

# "HELL" IN THE BIBLE?

You know, over the past few decades, the King-James-Only debate has become more and more heated. You know why? Well...

Numerous non-KJV-only "Christians" (including *many* considered "scholars") have begun accepting doctrines into their theology which KJV-only "Christians" essentially consider an abomination. And why would this be the case? Because...

Those doctrines, especially throughout the English-speaking world since the inception of the KJV in 1611, are sustained almost exclusively only by the KJV; in other words, without getting deep into the history of the version, the biases of those who have continued to champion this translation can be seen heavily shining through, in some cases with just a little bit of unbiased study into subjects that nearly all of us were raised to believe.

One example is that, even after numerous revisions over the past 400 years, it still has the Greek term *aion* translated as "world," when everyone who has any knowledge at all about that term knows it refers to an "age," not to a/the "world."

If *aion* had been correctly translated as "age" in Matthew 24:3 (as well as in numerous other passages) from the very outset in 1611, I dare say that we wouldn't have near the divisions we do with the various beliefs about biblical eschatology, i.e. the study of end-times matters. In fact...

Since the English term "eon" is derived from the Greek term *aion*, why didn't they just translate it as "eon" which means "age" ... unless it was because they felt compelled to sustain the ... excuse the pun ... age-old (though not old enough) belief that Jesus' *parousia* (i.e. His return) was for the purpose of destroying the material universe?

Another example has to do with the topic of the afterlife, primarily of the wicked: I'm talking here about the KJV's translation of the Hebrew *sheol* and the Greek *hades* and *Gehenna* all as "hell." From here on the subject of "hell" will be the focus of this study, so let's dig in.

Just as I'm convinced that we wouldn't have the problems concerning biblical eschatology that we do if not for the KJV, I'm also convinced that we wouldn't have the problems concerning life-after-death that we do if it weren't for the KJV which had such a strong hold all across Christendom for so many, many decades. For one thing...

I seriously doubt we'd have as many folks believing in unconditional immortality if it weren't for the borrowed pagan beliefs about fiery punishment in another dimension (e.g. Milton's *Paradise Lost* and Dante's *Inferno*) to keep everyone frightened into dependence upon a man-made religion. [What's unconditional immortality? Check out my podcast lesson with its transcript on my website: [ASiteForTheLord.com/index.php/miscellaneous](http://ASiteForTheLord.com/index.php/miscellaneous).] So, as a non-KJV-Only-Advocate, personally...

I'm pleased that most translators seemed to have learned the important lesson that the 19th century Scottish scholar/translator Robert Young apparently knew when he published his 1862 *Literal Translation Bible in English* (aka the YLT): In that version he made it a point to transliterate the Hebrew and Greek words for the KJV's "hell" (as well as several other terms); if that had been the case 250 years earlier, perhaps we wouldn't be in the mess we're in now. Here are some examples from the YLT:

Speaking of the fall of the king of Babylon, Isaiah 14:15 reads, "unto sheol [not "hell," but *sheol*] thou art brought down unto the sides of the pit" (which, btw, is what the term *sheol* means: "grave" or "dirt-pit," thus the place in which the dead are to be found; i.e., they're buried out of sight).

Speaking against the inhabitants of Jerusalem who had so rebelled against their God, Yahweh said to them through Isaiah in 28:18, "disannulled hath been your covenant with death and your provision with sheol [not "hell," but *sheol*] doth not stand" ("death" being made equivalent with *sheol*).

Here's an interesting one: In Ezekiel 31:15-16 God was prophesying against the Pharaoh. Let's compare the YLT with the KJV (noticing the inconsistency of the KJV against itself in just these two verses alone):

KJV: V. 15a: "Thus saith the Lord GOD, 'In the day when he went down to the grave [*sheol*] I caused a mourning....'" Then v. 16a says, "'I made the nations to shake at the sound of his fall, when I cast him down to hell [*sheol*] with them who descend into the pit.'" What inconsistency! Even the NKJV which has removed most of the "hells" is inconsistent here, but at least making a marginal notation about it. Now the...

