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Hell has served as a theological underpinning for western Christian culture – both Catholic and Protestant – almost but not quite since the days of the early church. In part, the western fear of hell can be attributed to what may appear as definitive statements in the Bible. However, we can also thank church theologians and resulting dogma, which together have shaped concepts that have persisted for centuries.

What is the doctrine of hell?

The two time-honored elements of this doctrine are that hell a) involves suffering and b) is eternal (or never ending)

Working Definition. What is the doctrine of hell? There are numerous theological formulations. A well-known American theologian and radio minister lays out a version of this doctrine in one sentence, describing hell as “an eternity before the righteous, ever-burning wrath of God, a suffering torment from which there is no escape and relief.”¹

The two key and time-honored elements of this doctrine are that hell a) involves suffering and b) is eternal (or never ending) – with no escape either via repentance or annihilation. When referring to hell in this discussion, this is the working concept (or definition) that will be applied.

Sources for the Doctrine of Hell. There are three primary sources of information for the doctrine of hell and its corollary of eternal punishment:

- **The Bible** – both Old and New Testaments.
- **Tradition of the church fathers** – starting with the post-apostolic age and the written accounts of the New Testament.
- **Church doctrine and tradition** – built up over nearly two millennia of teaching and practice.

The Case for Reconsidering Hell. The purpose of this monograph is to suggest that the concept of literal, never-ending punishment be reconsidered and discarded in favor of a more authentic scriptural understanding of judgment, rewards, punishment, and redemption whether before or after death.

Of three information sources for a doctrine of hell, the case for reconsidering hell rests primarily on what scripture itself says. This is viewed as the primary authority, superceding other conclusions that might result from church tradition or doctrine – especially when separated from a clear, direct scriptural foundation. As Martin Luther proclaimed, *sola scriptura* (scripture only).

While church tradition and doctrine are also considered in this discussion, they are viewed as clearly subordinate and supplemental to conclusions drawn first and foremost from the Bible itself.

Consequently, the bulk of this monograph is focused on 7 biblical reasons for suggesting the hell needs to be re-considered, not as a place of never ending punishment, but as a temporary place of correction for those who still have unfinished business with their Creator.

This Bible-centered discussion is followed by corroborating information from the early church fathers of the 1st-4th centuries, those closest to the scene of the action of Jesus' ministry on earth and subsequent formation of an early Christian church. We also briefly survey the role of Church doctrine and practice over the centuries.

THE BIBLE & HELL

7 Reasons for to Re-Consider Hell:

- 1) "Hell" misinterprets the original Bible
- 2) Hell is getting dropped from the Bible
- 3) Gehenna is here, not there
- 4) Hell is never mentioned by John or Paul
- 5) Other references to hell are incorrectly interpreted
- 6) In place of hell, the Bible expects accountability
- 7) Jesus came not to condemn but to save

While commonly viewed as *making the case* for hell, in fact the Bible pushes in just the opposite direction. In the pages that follow, seven primary reasons are advanced to suggest that neither the Old nor New Testaments supports the idea of an everlasting place of eternal torment for the damned (i.e. non-Christian) after death:

1. The English term "hell" misrepresents what the Bible in its earliest versions really says.
2. While the 1611 King James Version (KJV) makes liberal use of the term "hell", biblical use of the term "hell" is on a downward trend with more recent translations.
3. As the last term for hell remaining with modern New Testament translations, *Gehenna* is better understood as an actual earthly place rather than as the symbol of a never ending place of personal torment for non-believers after death and judgment.
4. While condemnation and judgment are theological concepts widely shared throughout the New Testament, hell is not. More specifically, both John's gospel and Paul's epistles never once use the term "hell".
5. A similar case can be made that other scripture references that imply the spiritual condemnation to a never ending hell also are incorrectly interpreted.
6. In place of hell without end, the Bible clearly recognizes accountability after death for the actions of this earthly life.
7. The Bible offers an alternative that is far superior to hell, the divinely appointed mission of Jesus Christ that none should be condemned "but that the world through Him might be saved."

A more detailed discussion of each element of this scripturally based rationale follows.²



1. The English term “hell” misrepresents what the Bible in its earliest versions really says.

To begin with, it is noted that the English word “hell” is not even a Biblical term. It is a word that was first coined and given form in written expression well after the earthly days of Christ.

The most commonly used term for “hell” in the New Testament is Gehenna.

And there are still ancient though no longer well-used steps leading down into Gehenna, a place where infants were sacrificed during the time of the Old Testament.

Fortunately, the news gets better from here.

The word that we know today as “hell” is much more recent, coming from an old English and Germanic term for the “netherworld of the dead.” Hell is derived from a Teutonic word *Hel*, the name of the goddess of the infernal regions. In the Norse as well, Hell is the name of the ruler of the underworld.

In its earliest usage, the Old English/Germanic/Norse hell is not necessarily a place of judgment, nor of damnation. Similar to the Greek “Hades,” the Saxon term *hell* was depicted as a place where both good and evil people (of all stripes) pass after death – a sort of post-life waiting room.

Hell & The King James. This is an appropriate point at which to introduce the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible – which establishes for English speaking peoples an unfortunate and distorted linkage between the Saxon Hell and different terms taken from earlier Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments and given the English equivalent of Hell.

Terms Translated as Hell. As is detailed by the following chart, the 1611 King James Version (KJV) liberally translates four different Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek terms as meaning “Hell” – sheol, gehenna, hades and tartarus.” The term “hell” is used a total of 54 times in the KJV, including 31 times in the Old Testament (OT) and 23 times in the New Testament (NT).

The 31 OT references of the KJV to “hell” are distributed through 10 books of the Old Testament, starting with Deuteronomy.³ In the KJV, Psalms and Proverbs each use “hell” seven times, followed by Isaiah (6 times), Ezekiel (4), and Job (2). Books to which “hell” is applied one time each are Deuteronomy, II Samuel, Amos, Jonah, and Habakkuk.

Of the 23 KJV references in the NT to “hell”, 15 are found in three of the gospel accounts (all except John), with 2 references in Acts, one each in James and II Peter and four in Revelation.

As depicted by the chart on the following page, the King James uses the word “hell” as an all-encompassing term for one Hebrew word found in the Old Testament and three distinct Aramaic and Greek terms found in early manuscripts of the New Testament:



Rodin's *Gates of Hell* (or Hades) with *The Thinker* dominating the action (above)

As King David wrote: "... you will not leave my soul in Sheol, Nor will You allow Your Holy One to see corruption."

- Psalm 16:10 (NKJV)

Hell in the King James Version (KJV) of the Bible

Term	Meaning	KJV Usage*
English Language KJV Terminology:		
Hell	Old English/Germanic term for "netherworld of the dead," Norse for the name of ruler of the underworld	54 times (31 OT, 23 NT)
Bible Manuscript Terms (in the Hebrew and Greek):		
Sheol	Hebrew term for "the unseen state," the underworld common grave or abode of righteous and unrighteous	31 times (all OT)
Gehenna	Hebrew term for Valley of Hinnom (or Gehenna), the rubbish dump outside the south-west Jerusalem wall; parallel Arabic word is Jahannam which is also named for Jerusalem's Valley of Hinnom	12 times (all NT)
Hades	Greek term for the underworld or "the unseen world," similar to Hebrew Sheol	9 times (all NT)
Tartarus (Tartaroo)	Greek term for the deep gloomy place of torment beneath the underworld	1 time (NT)

* Note: KJV refers to King James Version of the Bible; OT is Old Testament; NT is New Testament. See Appendix A for a detailed listing of all 54 instances in which hell is used in the KJV.

