

## HELL

Luke 16:23, Revelation 20:13-14

By Raymond White

The English word hell appears in the King James New Testament twenty-three times. Unfortunately, the notion of hell confuses English readers because there are three different Greek words that are translated as hell.

The three Greek words are: geenna (12), hades (10), and tartarus (1) — and their meanings are different. But because the meanings of these three words are confuddled together, the notion of eternal torment emerged as standard Christian doctrine, and it is false. So let's take these words, one at a time, and see what they actually mean.

### [1] GEENNA

The New Testament notion of geenna hell derives its meanings from the Old Testament, and it begins at a place called Hinnom, the valley where children were burned alive in ritual sacrifice to Molech.

***2 Kings 23:10** And [Josiah] defiled Topheth, which is 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.*

***2 Chronicles 28:1** Ahaz...did not that which was right :2 he...made molten images for Baalim :3 Moreover he burnt incense in the valley of the son of Hinnom, and burnt his children in the fire after the abominations of the heathen whom the LORD had cast out before the children of Israel.*

***2 Chronicles 33:6** And he [Manasseh] caused his children to pass through the fire in the valley of the son of Hinnom...*

***Nehemiah 11:30** ... And they dwelt from Beersheba unto the valley of Hinnom.*

***Jeremiah 7:31** And they have built the high places of Tophet, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I commanded them not, neither came it into my heart. :32 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 bury in Tophet, till there be no place.*

***Jeremiah 19:2** And go forth unto the valley of the son of Hinnom which is by the entry of the east gate, and proclaim there the words that I shall tell thee :4 Because they have forsake me...and have filled this place [Hinnom] with the blood of innocents. :6 Therefore, behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that this place shall no more be called Tophet, nor The valley of the son of Hinnom, but The valley of Slaughter.*

*Michah 6:7 ...shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? :8 ...what doth the LORD require of thee, but to do justly, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with thy God?*

As a result of this horrific evil that Israel was committing against its children, God removed the Israelites out of the land — first northern Israel by the Assyrians, then southern Judea by the Babylonians.

Later, when the Jews returned to their homeland by order of Cyrus, the king of Persia, the Jews would never again bow to an idol or even think of sacrificing a child. And when they remembered what their ancestors had done in Hinnom, they decided that since the place had such an evil history, and since it was just outside the city to the south, the only appropriate use for such a place was to use it as a trash dump. And so they did.

And so it happened that at night the people of Jerusalem could see in the distance the constant, 24/7, glowing of the burning trash fires of the Hinnom valley.

Centuries later — (when the Persians were gone, and the Greeks were gone, and the Romans had become the governing power) — two prophets came and uttered dark prophecies. The first spoke of a fiery retribution. His name was John the Baptist.

*Matthew 3:12 Whose fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.*

The second prophet was Jesus Christ. He followed up on John's fiery warning and gave John's fiery retribution a name. Jesus called it geenna, the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew Hinnom. And so the Hebrew word Hinnom became the Greek word Geenna, which is anglicized to gehenna, and finally translated to the English word hell.

*Matthew 5:22 ...whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.*

*Matthew 10:28 ...fear him which is able to destroy both body and soul in hell.*

*Matthew 23:33 Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?*

(Also: *Matthew 5:29, 30, 18:9, 23:15, Mark 9:14, 45, 47, Luke 12:5, James 3:6*)

Now you have the proper image of hell; geenna hell, that is. Geenna hell is a dump where trash continually burns. That is what Hinnom hell literally is and therefore what afterlife hell must be like.

What do the fires of hell do? Speaking of Hinnom hell, fires burn trash reducing it to carbon ash. Speaking of afterlife hell, if Hinnom hell is the model, then afterlife fire burns souls transforming them to something else. But once burned, it is burnt. The purpose is to transform (destroy), not to torment, and certainly not to torment forever.

In *Matthew 10:28*, what are we to make of “to destroy both body and soul in hell”? The word destroy does not mean torment. The Greek word apolesai is rightly

translated destroy because destroy conveys the correct meaning consistent with its Hebrew origin in the Hinnom valley. Souls are destroyed or changed, not tormented.