YLT: V. 15a: "'In the day of his going down to sheol, I have caused mourning.'" Then v. 16a says, "'From the sound of his fall I have caused nations to shake, in My causing him to go down to sheol.'" What consistency! And what I most like is the clearance it provides for us to make up our own minds about the meaning and usage of the term! Versions are supposed to be translations, not paraphrases or commentaries! Anyway, off my soapbox; on to the NT...

Speaking against the inhabitants of Capernaum, Jesus said in Matthew 11:23a, "'Thou, Capernaum, which unto the heaven wast exalted, unto hades [not "hell," but *hades*] shalt be brought down....'"

Speaking against the hypocritical leaders of the Jews, Jesus said in Matthew 23:15, "'Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! ... Ye go round ... to make one proselyte, and, whenever it may happen, ye make him twofold more than yourselves a son of Gehenna [not "hell," but *Gehenna*].'"

Let's move on to considering the terms *sheol*, *hades*, and *Gehenna*.

As we already touched on briefly, *sheol* merely refers to a grave or dirt-pit, i.e. a place in which one places something in order to hide it from view, thus a place of the unseen. Furthermore, of *sheol*...

The Jewish Encyclopedia says that the fact that it's "described as subterranean is but an application of the custom of hewing out of the rocks passages, leading downward, for burial purposes." And, btw...

The history of the term "hell" corresponds to what I just said concerning *sheol*. Consider the following:

The most in-depth historical information of the word "hell" I found traces it back to what's called a Proto-Indo-European origin when it began as a verb and held that part of speech for centuries, and (as *sheol*) it merely meant "to cover or bury" in the earth. Sadly, I never found when it's believed to have taken on a noun form referring to a place *under* earth; the closest I found was centuries after its origin when employed as a noun in Dante's Italian-written *Inferno* of the early 1300s. (BTW, "inferno" is the Italian word for "hell.") (See [wikipedia.com](http://wikipedia.com) and [wiktory.com](http://wiktory.com) for all such info.) Now, regarding English...

*The Encyclopedia Britannica* says of "hell" that it's "derived from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'to conceal' or 'to cover,'" while *Webster's Unabridged Dictionary* says it's from Old English *helan* meaning "to conceal"; i.e., even in English it began as a verb. In fact, interestingly, the word "helmet" comes from "hell" because it "covers" one's head, and scholars tell us that the term "hell" was used in the middle ages of farmers when they'd "hell" or "cover" their potatoes to preserve them during the winter. However, as with nearly any other noun (which, unfortunately, hell became probably in the 1300s)...

*Sheol* may be and has been employed as a metaphor: For example, death and the grave are very objectionable things to people, especially the Jews, as we know God made it a point to be. Why? Well...

As with just about anything else in Hebrew Scripture, physical death and the grave were used to denote something spiritual: Just as they considered death, the dead, and the grave as repulsive, so they should've been able to discern how revolting and an abomination they were to God in their sins which separated them from Him (Isa. 59:2); i.e., in their sin, they were dead and buried out of God's sight, so to speak. So...

The term *sheol* came to refer to the sorrow and loathsomeness of such a state or even to something that was just downright repugnant, and it's used in that manner in numerous Old Covenant passages (e.g. 2 Sam. 2:6, Psa. 18:5, 86:13, 116:3, Prv. 23:14, & Jon. 2:2). So...

What do the Hebrew Scriptures say about the destiny of the dead, at least during the seemingly hopeless time before redemption was accomplished? Well...

Ecclesiastes 9:2a & 5a say, "All things come alike to all: one event happens to the righteous and the wicked ... the clean and the unclean, to him who sacrifices & to him who doesn't. As is the good, so is the sinner.... The living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing...." And 9:10b says that "there's ... no knowledge or wisdom in the grave." The idea of the dead knowing nothing speaks to the idea of there no longer being any consciousness. Likewise, in the Psalms...

115:17 says, "The dead don't praise the Lord, nor any who go down into silence." 6:5 says, "In death there's no remembrance of the Lord. In the grave who will give thanks?" And, speaking of man, 146:4 says, "His spirit departs, he returns to the earth; in that very day his thoughts perish" (NASB). Incidentally...