- *Sheol* is a Hebrew term which has been interpreted to mean not only the underworld abode of the dead, but which also can be interpreted as a pit or grave.⁴ Sheol finds its application exclusively in the OT, with no direct NT references.
While the OT contrasts Sheol with heaven, Sheol generally was understood to be a place that does not readily discriminate between OT saints and sinners.⁵ Rather, it is a place to which even those clearly chosen of God have or would descend.⁶ And it is a place from which the soul of the godly can be rescued.⁷
- *Gehenna* is derived from a Hebrew phrase for the Valley of Hinnom (or Ge Hinnom), a ravine running west and south of the old city of Jerusalem – just beyond the western city wall. Gehenna served as the garbage dump for Jerusalem and was virtually always smoldering or on fire.⁸ Gehenna is a place described by OT and by Jesus of the NT as a place "where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched."⁹
- *Hades* is a Greek term for the place or abode to which all people go upon death, both the good and the wicked. This term is similar to the earlier Hebrew Sheol in that it represents a place experienced by a wide range of deceased individuals – both God-fearing and otherwise.¹⁰ And it provides a meaning similar to that of the later teutonic word for the abode of the dead that found its way into the English lexicon as "hell".

- *Tartaros* (or tartarus) is a term used far less frequently – in fact only once in the Bible in the book of II Peter. The word Tartaros is a variation on the Greek (Tartaroo) which is translated as to cast down into hell. In Greek mythology, it is depicted as the deepest, gloomiest place of the Hades underworld.

In short, the words that have been appropriated by the KJV as implying a place of eternal torment are really Sheol and Hades (the after death abodes of both the righteous and wicked), Gehenna (an earthly, ever smoldering garbage dump) and Tartaros (the lowest level of Hades applied by Peter to the angels of Satan). With the possible exception of Tartaros (for demons), none of these terms are necessarily intended as places of torment, nor is the punishment necessarily identified as never ending.

2. While the 1611 King James Version (KJV) makes liberal use of the term “hell”, biblical use of the term “hell” is on a downward trend with more recent translations.

Hell’s declining status is illustrated by the following counts from more recent Bible translations:

The most vivid depiction of what English-speaking people call “hell” comes from the Gospel of Luke – in the depiction provided by Jesus of the rich man and beggar Lazarus in the afterlife.

What’s most surprising is that the rich man in Hades can both see and converse across the chasm between hell and heaven.

- Starting with the King James (KJV) at 54 references, *followed by*
- New King James Version (NKJV) – 32 references to “hell”
- New International Version (NIV) – 14
- New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) – 13
- New American Version (NAV) – 0.

One exception to this trend is noted for the contemporary but paraphrased Living Bible which has upped the hell count to 66 occurrences with 65 verses.

Appendix A provided at the end of this discussion paper includes a detailed listing of the 54 verses in which “hell” is used by the KJV. This appendix chart also shows how the 54 KJV references have been narrowed to 14 with the NIV. In effect, the NIV:

- Eliminates the word “hell” altogether from the OT, instead replacing *sheol* with terms such as “death”, “realm of death”, “depths of the grave”, and “to the grave”.
- Reduces the 23 NT references of the KJV to “hell” to just 14 – by eliminating use of *tartarus* and *hades* except in one instance as hell, otherwise retaining only *gehenna* as “hell”.¹¹

Let’s look in a bit more detail at the terms which get eliminated by most recent Bible translations of the NT as “hell” – *hades* and *tartaros*.

Hades (in the Gospels). In the KJV, there are 9 occasions where the term Hades is translated as hell. Two references each are found in Matthew and Acts, one in Luke, and four in Revelation. The NIV eliminates all of these from the lexicon of hell except for one passage in Luke – the parable of the poor man Lazarus and the rich man. This is an interesting choice for the NIV to retain as meeting the translators’ criteria for “hell”.

In this parable, the rich man dies and: “From Hades, where he was being tortured, he looked up and saw Abraham a long way off and Lazarus with him.”¹² Outside of Revelation, this parable provides the only New Testament picture (however short) from Jesus himself of what hell may be about.

The rich man (of Jesus’ parable) describes this Hades as a place of torment and flames, and asks for Lazarus to come and dip the tongue of his finger to cool the rich man’s tongue. Interestingly, Hades is also described in this parable as a place from which one can see the other side in which Abraham and Lazarus reside. However, the divide is rugged “so that even those who want to cross over from here to you cannot, and no one can cross over from that side to ours.”¹³

So, what are we to make of this one remaining instance where Hades is characterized in the NIV as hell? Three responses are suggested:

- First, while there appears to be some level torture of the sinner (i.e. rich man), nowhere does Jesus indicate that this period of personal torment is necessarily never ending.
- Second and more telling, this “hell” does not appear to be a place of eternal separation from God. The rich man: a) can look across the chasm and see Lazarus at rest with father Abraham; and b) is able to converse with Abraham (despite the chasm).
- Third, the gist of the parable is the rich man’s desire to have someone warn his brothers who are yet in the land of the living. Abraham rejects this request as futile, saying that “If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.”¹⁴ Abraham is not commenting on whether the rich man can obtain forgiveness (even in Hades), only on the efficacy of attempting to use this experience as an object lesson for the rich man’s still living brothers.

What is remarkable about this parable is that Jesus’ depiction of Hades more closely resembles the Greek view of the underworld (Hades) than it does a place of never ending torment. As a parable, it is unclear as to whether Jesus meant for this depiction to be taken literally or figuratively.

In either case, with Jesus’ description of this Hades, there appear to be different levels of comfort and punishment (depending on one’s acts in life), the punishment is not necessarily eternal, and there is the ability to both observe and communicate between the pleasant and not so pleasant realms of Hades.

Despite the NIV's decision to continue to translate this instance of Hades as hell, a clear case can be made that the rationale for the rich man being in a place of torment forever separated from God is not any more readily supportable than for the other uses of Hades in the NT. The rich man is still in communication with the heavenly side of the chasm – and the option for eventual redemption has not been definitively ruled out though it appears that the rich man may not be able to figure the path out on his own.

Hades (in Acts). It is easy to see why the NIV no longer translates the two references in the Acts of the Apostles as hell. In one reference, the apostle Peter quotes David, then refers to Jesus whose “soul was not left in Hades.” If David could leave the OT Sheol (translated as Hades in the NT), then certainly Jesus would have the same capability.

Back to Hades (in Revelation). If there is a canonical New Testament source from which the modern conception of hell has been most vividly portrayed, it is most likely from the book of the Apocalypse (or Revelation). Consider what is often regarded as the most explicit text of this Apocalypse:

Outside of Jesus' description of the rich man in Hades, Revelation offers the most graphic looks at what hell may be about.

