

FACTS ABOUT HELL

There are different views of what 'hell' refers to but the most popular is a dark, underground place of eternal punishment or torment for the wicked. Many people believe that no one dies eternally due to all mankind being saved regardless of whether they have lived a good or bad life or whether they followed Jesus or not. This may sound nice, but it is not scriptural. Here is what Jesus said: ***“And whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear your words, when ye depart out of that house or city, shake off the dust of your feet. Verily I say unto you, it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city.”*** Matthew 10:14, 15; ***“Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? And in thy name have cast out devils? And thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me, ye that work iniquity.”*** Matthew 7:22, 23. There are many other verses spoken by Jesus and the apostles wherein it is stated that obtaining salvation involves witnessing for Jesus and teaching others; we cannot sit on our rump and do nothing and expect that we will be saved. Many misunderstand that the grace that was extended to us so that we can be saved is not guaranteed unless we put in the effort and “fight the good fight”. However, for purposes of this study, we are going to focus more on the true concept of “hell” from the Biblical perspective.

The doctrine that all people will be saved is called Universalism and most who hold to this belief are Unitarians. Origen, who was born at Alexandria, Egypt and lived from about 185 to 253 A.D. was the first known Christian to formulate the Universalist theory. He believed that all of mankind will be saved and that the punishment of hell fire serves only to purify all people of sin (ie. purgatorial in its effect) and when this end was accomplished, all are secured to an everlasting life by purification, the punishment ceasing for all.

A second view of “hell” is that it refers to eternal punishment and this is probably the view held by the majority of Christians. This concept of hell, however, is also not scriptural because in essence, it suggests that the wicked will be punished for eternity, so in a sense, they have eternal life because their torment lasts forever. The concept of eternal torment of the wicked is actually very old, dating back to Sumerian times. Much of our present day view of hell comes from the mythical Greek underworld of Tartarus (Hades) which described by Plato, is a vast chasm which pierces through the centre of the interior of the earth. Plato also wrote a detailed description of his theory of the immortality of the soul; many Greek philosophers of his time did not believe in immortality. Socrates characterized the soul (or conscience of a person) as a vapour and upon death, the soul vanishes into the atmosphere. Aristotle and many other Greek thinkers believed that when the material body dies, the soul of man dies also.

The third view of “hell”, believed by the Church of God, can be described as ‘conditional immortality’. This view differs from the other two in that the wicked will not be saved but will be erased from existence altogether after a finite punishment. The scriptures describe the wicked being punished but not for an eternity. ***“For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, said the LORD of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch ... And ye shall tread down the wicked; for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet in the day that I shall do this, saith the LORD of hosts.”*** Malachi 4:1, 3.

Before delving further, ‘hell’ is a Germanic word; it is neither a Hebrew nor Greek word and should not have been used in the Old nor New Testament. The Old Testament was translated from Hebrew into Greek in about 285 B.C. by seventy or seventy-two Jewish scholars working under the patronage of Ptolemy Philadelphus at Alexandria in Egypt. This Greek translation of the Old Testament became known as the ‘Septuagint’ and is also known by the symbol ‘LXX’. What we should be aware of is that when the Hebrew scriptures were translated from Hebrew to Greek, the Hebrew word ‘sheol’ was mistranslated into Greek as ‘hades’, which implied a different meaning than ‘sheol’. A bit further on, we will see that when the New Testament came into existence from the apostolic manuscripts, the word ‘hades’ was carried over from the Septuagint.

The ancient or Septuagint scriptures did not originally contain the word 'hell' since that word came from the Germanic language and there was no English translation of the Bible until 1382 A.D. with the advent of the Wycliffe Bible. What we are saying, is that any conception of what 'hell' might be must be put from our minds since that word did not exist during the time of Jesus and the Apostles nor before then. The Hebrews did not believe in an underground world where the dead were going about carrying on activities as has been described in the myths of the Sumerians, Babylonians and Greeks. The Jews believed 'sheol' to be the subterranean abode of the dead, where the dead 'sleep', that is, they exist without knowledge or feeling. It is not akin to 'hades' like the Greeks believe: there is no judgment but simply where the dead go.