An intertestamental writing of the Jews called *The Wisdom of Sirach*, reads, "Who will sing praises to the Most High in [the grave]...? From the dead ... thanksgiving has ceased; he who is alive and well sings the Lord's praises" (17:27-28). So...

Death, as far as national Israel knew before becoming so adversely influenced by the nations about them, merely meant "nothingness"; in fact, it was described as being asleep (and I'm sure a dreamless and deaf sleep at that—when one is essentially oblivious in oblivion):

Psalm 13:3 says, "Consider and hear me, O Lord my God; enlighten my eyes, lest I sleep the sleep of death."

Jeremiah 51:39-40a (as well as 57) have God saying of Babylon's demise, "I'll make them ... sleep a perpetual sleep and not awake. I'll bring them down like lambs to the slaughter."

Daniel 12:2 & 13 speak of those who were dead as those who were sleeping or, as in the case of the faithful, at rest, awaiting their gift of immortality, that is eternal life with their Creator supplied by Him at the Lord's return in AD 70.

Even in the New Testament (NT) we can find this idea in First Corinthians 15:51, First Thessalonians 4:14, & 5:10. But now, moving on to *hades* in the NT...

Like *sheol*, *hades* refers to the unseen ... the place of the dead, the grave. And, since *hades* is the Greek equivalent of *sheol* (as seen in its use in NT quotes of OT verses like Acts 2:27 of Psalm 16:10, as well as its use in the Septuagint for *sheol*), it's used just like *sheol*, i.e. metaphorically for that which is objectionable, loathsome, sorrowful, dreadful, and so on (Mat. 11:23, Acts 2:27, 1 Cor. 15:55, Rev. 20:13-14, etc.). So pretty much everything, if not everything, we said about *sheol* applies to *hades*.

Just as we noticed with *sheol* in various versions, so *hades* is also translated in many versions by whim; e.g., *hades* in Luke 10:15 is translated as "hell" in the KJV, while *hades* in First Corinthians 15:57 is translated as "grave"! But...

Perhaps a more significant point for us to consider is that both *sheol* and *hades* were words employed in relation to judgments upon nations who had become objectionable to God and thus deserved to become extinct, "vanishing" into "the unseen"—buried "out of sight"! Consider the following:

In Psalm 9:17 David wrote, "The wicked shall be turned into *sheol*, as well as all the nations that forget God." I.e., just as they treated God as if He didn't exist, God actually made them to *not exist*. And such is what happened to Babylon: According to Isaiah 14:13-15, she vanished into *sheol* (cf. Egypt & Pharaoh in Eze. 31:10-18 and Assyria in 32:17-28). Likewise...

In Matthew 11:23 and Luke 10:15 Jesus said of Capernaum that she would go down into *hades*! Did He mean that the entire city would be removed into a place of unending torturous punishment? Hardly. I think He meant she was going to be destroyed so as to become extinct just as Tyre which was spoken of in Ezekiel 26:19-21.

Some are now saying that "hell" is never mentioned in the Bible, and, from the perspective in which they mean that relative to the general view of it in Christendom, I suppose I agree; however, if when we do see the noun "hell" in certain versions, we merely consider it as that which is covered/buried or more importantly, in a metaphorical sense, of something loathsome, repugnant, and objectionable instead of as some ethereal place or torment, then I have no issues with it. (Yes, I know, what does become a problem is the usage of *hades* in Luke 16:19-31, but I don't have time to deal with that parable now.) Now...

Unlike *sheol* and *hades*, *Gehenna* doesn't refer to a place of the unseen, rather it was/is a proper name; but it wasn't a proper name for a general place like a dirt-pit or grave (which could be anywhere on the planet), but to a very specific parcel of land known to every Jew since the time of Joshua.

According to Vos Geerhardus who wrote the piece on *Gehenna* in The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, the term refers to the "Valley of Hinnom," the prefix *ge*, as we already know, actually being the term for "land." He also said that it "became the technical designation for the place of final punishment" for two reasons: {1} "It had been the seat of the idolatrous worship of Moloch, to whom children were [sacrificed] by fire (2 Chr. 28:3 & 33:6)." And {2}, "on account of these practices, the place was defiled by [good] King Josiah (2 Kgs 23:10) and became in consequence associated in prophecy with the [final] judgment to be visited upon the people (Jer. 7:32)." He continued to say, "The fact also that the city's [sewage (something that burns well, ya know)] was collected there may have helped to render the name synonymous with extreme defilement."