And the sea gave up the dead that were in it. Death and *Hades* gave up the dead that were in them, and all were judged according to what they had done. Then Death and *Hades* were thrown into the *lake of fire*. This is the second death, the lake of fire; and anyone whose name was not found written in the book of life was thrown into the *lake of fire*.¹⁵

However, the metaphorical language of Revelation makes it exceptionally difficult to sort out what is intended as literal versus figurative speech.

Revelation creates searing images of hell as a lake of fire. Other passages in this book describe the keys to hell and a horse rider of death followed with hell.

However, it is also noted that, even with the passage cited above, Hades (Hell) does not appear to be the final end state of the condemned. Rather, the ultimate penalty depicted by this passage is a lake of fire, into which both death and Hades are cast (in what appears to be tartaros style).

There are three problems with over-reliance on Revelation as a primary authority or basis for claiming the existence of a literal hell:

- First, the canonical status of Revelation is questionable. While popularly attributed to the apostle John, even the early church questioned whether the author was really the apostle or another John the Presbyter of Ephesus.¹⁶ It would be a mistake to pin one of the primary dogmas of the Christian faith on a document whose apostolic authenticity is uncertain – unless there were to be clear corroboration from other NT sources as well.

- Second, much of the writing of Revelation is intentionally figurative rather than literal. The extent to which Revelation should be viewed as literal prophecy has and will continue to be debated without clear resolution. Why suggest a literal interpretation for Hell when the literal nature of the rest of the book is, at best, questionable?
- Third, manuscripts such as the NIV and NRSV no longer use the term “hell” anywhere in the book of Revelation. Rather, the original Greek “hades” is the term applied to all four of the references to “hell” found in the KJV version of Revelation.

T

artaros is used only once in the Bible (as a term for hell) and is predicated on the concept of multiple levels of Hades – like Purgatory.

Tartaros (& Peter). There is one more Greek word to consider as a possible basis for Hell in the NT. As noted, the term *tartoros* as the deepest level of Hades is used only once in the Bible, in the book of II Peter as follows: “For if God did not spare the angels when they sinned, but cast them into hell (Tartaros) and committed them to chains of deepest darkness to be kept until the judgment...”¹⁷

What is interesting about this passage is that tartaros is described as a place of punishment for disobedient angels only, not for humans. While one could argue for the possible eventual redemption even of demons, the more relevant point for this discussion is that this lowest place of punishment is nowhere identified in the Bible as applicable for humans – despite the evil that may have been committed while living the earthly life.

In summary. Hell has been removed from the vocabulary of recent Bible translations when translated from the Hebrew term Sheol and the Greek terms Hades and Tartaros. The one remaining translation of Hades as eternal hell in the NIV appears misplaced and insupportable given the evidence of the text itself. All that now remains in the OT and NT as the last stand-in for hell is Gehenna – a subject to which we now turn.

3. As the last term for hell remaining with modern New Testament translations, Gehenna is better understood as an actual earthly place rather than as the symbol of a never ending place of personal torment for non-believers after death and judgment.

The term Gehenna appears 12 times in the NT – seven times in Matthew, three in Mark, once in Luke and once in James.

Into the Rubbish Heap. Fully half of these references (six in total) refer to one set of sayings found in both Matthew and Mark. These are the statements of Jesus (rendered in six different ways) that it would be better to pluck out your eye or cut off your hand (or foot) rather than to keep one's appendages and have the whole body cast into Gehenna (the smoldering garbage dump).

“And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell (Gehenna).”

- Matthew 5:29
(first of six similar statements in the Gospels of Matthew & Mark)

Mark's version of these statements also has Jesus adding the following reference from the OT prophet Isaiah:

... it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and to be thrown into hell, *where their worm never dies, and the fire is never quenched.*¹⁸

The term “where their worm never dies” refers to the Old and New Testament observation that worms were always present in Jerusalem's rubbish dump of Gehenna. Worms lived on even though the rubbish was perpetually burning.¹⁹

Jesus is clearly engaging in a bit of hyperbole. In Mark's version of this incident Jesus begins by proclaiming that a person who causes “one of these little ones” to stumble would be better off having a millstone hung around their neck, then tossed into the sea. He goes from there to his similarly intense discourse on Gehenna.

Even if this is all a case of exaggeration for the purpose of driving home a point, **Jesus is clearly referring to a physical, worldly place – Gehenna – and not the afterlife.** If you can't control your hand, cut it off. This is to avoid the greater punishment of having your whole body tossed outside the City wall into a rubbish heap that included the unburied bodies of dead animals, common criminals, and the trash of Jerusalem.

Remaining Uses of Gehenna. This leaves us with six somewhat more random NT statements about Gehenna. Five of these statements are made by Jesus, the other by Jesus' brother James. Three of these statements are found in Matthew's gospel:

- In the first, Jesus is again making a point, this time about a loose tongue and name calling – the name caller is exposed to the Gehenna of fire.
- In teaching his disciples, Jesus encourages them not to “fear those who kill the body but can not kill the soul; rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.”
- And toward the end of his ministry, Jesus condemns scribes and Pharisees, calling them vipers and rhetorically asking “How can you escape being sentenced to Gehenna?”

In all three instances, Jesus is making extreme points – illustrating them with the dangers of being condemned to the fire of Gehenna. In these instances, is Jesus describing a physical place, or could he be generalizing to a more theological / after life concept of an never ending hell? In each instance, one conceivably could argue the case either way. This is especially the case in the second instance where Jesus talks of destroying not just the body but also the soul in Gehenna – which takes us our next question.

Destroying Body & Soul? There are two possible ways to interpret Jesus comment about the destruction of body and soul in Gehenna:

- *As a physical occurrence at Jerusalem's garbage dump.* Due to Jewish concerns over the need to bury all the dead, casting the body into the ravine without proper burial could be viewed as tantamount to destruction of both body and soul. Consistent with the Jewish view that body and soul are co-existent, David's soul could go to and be delivered from a real grave (Sheol). Jesus may also be saying that destruction of body and soul may be particularly imminent when proper burial has not occurred. And he is referring to a soul as an entity that, together with the body, can go to a physical grave (or burning refuse dump).²⁰
- *Alternatively, as a never ending place of personal torment after death (rather than the ravine at Jerusalem's edge).* However, spiritualizing Gehenna places Jesus in the position of contradicting himself. How can body or soul be tormented eternally when both are essentially destroyed (or annihilated)? The annihilation view contradicts other teachings of Jesus about continued life after death – with rewards and punishments based on one's faith and works in life (as described under point #4 below).

The only logical choice is the first. Jesus must be articulating the literal perspective that Gehenna is an earthly, physical place – and that soul and body are somehow inextricably linked.

Luke & Gehenna. Luke's gospel make use of Gehenna just once, paralleling the passage in Matthew about fearing the one who has power to "cast into Gehenna." Unlike Matthew's gospel, this time Jesus does not talk about body and soul, but more generally the power to kill.

James & Gehenna. Finally Jesus' brother makes one use of the term Gehenna in the epistle attributed to James. As in Matthew, this statement comes in the context of describing the excesses of the human tongue: "The tongue is placed among our members as a world of iniquity; it stains the whole body, sets on fire the cycle of nature, and is itself set on fire by Gehenna"²¹ As in Matthew, the analogy of the tongue to Gehenna fire is clearly symbolic but rooted in the visual image of a specific place that all would recognize – Jerusalem's ever smoldering, rancid dump.