What about the word 'hades'? How did it come to be used in bible translations? It was erroneously used in place of 'sheol'. According to Greek mythology, Hades was most often used as the name of the 'lord of darkness', not the name of a place. Hades ruled over the realm of darkness and death. Hades was referred to as 'Pluto' in Latin. The Greek poet, Homer, mostly spoke of Hades as a mythological character rather than a place. Later, however, Hades became more and more used to refer to the realm of the dead, where all the ghostly-shadows of the good and the bad dwelt together. As the concept of ethical behaviour became more prevalent in Greek mythology, there gradually developed the idea of reward and retribution for good and evil. Soon, the underworld kingdom of the ghost-shadows was divided into two parts: 'Tarus' was the place of a deep, sunless abyss for the wicked and 'Elysium' was the place where the good lived in an ever-abundance of innocent pleasures. All the dead, however, lived in the realm of the underworld. The mythology continue to change as later writers have the Elysium plains as not being subterranean but in the sky in mid-air or in the glorious brightness of the sun. We also know that by the time that the philosopher Plato came around and the Hebrew scriptures had been translated into Greek, the word 'hades' had been long used to refer to the underground dwelling place for the wicked.

Another Greek word used in translating the Bible was "Gehenna" which was used in place of the Hebrew word "Ge Hinnom" which means 'the valley of Hinnom'. Many people, including scholars misinterpret this word to mean the place where the wicked are tormented in an everlasting and unquenchable fire. The word was used in a place as a symbol of a total and everlasting spiritual death. Let us look at more verses: ***"And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. And if they eye offend thee, pluck it out: it is better for thee to enter into the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire: where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."*** Mark 9:43 to 48. In these verses, Jesus was speaking about the fire of Gehenna. Take special note that all three times the word 'hell' was used but it should have been translated 'Gehenna'. Again, we need to recall that 'hell' only came to be used with the bringing in of the English translations. What Jesus was trying to explain was that in the day of judgment, when the wicked will be burned up, no one will be able to quench the flames until the wicked are totally burned up. Jesus was comparing the end day judgment with something that the people he was speaking to could understand. "Gehenna" as explained refers to the valley of Hinnom which was a deep, narrow gorge south-west of Jerusalem. This was where Solomon had built an altar to Molech: ***"Then did Solomon build an high place for Chemosh, the abomination of Moab in the hill that is before Jerusalem, and for Molech, the abomination of the children of Ammon."*** I Kings 11:7. King Ahaz and Manasseh were other Judean kings who had encourages the people to participate in heathen worship, although King Manasseh later gave up his heathen worship and returned to worship God. While conducting this heathen worship, the people even offered their children as sacrifices to the pagan gods – see II Chronicles 28:3 and 33:6. When King Josiah came to sit on the throne, he dismantled the altars of the heathen and the images – see II Kings 23:13, 14 and Jeremiah 19:2 to 6. King Josiah defiled the heathen practices performed in the valley of Hinnom by covering it with human bones after which it appears to have

become the common 'cesspool' of Jerusalem. The sewage of Jerusalem was carried off by the waters of the Kidon and in time, the valley became stagnated, where its solid filth was collected. Fires were constantly kept burning to consume the bodies of criminals and the carcasses of animals and other combustible material. Where the solid filth congealed huge nests of swarmed insects, the worms fattened themselves on the corruption that laid at the perimeter of the fire. The Tophet ('place of burning') and Ge Hinnom became well-known to the Jews as a symbolic place of future punishment of the wicked. The place of Gehenna was used by Jesus to demonstrate that just as the bodies that were thrown into its fires were totally destroyed so that there was neither root or branch left of them, so shall it be in the last day of judgment that the wicked shall be fully consumed that there will be nothing left of them, not even the memory of their existence. Gehenna was a good comparison as fires were constantly burning as people constantly fed it combustible materials of various sorts. As long as there is material to keep it burning, it is in essence 'unquenchable'. As long as the wicked exist in the day of judgment, the fire will continue to burn until there is no more of them.

So what of the word 'hell'? The word came from the name of the goddess of the dead, 'Hel' or 'Hela' from northern mythology. According to the mythology, Hel was the sister of Fenrir, the wolf and daughter of Loki. The god, All-father threw her down into the lower world which was called Nifheim, giving her complete authority over this realm where she received all the dead of those who were sick or of old age, whether good or bad. The Germanic word seems to get its origin from 'Hehlem' meaning 'to hide' or 'Huhlen' which means 'to cover'.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that the word 'hell' did not appear in the early manuscripts and only came to be used for the English translations many centuries after the original manuscripts were written. 'Hades' appears in early scripts only because of the error in translating from Hebrew into Greek, where it replaced 'sheol' which did not have the same meaning, since 'sheol' means the abode of the dead who know nothing nor have feelings – in other words, the grave.