What body and what soul are destroyed in hell? Destroying body and soul in an afterlife hell can only be annihilationism. But we need not accept this meaning because the text does not say God *does* annihilate, but only that he *can* annihilate. Thus our immortality is not a product of our nature but a product of God's love for us. We remain alive forever because he keeps us alive forever.

Are the fires eternal? Yes, 24/7. But that doesn't mean that each piece of trash eternally burns, it means that the fires are eternally doing their job. Each piece of trash, once burned, stops burning.

So, how literal or how figurative is the image? In *Matthew 23:33*, certainly Jesus did not mean that the Pharisees were literally serpents and vipers. It's a parable. When fire runs across the ground, snakes come out of their holes and flee. But can they outpace the fire? That's the question Jesus is asking: can you outrun the judgment that is coming?

If the Pharisees are not literal snakes then how can they be chased by literal fire? The risk of using parables is that people take them literally and create nonsense theology. The threat that is chasing the Pharisees is *like* fire, just as they are *like* snakes. God's judgment, when it catches them, will "burn" them and change them in some sense.

I will more strongly make the point that eternal fire does not burn forever. Consider these two verses —

*Jeremiah 17:4 ...ye have kindled a fire in mine anger, which shall burn for ever.*

Does God's anger burn forever? No. Of course not. He forgave them and brought them back to the land. Either the *forever* is an exaggeration or, in spite of the forever-ness of his anger, he will forgive anyway. We do the same, forgive in spite of a lingering pain.

*Jeremiah 17:27 ...then will I kindle a fire...it shall devour the palaces of Jerusalem, and it shall not be quenched.*

What fire doesn't burn out? Is there a 2,000 year old fire that is still burning Jerusalem today? Of course not. It's ludicrous even to imagine. The fires that burned Jerusalem finally burned out. This is exaggeration that simply means that the result, the damage is permanent. And it was. A new city would one day be built on the ashes of the old city, but the old city was permanently gone. Once destroyed, it is destroyed forever.

"Shall not be quenched" does not mean that the fire will never go out. It means that it won't go out until it has burned everything that there is to burn. *Then* it will go out.

## [2] HADES/SHEOL

Now the other hell. This Greek word hades also has its origin in the Old Testament.

The Hebrew word sheol, which occurs in the Hebrew scriptures 32 times, is in every instance translated in our English Old Testament as hell. It is that Hebrew word, sheol, which the New Testament authors translated to the Greek word hades.

How do we know that? Because of this translation —

***Psalms 16:10*** For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell [Heb: sheol]; neither wilt thou suffer thine holy one to see corruption.

***Acts 2:27*** Because thou wilt not leave my soul in hell [Gr: hades], neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.

These two words then, Hebrew sheol and Greek hades, are interchangeable.

So, what do they mean? The Hebrew word sheol means unseen, or unknown. Death is in view, or the grave. Where does the soul go after death? Who knows. That's the point of the word sheol. Death is the great unknown.

I'll use some outrageous examples from math. What is one divided by zero? The answer is: who knows. Math teachers call that quotient "undefined" which means who knows. Trigonometry presents the same problem. What is the tangent of zero? Who knows. And then there is the far worse question: what is the square root of negative one? Who knows. It is interesting, I think, that while math geeks happily give the square root of negative one a name — namely, "i" — they scorn the name of one divided by zero — namely, "∞", insisting that that quotient be called undefined. Why do math geeks embrace "i" and scorn "∞"? Who knows. Enough of that.

Here are some examples of sheol in the Old Testament.

***Psalms 18:5*** The sorrows of hell compassed me about: the snares of death prevented me.

***Psalms 55:15*** Let death seize upon them, and let them go down quick into hell...  
***:23*** But thou, O God, shalt bring them down into the pit of destruction...