Dumping Gehenna. In summary, the term Gehenna is best understood for its literal meaning as a material fact – an earthly place observable in this life and not necessarily as a spiritual place experienced after death. This is clearly the case with 6 of 12 NT usages of the term.

In the other 6 instances, the case for or against Gehenna as hell may not appear quite as clear cut. However on closer inspection, the only logical explanation remains that Gehenna is not an after death place of eternal torment.²² To argue for this spiritual view is to place Jesus in the position of contradicting himself. For those who would support the view of never-ending torment, this prospect of on-going torture is impossible if both body and soul are to be as, Jesus says, "destroyed".

4. While condemnation and judgment are theological concepts widely shared throughout the New Testament, hell is not.

A basic principle of biblical exegesis is that of multiple attestation. To be considered as a core doctrine, the teaching should be shared by multiple writers of the New Testament – especially the principal writers. All scriptural writings may be considered as profitable, but the case for core doctrinal value is more difficult to make if some key NT writers ignore the topic altogether.

So it is for hell. The case for consideration as a fundamental doctrine of the faith is stronger if hell is a part of theology, at a minimum, of all the gospel writers and Paul as the most prolific and doctrinally oriented of the New Testament writers. The case is enhanced if the other less prolific writers of the NT also espouse a view of never ending damnation. But is this the case?

What about John & Paul? Neither John's gospel nor Paul's epistles ever use any of the identified Biblical Hebrew, Aramaic or Greek terms translated by the KJV as "hell" – **not even once**. This is a fairly glaring omission when the most theological of the gospel writers never once refers to hell. And when the most prolific writer and shaper of Christian doctrine Paul also never once uses any of the four Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek terms that have been translated as hell.

Even if one granted the belief in a place of torment to the other gospel writers Matthew, Mark and Luke, to James, Peter and the author of Revelation, the omission of hell from the vocabulary of the New Testament's two most theologically oriented writers should provide substantial cause for pause.

Christian doctrines regarding the divinity, death and resurrection of Christ are attested to by the authors of all the gospels and by the apostle Paul. Why apply a lesser standard of attestation when the subject is eternal damnation?

Similarly the gospels, the apostle Paul and other shorter New Testament writings speak clearly of condemnation – at the very least applied to those who don't believe or follow the way of Jesus. John's gospel says that those who don't believe are "condemned already."²³ Paul talks about appearing before the judgment seat of God, but for a judgment that involves something other than never-ending, post-earthly torture.

James & Peter? Jesus' brother James says that the "doubter, being double-minded and unstable in every way, must not expect to receive anything from the Lord."²⁴ And he condemns the capacity of the human tongue to be "set on fire of Gehenna."

Peter's second epistle condemns false teachers who bring "swift destruction on themselves."²⁵ He also states that the Lord knows to "keep the unrighteous

under punishment until the day of judgment.”²⁶ And Peter observes that God cast the angels that sinned into Tartaros. Both writers talk openly of condemnation and judgment. However, neither James nor Paul writers ever says that the condemned will be tormented in perpetuity. There is judgment, lack of blessing and punishment – but not never ending damnation.

The Others? Two final books of the New Testament written by others – Hebrews and Jude – never once use any term translated as Hell. Yet both speak of condemnation.

The (unknown) author of Hebrews writes that that if “the message declared by angels (through Moses at Sinai) was valid, and every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty, how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?”²⁷ Hebrews goes further, describing “eternal judgment” as a “basic teaching about Christ.”²⁸

Yet Hebrews also speaks of the discipline of God, as seeming “painful rather than pleasant at the time, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” And the discipline can be unmistakably severe as the author exhorts ultimate recovery: “Therefore lift your drooping pants and strengthen your weak knees, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed.”²⁹

How is the concept of once and for all, never ending judgment to be reconciled with God’s mercy and opportunity for ultimate recovery? In only one way – by recognizing the “eternal” is a period that means “age lasting”, sometimes of indefinite duration, but not infinite. This is the literal meaning of the Greek from which English terms like eternal and everlasting are derived – *aionios*.³⁰

Jude starts his short letter by observing how “certain intruders” have infiltrated the ranks of believers, “people who long ago were designated for this condemnation as ungodly.” Jude goes on to compare these to the residents of Sodom and Gomorrah whose unnatural lust serves “as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire.” Yet at the close of the letter, Jude suggests that the exercise of mercy can serve to “save others by snatching them out of the fire.”³¹ From Jude’s perspective, the fire itself may be never ending but the sinner’s position in the fire is not necessarily forever; the sinner can yet be snatched out.

Condemnation Yes, Hell No! At least one of four terms is translated by the KJV as “hell” in just seven of the 27 books of the New Testament. The other 20 NT books offer not a single mention of hell. NT writings evidence broad discussion of responsibility for one’s actions, for condemnation, for judgment – and for a time certain. But hell as a place of never ending torment – it’s just not there.

5. A similar case can be made that other scripture references that imply the spiritual condemnation to a never ending hell also are incorrectly interpreted.

All four gospels describe condemnation of evil in rather stark terms – often assumed as equivalent to Hell though this is never directly stated in the scriptures. For example, as part of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus proclaims:

Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven. On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many deeds of power in your name?’ Then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; go away from me, you evildoers.’³²

In this case, Jesus clearly is separating himself from the perpetrator of evil. But to where and for how long, this is not as clearly stated.

Weeping & Gnashing. For an even more explicit example, turn to Jesus’ explanation of the parable of the weeds of the field. Interpreting for his disciples, Jesus is at his most cryptic:

Just as the weeds are collected and burned up with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will collect out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all evildoers, and they will throw them *into the furnace of fire, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*³³

In the parable of the ten talents, Jesus describes a similar form of punishment albeit in response to a different situation. In this case, the master condemns the slave who buried his money in the ground, earning no return on investment:

You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. As for this worthless slave, throw him *into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.*³⁴

There is one other similar passage in Luke that warrants consideration. Again, hell is not mentioned by name, but may (or may not) be implied. In any event this warning is worth considering in its entirety. In this instance, Jesus is on the road and responding to a question: “Lord, will only a few be saved?”

Jesus' response is telling:

Strive to enter *through the narrow door*; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able. When once the owner of the house has got up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and to knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, open to us,' then in reply he will say to you, 'I do not know where you come from.' Then you will begin to say, 'We ate and drank with you, and you taught in our streets.' But he will say, 'I do not know where you come from; go away from me, all you evildoers!' There will be *weeping and gnashing of teeth* when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves thrown out. Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God. Indeed, *some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.*³⁵

In the first above-noted parable of Matthew, the place of punishment is a furnace of fire; in the second the place is that of outer darkness. In Luke, there is no explicitly identified place of punishment, but there is expulsion of the evildoers from the kingdom of God.

In all three instances, the response of the evildoers is **weeping and gnashing of teeth**. This expression is also cited elsewhere in Matthew and appears to draw on a passage in Psalms that describes the wicked respond to righteousness and "gnash their teeth."³⁶ The Psalmist goes on to say that "the desire of the wicked comes to nothing."

Whether this place of "weeping and gnashing of teeth," is hell or not, Jesus does not directly say. The argument could be made that Jesus is speaking metaphorically. Otherwise, how could hell be both a furnace of fire and a place of darkness?