Not only was it called "the Valley of Hinnom" (Jos. 15:8 & 18:16), but, due to God's prophecy of the Jews' destruction there because of their idolatry, it was also called "the Valley of Slaughter" (Jer. 19:6). And, speaking further of terms for this place, according to *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon*, it was also appropriately called "the Valley of Lamentation, so called from the cries of the ... children who were thrown into the fiery arms of Moloch.... The Jews so abhorred the place after these horrible sacrifices had been abolished by king Josiah 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 [thus denoting it as a place of shame]." He went on to mention that "the fires were always needed to consume the dead bodies so that the air might not become tainted by the putrefaction," which perfectly corresponds to it having also been called "Tophet," which means "place of burning," the prophesied place of the final judgment for the Jews (Isa. 30:33, Jer. 7:31-32 & 19:6-14).

Marvin Vincent said of *Gehenna* that it was "a deep, narrow glen to the south of Jerusalem, where, after the introduction of the worship of the fire-gods by Ahaz, the idolatrous Jews sacrificed their children to Moloch. After this it became the common refuse-place of the city into which the bodies of criminals, carcasses of animals, and all sorts of filth were cast. From its depth and narrowness, and its fire and ascending smoke, it became the symbol of the place of [their] future punishment" (Mat. 5:22). And lastly, but interestingly,...

From *Bauer's Greek-English Lexicon*, "according to ... Jewish popular belief, [it was here that] the Last Judgment was to take place." (And, if interested, one may read what Josephus said in his *Wars* book, chap. 5, sec. 12, lines 518-519.) Well...

The term *Gehenna* is found twelve times in the New Testament: eleven times in the Gospels and only by Jesus and then once in James 3:6 which, ironically, essentially restates Jesus' first usage of it in Matthew 5:22.

We could spend a lot of time investigating all these passages, but...

1. due to what we've already seen about *Gehenna* (especially how that it was prophetically associated with the annihilation of the Jews), and...
2. due to the fact that Jesus (as well as James) was addressing Jews and no one else, and...
3. due to the timing involved in the *Gehenna* punishment of these passages...

...it's pretty obvious that what all the Bible has to say about *Gehenna* was in reference to something physical which was fulfilled in the final judgment of Israel in AD 70, thus having no application to us today whatsoever. Speaking of that...

Let's conclude with some thoughts on **Revelation 20:12-15**.

Firstly, I believe that "the lake of fire" is another designation for *Gehenna*, except that it's mainly metaphorical nature. So...

Secondly, the death *here* is spiritual, referring of course to that eternal separation from God which was caused by sin. And...

Thirdly, and very closely related to what I just said about death, *hades* (being a grave for the horridness of that death which needed to be forever buried) represents the hideousness of that death and everything associated with it; i.e., the term *hades* here epitomizes man's dust-of-the-earth, unspiritual, natural, earthly, detestable-to-God condition with which Yahweh can of course have no fellowship. So...

With these things in mind, I find Paul's words in First Corinthians 15:54 & 56-57 very applicable and a great way to conclude: "When this mortal [body] has put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written: 'Death is swallowed up in victory.' ... The sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God who gives us the victory through Jesus Christ." I.e....

As we know, Revelation 20:12-15 is about resurrection (something no one argues against); but also, at this time, verse 11 tells us that "the earth and the heaven fled away" from the face of the One who sat on the great white throne. And what does the heaven and earth represent? Right, the law, that which Paul said gave strength to sin which in turn was the sting that resulted in death. So...

The law, part of "the former things" of Revelation 21:4, had "passed away," culminating in the fulfillment of "the end of sin" of Daniel 9:24 and therefore the end of sin-death and all the repulsiveness belonging to those things which kept man from a relationship and fellowship with His Creator-God.

[Tony E. Denton, 9/10; ASiteForTheLord.com; Slightly Revised 6/18.]