***Psalms 86:13*** Thou hast delivered my soul from the lowest hell.

***Psalms 116:3*** The sorrows of death compassed me, and the pains of hell gat hold upon me...

***Psalms 139:8*** If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there. Heaven is up and hell, sheol, is down; namely, the grave.

***Proverbs 7:27*** Her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death.

***Proverbs 9:18*** ...her guests are in the depths of hell.

***Proverbs 15:24*** The way of life is above to the wise, that he may depart from hell beneath.

***Proverbs 27:20*** Hell and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.

**Isaiah 5:14** *Therefore hell hath enlarged herself, and open her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it.*

**Isaiah 14:9** *Hell from beneath is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming: it stirreth up the dead for thee...*

**Isaiah 14:15** *Yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, to the sides of the pit.*

**Amos 9:2** *Though they dig into hell, thence shall mine hand take them... They imagine hell to be a safer place than God's vengeance.*

**Jonah 2:2** *...out of the belly of hell cried I... Jonah was certainly not dead, he was in the belly of a fish, and that, for him, was hell.*

You can see from the context of all these verses that the Hebrew hell, sheol, is not an afterlife place of torment, it is simply the afterlife mystery, and being dead was curse enough to not want to go there.

That the Hebrews were vague on their idea of sheol, does not mean that Christians were vague on their idea of hades. By the time of Christ, Jews were haggling about afterlife. Pharisees claimed there was an afterlife and Sadducees claimed there was not. Jesus settled the dispute by resurrecting himself, which is what Christianity is all about. And for Christians, hades was a specific place or condition of some dead people.

Before we explore the examples of New Testament hades, let me first say something more about fire.

**John 15:6** *If a man abide not in me, he is cast forth as a branch, and is withered; and men gather them, and cast them into the fire, and they are burned.*

That this is a parable convinces me that afterlife fires are not literal flames. In the parable, it is *men* who gather these withered branches for burning, not God. Those not in Christ are *as a branch cast into fire*. They are not themselves literally cast into fire. This is a parable. But it is terrifying enough in that, whatever the fires of hell are, they have the same effect on souls that literal fire has on wood. And what effect is that? Violent change of some kind. For what purpose? Hopefully, to improve souls by purging. Or maybe to be rid of them. But it is not to torment them.

**Jude 1:7** *...suffering the vengeance of eternal fire.*

**Jude 1:13** *...to whom is reserved the blackness of darkness for ever.*

Jude seems to be at odds with himself. First he writes that God's vengeance is eternal fire. Then he writes that it is blackness of darkness. So, which is it, Jude? Eternal fire or blackness of darkness? Maybe both are exaggerations, they certainly are opposites.

Now, hades —

*Luke 16:23 ...in hell he [rich man] lifted up his eyes, being in torment.*

*Acts 2:27 thou will not leave my soul in hell...*

*Acts 2:31 that his soul was not left in hell...*

*Revelation 1:18 I...have the keys of hell and of death*

*Revelation 20:13 ...death and hell delivered up the dead... :14 ...death and hell were cast into the lake of fire.*

(Also: *Matthew 11:23, 16:18, Luke 10:15, Revelation 6:8*)

There are three things to notice about hades hell. First, it *is* a place of torment, unlike geenna which is a place of destruction, not torment. Second, hades *is temporary!* “Not left in hades” and “hades delivered up the dead” certainly gives us very important information about this horrific place. And third, hades will be destroyed.

What could possibly be the point of eternal punishment? There is no point to eternal punishment. What reason could there possibly be? The Bible demands no such thing.

### [3] TARTARUS

Now, there is one last lingering Greek word in the New Testament that translates to hell. You may have heard this word in a Johnny Depp pirate movie (which, alas, has nothing to do with pirates) and wondered where Hollywood came up with the word. Well, now you know. It is a Bible word and here is the reference —

*2 Peter 2:4 For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell [tartarus], and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment;*

There you are — a one-time reference to a singular place reserved for fallen angels only, and it has nothing to do with us.

What does the word mean? It means “to cast down.” In other words, God cast them down to the cast-down place. Beyond that, I have no idea, and it doesn’t matter.