In all of these instances there is no claim that the punishment of the individual sinner is perpetual. Looking back at the deeds of the human life rightfully may involve weeping and gnashing of teeth. But God's mercy has the upper hand when the sinner is prepared to surrender his will to that of the Father.

Back to Aionios. We are drawn back to numerous NT statements that imply or, in some cases, directly make statements about what appears to be eternal punishment. For example, in an apocalyptic discourse with the disciples prior to his arrest, Jesus ends by condemning those who will not take care of persons who are hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison:

"Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. And these will go away *into eternal punishment*, but the righteous into eternal life."³⁷

As previously noted, the problem is that the Greek term *aionios* translated as “eternal” does not mean what we think of as “eternal.” The Greek term means “age-lasting.” As the adjective form of the noun Aion, the descriptor Aionios is of finite (albeit often indefinite), but not infinite, duration.³⁸

Condemnation - yes, perpetual hell - no. These examples (and others like them) are not easily resolved. For the *hardliners*, they can readily be used as suggesting that hell is real – a place of perpetual torment.

And this position is perhaps half-right. The NT scripture definitely teaches condemnation and punishment for evil doing. However, this is only half the story.

From the earliest Greek manuscripts, the available evidence is that the NT does not teach that this individual punishment is perpetual. Rather the punishment is *age-lasting*, of a finite but seemingly indefinite nature defined by and known only to the Godhead.

6. In place of hell without end, the Bible clearly recognizes accountability after death for the actions of this earthly life.

“He who believes
in Him is not
condemned; but
he who does not
believe is
condemned
already,
because he has
not believed in
the name of the
only begotten
Son of God. And
this is the
condemnation,
that the light has
come into the
world, and men
loved darkness
rather than light,
because their
deeds were evil.
For everyone
practicing evil
hates the light
and does not
come to the
light, lest his
deeds should be
exposed.

- John 3:18-20
(NKJV)

Accountability with the possibility of condemnation and punishment is made abundantly clear by the comments noted above. This is true even for NT writings that contain no mention of hell – especially John’s gospel and the epistles of Paul.

John’s Gospel. The account given by John is that Jesus did not come to condemn but to save humanity. When condemnation occurs, it is essentially self-inflicted. The sinner gets what he or she asks for.

About as close as the Jesus of John’s gospel comes to the notion of a place for the damned occurs as he is criticized for healing on the Sabbath. Jesus starts by commenting on the primacy of doing good despite the legalistic rules of Judaism, then continues to make a broader point, stating that:

For just as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son also to have life in himself; and he has given him authority to execute judgment, because he is the Son of Man. Do not be astonished at this; for the hour is coming when all who are in their graves will hear his voice and will come out—those who have done good, to the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil, to the *resurrection of condemnation*.³⁹

Based on earlier discussion, it would appear that both body and soul can be expected to come forth at the time of this resurrection. The price of accountability is clear – life for those who have “done good” and condemnation for those who have “done evil.” Again note, John’s term is one of condemnation, but with no statement of a never-ending place of torture.

Pauline Theology. Paul follows John in not referring directly to any of the terms used by the KJV for hell. Both John and Paul talk of judgment, but neither identifies a never-ending hell as the necessary or logical result of that judgment.

However, the apostle Paul is not necessarily any more instructive about the means of condemnation than John even when describing his views of judgment (without any direct recourse to hell). For example, writing to the Romans, Paul states: “For we will all stand before the judgment seat of God.” Paul goes on to say that “every knee shall bow” and “every tongue shall give praise.” He concludes by stating that: “So then, each of us will be accountable to God.”⁴⁰

Is our method of accountability solely to give praise? If so, we might seem to be off the hook fairly easily. Or is it that some may be judged more harshly? If so, Paul doesn't say, at least not to the Romans.

To the Corinthians, Paul writes in a similar vein: "For all of us must appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each may receive recompense for what has been done in the body whether for good or evil."⁴¹ In this passage, Paul seems to indicate the possibility of **different outcomes depending on one's individual actions in this earthly life**. However, even in this instance, Paul does not go on to explain specifically what is in store for those who do evil.

And to the Galatians: "...if anyone proclaims to you a gospel contrary to what you received, let that one be accursed."⁴² Paul is more emphatic in his condemnation, but still no less evasive by not detailing the consequences.

In fact, in this instance, Paul is not condemning non-believers, but rather other believers, just those who are "turning to a different gospel – not that there is another gospel." In this case the condemnation is actually aimed at other believers, first identified as those "who were supposed to be acknowledged leaders," more specifically as none other than the church leaders James and Cephas (Peter) and John.⁴³

Accountability – yes; hell – no. Despite never once mentioning hell, John and Paul appear to line up with the three synoptic gospel writers, Peter and James, and the (uncertain) author of Revelation in a common view that there is accountability for the actions of this life after death. Condemnation is clearly in store for those who do evil. However, there is no clear NT support in any of these writings for a hell with torture that is never ending.

7. The Bible offers an alternative that is far superior to hell, the divinely appointed mission of Jesus Christ that none should be condemned “but that the world through Him might be saved.”

This is the ultimate redeeming message of John 3:17. It follows on the heels of the better known saying of 3:16, expressing why God will go to all extremes to avoid never ending condemnation. The reason is simple; it is because “God so loved the world.” Pure and simple.

Jesus’ Message to Nicodemus. This is a message not contravened by the rest of Jesus’ statement to the Jewish ruler Nicodemus that he who does not believe is “condemned already.” Because there is more!

What is the condemnation? Is it hell? No. This is not part of the message of Jesus imparted by John’s gospel. Rather, Jesus explains to Nicodemus that “the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.”

Those who practice evil shun the light; the one “who does the truth comes to the light.”⁴⁵ And for those who come to the light, Jesus concludes his message by noting that this is so it may be clearly seen that good deeds have been “done in God.”

With Jesus, the message is not about hell for those who shun the light. Rather, the emphasis is on the purpose and the meaning of the actions of those who come to the light. The bottom-line purpose is not to emphasize God’s wrath, but rather his glory and his mercy.

And note, the condemnation does not appear to be the work of God alone. The stimulus comes from human initiative. As Jesus explains to Nicodemus, “... this is the condemnation, that the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil.”⁴⁶ As noted earlier, any condemnation is essentially self-imposed.

Back Once More to Paul. We conclude by returning again to that most prolific of NT writers – the one apostle who never met Jesus in the earthly flesh. However, like John, Paul has a clear view of why Jesus came to earth.

Writing to the Thessalonians, Paul states: “For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him.”⁴⁷

And to Titus, after describing how slaves should submit to masters, Paul says even more succinctly that “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all.”⁴⁸

For Paul, the message is about salvation. Despite Paul’s warnings of judgment to unbelievers, he does not impose a time certain beyond which redemption is no longer possible.

To the Galatians, Paul proclaims that salvation is not limited but available to all – giving as examples Jew and Gentile, man and woman, slave and free.

To drive home his point, Paul elucidates metaphors of slavery and the fullness of time (or an age-lasting era). He begins by offering a conclusion, stating that “...if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to the promise.” He then continues with a more detailed explanation:

“... neither
death, nor life,
nor angels, nor
rulers, nor things
present, nor
things to come,
nor powers, nor
height, nor
depth, nor
anything else in
all creation, will
be able to
separate us from
the love of God
in Christ Jesus our
Lord.”

