section of the discussion, see Revelation 1:17-18, for example.

*I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of ~~hell~~ **hades** and of death.*

CONCLUSION

It seems to me from the literature that the concept of the hell developed to some extent during the second and third century AD, but that the major development took place within the Catholic Church environment during the middle ages.

Over the past decades, and even in previous centuries, there have been many writings identifying the false teaching. Yet it sadly lived on from the church pulpits and of course in the visual media. Various books and other media about alleged visits to hell also found prominent place on the shelves of Christian bookstores. In the course of my literature search I noticed, among others, material accentuating hell as a real place on the website of one of the best known evangelists of our time (Billy Graham). Just think, what a worldwide influence does he not have? I think of the various churches that declare Jesus descended to hell every Sunday when they recite the apostle’s creed. That was my own church environment up to just before my fiftieth birthday.

How different would the world have been today if the teachings of Jesus the Christ and His apostles had been taught to generation upon generation conscientiously and free of the influence of Greek and Roman philosophy. Instead of expanding the relationships based community (*ecclesia*) that Jesus proclaimed, humanity has twisted and adapted the Scriptures to produce a new man-made religion in many variations in its place. The concept of the hell is one of the prominent rotten fruits that came forth out of this pollution. The words of Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ to the religious leaders has gained even more authority and truth in my view:

“Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition” (Mat 15:6).

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ⁱ Zodhiates, S. *The Complete Wordstudy Dictionary*. Add-on to e-Sword, version 11.0.6.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/inferno>

ⁱⁱⁱ Vine, W.E. 1984, 1996. *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary Of Old And New Testament Words*. Nashville: Nelson. P286.

^{iv} Mounce, W.D.2006. *Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary Of Old And New Testament Words*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.p316.

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