### [4] CONCLUSION

The word hell invokes terror in the minds of Christians as a place of eternal fiery torment. But it is simply not true. Now the Orthodox will brand me as a heretic, but I’m telling you, it is not true. Why? Because the English word hell which occurs all over the Bible comes from three different origins (actually four if you count Hebrew sheol separately) which get scrambled together to produce images of eternal fiery torment. When we separate those three words and their meanings, they are not so terrifying.

To review, here are those three (four) words:

1. Geenna is an eternal fire, metaphorically speaking, that “destroys,” not torments. But what does destroy mean? It means to change. If you burn a chair, the “chair” vanishes but it is replaced by carbon ash which is itself useful for some things. It does not go out of existence, it does not annihilate. Only the *form* of a “chair” is annihilated which is not annihilation but transformation. So, when souls go to geenna, God does something drastic to them by some process that is like fire burning wood. And when the wood is burnt, it stops burning.
2. Sheol/Hades is, in Hebrew etymology, the place of the dead. But in Christian etymology, it is a place of torment. But it is *temporary* torment which ends as does death. Since it ends, it seems to have a purpose, perhaps some kind of purging like Catholic purgatory or Mormon spirit prison. In any case, not only will souls not suffer eternally in hades, hades itself will end when it is cast into the lake of fire.
3. Tartarus is a place for fallen angels and has nothing to do with us, so don’t worry about it.

So, geenna destroys or changes souls. It does not torment, or at least that’s not its intent. Its fires are eternal but the burning is not. When someone is “burned” (whatever that means), the burning will stop. Just like any fire burning anything combustible. When the burning thing is burnt, the fire stops burning that thing. Fire does not burn ash, not even eternal fire.

Hades, on the other hand is a place of torment though not necessarily intentionally so — God could destroy body and soul in hades but does not. The torment of hades is more likely (in my view anyway) the pain of being dead for those who have no faith. That would be more consistent with the Hebrew meaning of sheol.

And hades ends, which is the big point. Jesus destroys hades and death together. Tartarus we needn’t worry about.

So in conclusion, there is no place where human souls find themselves in eternal torment other than perhaps the agony they suffer for the loss of good eternal blessings they forfeited by rejecting them when they had opportunity to decide differently.

## [5] MORMONS

Now this question: Do Mormons believe in hell? I suppose the answer depends on which Mormons you ask. In general, most Mormons, those that I know, just dismiss it without a thought.

I have conceived an experiment, though I have never done it. In an adult class, I would like to have everyone close their eyes (except me of course) and ask: “Everyone who believes in hell, please raise a hand.” I’d wager that the class would be split nearly in half. But I won’t know until I ever attempt it.

I would also wager that those who admit to believing in hell do not have a clear idea of what they mean by it, and I would further wager that those who reject hell do not

know that the word hell appears all over the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants. And that fact poses a bit of a problem, which is what I will now deal with.

The word hell occurs 62 times in the Book of Mormon and 17 times in the Doctrine and Covenants, so to just reject it out of hand is out of the question. We *have* to accept that it exists and that we ought to have some rational theology about it, or we are at odds with our own scriptures. And to create a rational theology — a rational *Mormon* theology, that is — is what I will now attempt to do.

First, we must understand and except that bibilical meanings of the word hell, and that, I've just given you: Geenna, Sheol/Hades, and Tartarus.

So: Do these three separate notions of hell have a good fit anywhere in Mormon theology? Actually, they do. But before launching into that, let me ask this question: Did Jesus — that is, the Book of Mormon Jesus of *3<sup>rd</sup> Nephi* — have a sense of the difference between Geenna and Hades? Actually, he did, and I can prove it.