- Paul’s Epistle to
the Romans
(8:38-39) ⁴⁴

My point is this: heirs, as long as they are minors, are no better than slaves, though they are the owners of all the property; but they remain under guardians and trustees until the date set by the father. So with us; while we were minors, we were enslaved to the elemental spirits of the world. But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir, through God.⁴⁹

God’s purpose is redemption of those under the law (i.e., everyone). Adoption as children of the heavenly king is available who all who accept the offer. And as Paul wrote to the Romans, this is an offer not limited by life or death, by earthly or spiritual powers.

Bottom line, God’s mercy extends not just to those who have already believed but also to those yet to come into the kingdom. As explained by Paul to the Ephesians, this has been his plan since before our creation:

But God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, so that in the ages to come he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus. For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God—not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.⁵⁰

For some, the transition from spiritual death to life takes longer than for others. For some, it may arrive in “ages to come.”

From Condemnation to Salvation. The unfortunate reality expressed by scripture is that salvation is always preceded by condemnation. But God’s purpose is that condemnation and judgment gives way to salvation, not just for some, but available for everyone who has been, is, or will traverse this earth. Reconciling this purpose of salvation with the divine requirement for justice represents a challenge barely comprehensible to humankind. But not incomprehensible to God.

How does this happen? Paul perhaps speaks best, for many of us, from the gut level: “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!”⁵¹

BEYOND THE SCRIPTURAL WITNESS

While the focus of this manuscript has been on what the Hebrew scriptures and New Testament have to say about hell, it is useful to also briefly consider other historical perspectives – including Jewish views of Gehenna, the traditions of the church from the early patriarch up to today’s post-reformation world.

JEWISH VIEWS OF GEHENNA

In contemporary evangelical writing about hell, the case is made that that Jesus’ hearers in the first century would have understood Jesus talk of Gehenna as speaking “figuratively of the fate of the wicked.” However, this author (cited to the left) provides no evidence as to how Gehenna was actually viewed by Jews of the 1st century.

Was Gehenna viewed then as simply Jerusalem’s garbage pit (which is why the [heat-loving] worm never dies and the fire is never quenched)? Or was the perspective more along the lines of Jewish teachers Shammai and Hillel who had within the century just before Christ come to view Gehenna *as a metaphor* offering the option of remedial punishment?

The great schools of Jewish thought before the time of Christ until afterwards revolved around two Rabbi’s – Shammai and Hillel.⁵² **Shammai required** a belief in eternal torment, but allowed that some would return from Gehenna. He cited Zechariah 13.9 and 1st Samuel 2.6. A third of the people would be immediately given eternal life while a third eternal torment, but another third would go into Gehenna and return.

Hillel’s school was perhaps the most influential Jewish teacher of this era. Hillel taught punishment for sinners and Gentiles for 12 months but allowed for a certain class of people to spend eternity in hell. There are nuances here, especially for those who would be sent to hell – those, it seems, who completely and utterly rejected God.

Hillel was the grandfather of Gamaliel who was the teacher of Saul, renamed Paul. Then Gamaliel’s grandson served as spiritual leader to Rabbi Akiva, who would become involved and then executed by Rome in 137 AD due to his involvement in the Bar Kokhba revolt.

To summarize, both Rabbis Hillel and Shammai not only used Gehenna as a metaphor of remedial punishment but both also assumed that most people who went through such judgment/punishment ultimately rose to Ga Eden (Paradise). The punishing afterlife is temporal; there is no eternal punishment. Or as Rabbi Akiva would say: “The duration of the punishment of the wicked in Gehinnom is twelve months.”⁵³

In 1995, a professor at Covenant Theological Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri published a book making the case that the Old Testament concept of “sheol tells us nothing about life after death.”

The book goes on to discussion of hell in the New Testament, stating that when speaking of Gehenna, Jesus’ hearers would have understood that he was speaking “figuratively of the fate of the wicked.”

- From Robert Patterson, *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment*, 1995.

TRADITIONS OF THE CHURCH FATHERS

The previously referenced book *Hell on Trial: The Case for Eternal Punishment* includes a quote from the English Anglican scholar Richard Bauckham that “until the nineteenth century almost all Christian theologians taught the reality of eternal torment in hell.”

“For the wicked
there are
punishments, not
perpetual,
however, lest the
immortality
prepared for
them should be a
disadvantage,
but they are to
be purified for a
brief period
according to the
amount of
malice in their
works. They shall
therefore suffer
punishment for a
short space, but
immortal
blessedness
having no end
awaits them...the
penalties to be
inflicted for their
many and grave
sins are very far
surpassed by the
magnitude of the
mercy to be
showed to
them.”

- Diodore of
Tarsus, 320-394
A.D.

But is this statement really the case – or does it represent a bit of an exaggeration. A quick tour of two millennia of church provides a less clear-cut answer. Not only has there been less than universal consensus about torment in hell, in many cases this view has been strongly disputed by a wide range of orthodox as well as heterodox theologians.

Two millennia ago, Jesus of Nazareth emerged on the eastern edge of the Mediterranean to earth to bring salvation and break the bonds of death. He came “not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.”

Jesus lead disciple, Peter, would later write that while Jesus was “put to death in the flesh but made alive by the Spirit, by whom also He went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly were disobedient.”

In short, it appears that Jesus went to ‘Hell’ after death to offer forgiveness to those unrepentant in their life if they would only repent given a “second chance” post-mortem. At least this was the view of subsequent leaders (or patriarchs) of the early church. People like Origen (the most famous theologian of the 2nd century) and Tertullian (the person who coined the term “New Testament”).

And in more recent times, those expressing views supportive of a second chance also endorsed by persons as diverse as C. S. Lewis (the 20th century theologian and fiction writer) and Joseph Smith (the 19th century founder of the Mormon church). What Joseph Smith brought to the table was a different twist on the concept of the second chance, via retroactive baptism for the dead – a practice alluded to in the New Testament.

Between the times of the early church leaders and our modern era, there were others who took Christianity in a different and less conciliatory direction, leading to the church orthodoxy that has prevailed to this day – at least those who are willing to still openly discuss hell and damnation in a 21st century culture less tolerant of a punitive world. Down through the last 20 centuries, disparate figures have proclaimed that life without salvation meant damnation to the never ending torments of an eternal hell.

This change toward what became church orthodoxy took hold most abruptly with Augustine, who feared that a doctrine of universal reconciliation or a

"We can set no limits to the agency of the Redeemer to redeem, to rescue, to discipline in his work, and so will he continue to operate after this life."

- Clement of Alexandria, (Stromata, vi, 638)

"In the end and consummation of the Universe all are to be restored into their original harmonious state, and we all shall be made one body and be united once more into a perfect man and the prayer of our Savior shall be fulfilled that all may be one."

- St. Jerome, 331-420

post-human life second chance would create apathy and weaken people's desire to repent, receive baptism, and keep the commandments. The vision of what Hell might be about was intensified by Muhammed, then by Dante and even Martin Luther (in part due to Luther's objections to the Catholic church putting salvation up for mercantilist grab via the sale of indulgences).