*3 Nephi 11:33 the gates of hell shall not prevail 3 Nephi 11:35 and the gates of hell stand open [Matthew 16:18 hell is hades]*

*3 Nephi 12:20 shall be in danger of hell fire [Matthew 5:22 hell is geenna]*

In Matthew, Jesus used both words, hades and geenna. It is impossible for him to not know the nuanced differences between them. That he then quotes himself to the Nephites, those different meanings have to have been preserved in the Nephite languages of which we know nothing. Those differences disappeared from Book of Mormon English probably for the same reason they disappeared from King James English: English does not carry sufficient distinctions to translate the two words distinctively, and the Kings James translators simply chose not to invent accommodating words so they were stuck with the one word: hell. Joseph Smith was similarly stuck — like the King James translators, Joseph also had no such English words to which he could attach the distinctions, so “hell” would have to do, leaving it to a future generation to untangle the mystery.

So, now, what could those three words possibly mean? That is, in Mormon theology.

First: Hades/Sheol. This is the place of the dead. There is suffering, but it is temporary. So, what could that be? That sounds very much like the Mormon notion of Spirit Prison, basically, a holding tank where souls wait for the final judgement. There is suffering, but at some point, everyone there will be delivered.

Second: Geenna. Here, there is fire, or something like it, that changes souls from something to something else. What could that be? Well, there is this:

*Doctrine and Covenants 76:81 And again, we saw the glory of the telestial, which glory is that of the lesser, even as the glory of the start differs from that of the glory of the moon in the firmament :83 These are they who deny ot the Holy Spirit :84 These are they who are thrust down to hell. :104 These are they who suffer the vengeance of eternal fire.*



Thrust down to hell! Yes indeed, that is what it says. This telestial kingdom is hell. What does “telestial” mean? It’s not Greek, it’s Latin, and it means stars, the “telos.”

How is it different from the other two kingdoms? The image of the first is the sun, a thing, cohesive. The image of the second is the moon, also a thing, also cohesive. But the image of the third is the stars, not a thing, not cohesive, but scattered across the sky everywhere. Dim? Yes. But why? *Because* they are scattered.

What better picture could there possibly be of people in hell? They are not together, not unified, they are scattered by their own greed, their own selfishness, and incapable of the love that binds the peoples of other heavens.

That’s why the 10 commandments say: don’t kill, don’t steal, don’t cheat on your spouse or with other people’s spouses. And why Jesus confirmed it with: Love thy neighbor as thyself. People of hell lack that. That’s why they are in hell, apart, hate filled, like a pile of ashes, not sticking together. Their own self-interest has caused them to be something that God never intended them to be: apart, just as surely as if they were burned in a fire that never goes out. The fire then is letting their own self will have its way with them.

Is there anything worse? Actually, there is. At least the people of hell did not deny the Holy Spirit; that is, when undeniable truth slaps them in the face, they at least accept *that*. But there are people who, when faced with undeniable truth, still deny. That’s what the devils did, and still do, and that why there is —

Third: Tartarus. This is that place created for the devil and his angels, where no person was ever meant to go. And yet, some do.

*Doctrine and Covenants 76:32 They are they who are the sons of perdition, of whom I say that it had been better for them never to have been born; 33 ... with the devil and his angels in eternity; :35 Having denied the Holy Spirit after having received it :36 ... shall go away into the lake of fire and brimstone, with the devil and his angels :37 And the only ones on whom the second death shall have any power. :44 ... where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched, which is their torment. :45 And the end thereof, either the place thereof, nor their torment, no man knows.*

Wow!

But now, let’s make a distinction. Those in the telestial kingdom are burned with an eternal fire, **:104** says so. But that does not mean that they are eternally burning *in* that eternal fire. In fact, it *can’t* mean that because if it did, then **:36** would make no sense. So the fire of telestial hell does its job, it burns them, changes them, perhaps forces them to the truth, and they are delivered from eternal suffering. But the fire of Perdition hell is something else. It is a second death, not merely apart, but somehow extinguished from the universe (**Matthew 10:28**), and the burning in *that* fire never ends.

So, there you have it. Mormon hell theology is pretty diverse, pretty all-over-the-place. But then again so is biblical hell theology, if you are willing to see it in all its details. Do they match up? Well, I’m no prophet, but it does seem to me that the two are describing the same things, the darker sides of afterlife, and that Joseph Smith was right after all.