Witness of the Early Church

Fundamentalist writers like Peterson and Bauckham have not only dismissed the testimony of Origen (the greatest theologian between Paul and Augustine), but also the unequivocal as well as the more nuanced statements of other church patriarchs including Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius, even Athanasius, Jerome, Ambrose, and also Gregory of Nyssa (among others).

Jerome said that "most people" adhered to some form of universalist belief; even Augustine acknowledged that "very many" believed in something less than never ending punishment. Not until the 5th century with Augustine does there appear to be a strong countermovement toward support for never ending damnation.

From the Medieval Church to the Reformation

This emerging medieval view is solidified by the subsequent infiltration of Muslim theology, the writings of Dante and then later reinforced by the Protestant reformers Luther and Calvin. These all seem to share a common blood lust for judgment in the here and now as well as the hereafter.

For Augustine, it was the just war, with Muhammad the jihad, then Dante's revenge against political and personal enemies, Luther's increasingly virulent anti-semitism, and Calvin's theocracy including approval of judicial killing as with Michael Servetus.

Nonetheless, some had second thoughts, like Luther, when he wrote that "God forbid that I should limit the time for acquiring faith to the present life. In the depths of the divine mercy there may be opportunity to win it in the future state."

Witness of the Post Reformation Church

The book *Hell on Trial* characterizes the transition to a "modern period" as exemplifying a split between previous orthodoxy and a new more humanistic, rebellious spirit. However, there are otherwise orthodox theologians of modernity who nonetheless challenged medieval views of hell as unrelenting and never ending torment – ranging from the Puritan/Pietist Richard Baxter of the 17th century to C. S. Lewis of the 20th century.

In 1741, a Puritan minister named Jonathan Edwards, widely acknowledged

“God forbid that
 I should limit
 the time for
 acquiring faith to
 the present life. In
 the depths of the
 divine mercy
 there may be
 opportunity to
 win it in the
 future state.”

– Letter from
 Martin Luther to
 Hansen von
 Rechenberg,
 1523. (Luther's
 Briefe, ii. 454.)

as America's most important and original philosophical theologian," preached
 that "There is nothing that keeps wicked men at any one moment out of hell,
 but the mere pleasure of God."

To the Puritan, life is but a part of a cosmic struggle between good and evil.
 All spheres of activity – family, work, spirituality, politics – are defined in
 terms of black and white, good or evil. There is no middle ground. This
 viewpoint reflects the politics of the just war, of calling out the financiers of
 the 2008 financial crash as evil people rather than searching for the systemic
 reason for the problem, and working to improve the system so that a
 recurrence is less likely in the future.

To the universalist, there may be good and evil but the fix doesn't necessarily
 require the elimination or shunning of the person who has caused evil –
 whether intended or not. There is not necessarily just one path to rightness
 and Godliness. There may be multiple avenues, though some may be more
 efficacious than others.

And for those who believe in an afterlife, there may be a second chance for
 those who did not make the grade the first time around. There is hope for all –
 and all are worthy of hope.

HELL SUMMARIZED

The thesis outlined in these pages is simply that the concept of a hell as a place of never ending torment for non-believers after death is supported by neither the Old nor New Testaments. Personal accountability for the actions of human life is clearly scriptural and represents a virtually insurmountable barrier to experiencing the kingdom of heaven – if not for the mercy of a loving and holy God.

In short, the Bible and more specifically the New Testament offers an alternative that is far superior to hell. This alternative is provided via the divinely appointed mission of Jesus Christ on behalf of God the Father that none should be condemned and punished for all time but rather that “the world through him might be saved.” The effectiveness of a church of God on earth as bearers of the truth depends on this long overdue return to scriptural authenticity.

APPENDIX A . KJV PASSAGES ON HELL (WITH MORE RECENT NIV TRANSLATION)

Passage	King James - KJV (54 References to "Hell" – 31 OT, 23 NT)	Hebrew / Greek	NIV (14) Translated
Dt. 32:22	For a fire is kindled in mine anger, and shall burn unto the <i>lowest hell</i> , and shall consume the earth with her increase, and set on fire the foundations of the mountains.	<i>sheol</i>	realm of death
II Sa. 22:6	The sorrows of <i>hell</i> compassed me about; the snares of death prevented me ...	<i>sheol</i>	the grave
Job 11:7-8	Canst thou by searching find out God? canst thou find out the Almighty unto perfection? <i>It is</i> as high as heaven; what canst thou do? deeper than <i>hell</i> ; what canst thou know?	<i>sheol</i>	depths of the grave
Job 26:6	<i>Hell</i> is naked before him, and destruction hath no covering.	<i>sheol</i>	Death
Ps. 9:17	The wicked shall be turned <i>into hell</i> , and all the nations that forget God.	<i>sheol</i>	to the grave
Ps. 16:10	For thou wilt not leave <i>my soul in hell</i> ; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.	<i>sheol</i>	to the grave
Ps. 18:5	The <i>sorrows of hell</i> compassed me about: the snares of death prevented me.	<i>sheol</i>	corde of the grave
Ps. 55:15	Let death seize upon them, and let them go down <i>quick into hell</i> ...	<i>sheol</i>	alive to the grave
Ps. 86:13	For great is thy mercy toward me: and thou hast delivered my soul from the <i>lowest hell</i>	<i>sheol</i>	depths of the grave
Ps. 116:3	The sorrows of death compassed me, and the <i>pains of hell</i> gat hold upon me: I found trouble and sorrow.	<i>sheol</i>	anguish of the grave
Ps. 139:8	If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed <i>in hell</i> , behold, thou art there.	<i>sheol</i>	in the depths
Pr. 5:5	Her feet go down to death; her steps <i>take hold on hell</i> .	<i>sheol</i>	lead straight to the grave
Pr 7:27	Her house <i>is the way to hell</i> , going down to the chambers of death.	<i>sheol</i>	highway to the grave
Pr. 9:18	But he knoweth not that the dead are there; and that her guests are in the depths <i>of hell</i> .	<i>sheol</i>	of the grave
Pr. 15:11	<i>Hell</i> and destruction are before the LORD: how much more then the hearts of the children of men?	<i>sheol</i>	Death
Pr. 15:24	The way of life is above to the wise, that he may <i>depart from hell beneath</i> .	<i>sheol</i>	keep from going down to the grave
Pr. 23:14	Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from <i>hell</i> .	<i>sheol</i>	death
Pr. 27:20	<i>Hell</i> and destruction are never full; so the eyes of man are never satisfied.	<i>sheol</i>	Death
Is. 5:14	Therefore <i>hell</i> hath enlarged herself, and opened her mouth without measure: and their glory, and their multitude, and their pomp, and he that rejoiceth, shall descend into it.	<i>sheol</i>	the grave
Is. 14:9	<i>Hell from beneath</i> is moved for thee to meet thee at thy coming: it stirreth up the dead for thee, even all the chief ones of the earth; it hath raised up from their thrones all the kings of the nations.	<i>sheol</i>	The grave below

Passage	King James - KJV (54 References to "Hell" – 31 OT, 23 NT)	Hebrew / Greek	NIV (14) Translated
Is. 14:15	Yet thou shalt be brought down <i>to hell</i> , to the sides of the pit.	<i>sheol</i>	to the grave
Is 28:15	We have made a covenant with death, and <i>with hell</i> are we at agreement; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, it shall not come unto us: for we have made lies our refuge, and under falsehood have we hid ourselves	<i>sheol</i>	with the grave
Is 28:18	And your covenant with death shall be disannulled, and your agreement <i>with hell</i> shall not stand; when the overflowing scourge shall pass through, then ye shall be trodden down by it.	<i>sheol</i>	with the grave
Is 57:9	And thou wentest to the king with ointment, and didst increase thy perfumes, and didst send thy messengers far off, and didst debase thyself even <i>unto hell</i>	<i>sheol</i>	to the grave
Ez. 31:16	I made the nations to shake at the sound of his fall, when I cast him <i>down to hell</i> with them that descend into the pit:	<i>sheol</i>	down to the grave
Ez 31:17	They also went down <i>into hell</i> with him unto <i>them that be slain</i> with the sword;	<i>sheol</i>	to the grave
Ez. 32:21	The strong among the mighty shall speak to him out of the <i>midst of hell</i> with them that help him: they are gone down, they lie uncircumcised, slain by the sword.	<i>sheol</i>	within the grave
Ez 32:27	And they shall not lie with the mighty that are fallen of the uncircumcised, which are gone down <i>to hell</i> with their weapons of war:	<i>sheol</i>	to the grave
Am. 9:2	Though they dig <i>into hell</i> , thence shall mine hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, thence will I bring them down:	<i>sheol</i>	to the depths of the grave
Jon. 2:2	I cried by reason of mine affliction unto the LORD, and he heard me; out of the <i>belly of hell</i> cried I, <i>and</i> thou heardest my voice.	<i>sheol</i>	depths of the grave
Hab. 2:5	Yea also, because he transgresseth by wine, he is a proud man, neither keepeth at home, who <i>enlargeth his desire as hell</i> , and is as death,	<i>sheol</i>	is as greedy as the grave
Mt. 5:22	<i>and whosoever shall say to his brother, Raca, shall be in danger of the council: but whosoever shall say, Thou fool, shall be in danger of hell fire.</i>	<i>Gehenna</i>	fire of hell
Mt. 5:29	<i>And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.</i>	<i>Gehenna</i>	thrown into hell
Mt 5:30	<i>And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell.</i>	<i>Gehenna</i>	go into hell
Mt. 10:28	<i>And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.</i>	<i>Gehenna</i>	in hell
Mt. 11:23	<i>And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted unto heaven, shalt be brought down to hell:</i>	<i>Hades</i>	to the depths
Mt. 16:18	<i>That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.</i>	<i>Hades</i>	gates of Hades
Mt. 18:9	<i>And if thine eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: it is better for thee to enter into life with one eye, rather than having two eyes to be cast into hell fire.</i>	<i>Gehenna</i>	fire of hell

Passage	King James - KJV (54 References to "Hell" – 31 OT, 23 NT)	Hebrew / Greek	NIV (14) Translated
Mt. 23:15	Ye make him twofold more the <i>child of hell</i> than yourselves.	<i>Gehenna</i>	son of hell
Mt 23:33	Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape <i>the damnation of hell</i> ?	<i>Gehenna</i>	Being condemned to hell
Mk 9:43	And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to <i>go into hell</i> , into the fire that never shall be quenched:	<i>Gehenna</i>	go into hell
Mk 9:45	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 <i>cast into hell</i> , into the fire that never shall be quenched:	<i>Gehenna</i>	go into hell
Mk 9:47-48	And if thine 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 <i>cast into hell fire</i> : Where their worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched.	<i>Gehenna</i>	thrown into hell
Lk. 10:15	And thou, Capernaum, which art exalted to heaven, shalt be thrust <i>down to hell</i> .	<i>Hades</i>	down to the depths
Lk. 12:5	Fear him, which after he hath killed hath power <i>to cast into hell</i> ; yea, I say unto you, Fear him.	<i>Gehenna</i>	to throw you into hell
Lk. 16:23	And <i>in hell</i> he lift up his eyes, being in torments, and seeth Abraham afar off, and Lazarus in his bosom.	<i>Hades</i>	In hell
Ac. 2:27	Because thou wilt not leave <i>my soul in hell</i> , neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.	<i>Hades</i>	me to the grave
Ac. 2:31	He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was <i>not left in hell</i> , neither his flesh did see corruption.	<i>Hades</i>	not abandoned to the grave
Ja. 3:6	so is the tongue among our members, that it defileth the whole body, and setteth on fire the course of nature; and it is set <i>on fire of hell</i> .	<i>Gehenna</i>	on fire by hell
II Pet. 2:4	God spared not the angels that sinned, <i>but cast them down to hell</i> ,	<i>Tartarus</i>	but sent them to hell
Rev. 1:18	I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the <i>keys of hell and of death</i> .	<i>Hades</i>	keys of death and Hades
Rev. 6:8	And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, <i>and Hell</i> followed with him.	<i>Hades</i>	and Hades
Rev. 20:13	And the sea gave up the dead which were in it; <i>and death and hell</i> delivered up the dead which were in them: and they were judged every man according to their works.	<i>Hades</i>	death and Hades
Rev. 20:14	And <i>death and hell</i> were cast into the lake of fire. This is the second death.	<i>Hades</i>	death and Hades

APPENDIX B. DOES AIONIOS MEAN NEVER ENDING?

In the King James version of the New Testament, the Greek term *aionios* is translated as “eternal” 42 times, as “everlasting” 25 times and as “forever” one time. But do these English terms adequately reflect what *aionios* really means?

Hebrew Meaning. Let’s start back with the Hebrew scriptures (of the Old Testament). The older Hebrew equivalent of the word subsequently translated sometimes as “everlasting” is *olam*. However, the KJV appears to allow for considerably more nuanced and varied translations of *olam* than *ainios*. KJV translations of *olam* are to terms that include ancient time, beginning of the world, continuance, ever, everlasting, evermore, eternal, old, old time, world, always, at any time, forever, lasting, long, and perpetual. In almost all cases the Greek Septuagint would translate the Hebrew word *olam* into the Greek as *aionios*.

For a sense of the diversity in translation, consider the following examples (from the KJV):

- *God speaking to Abram*: “For all the land which thou seest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed for ever (*olam*).”⁵⁴
- *To Moses*: “... and ye shall keep it (the Passover) a feast to the Lord throughout your generations; ye shall keep it a feast by an ordinance for ever (*olam*).”⁵⁵
- *God speaking thru Nathan of the son of David the king*: “He shall build me an house, and I will establish his throne for ever (*olam*).”⁵⁶
- *God speaking to Solomon at night*: “For now I have chosen and sanctified this house (temple), that my name may be there for ever (*olam*), and that my name may be there for ever (*olam*), and mine heart shall be there perpetually.”⁵⁷
- *Solomon writing the Proverbs*: “The king that faithfully judgeth the poor, his throne shall be established for ever (*olam*).”⁵⁸
- *The Lord speaking to Isaiah*: “And the Lord shall guide thee continually, and satisfy thy soul in drought, and make fat thy bones: and thou shalt be like a watered garden, and like a spring of water, whose waters fail not. And they that shall be of thee shall build the old (*olam*) waste places, thou shalt raise up the foundations of many generations; and thou shalt be called, The repairer of the breach, The restorer of paths to dwell in.”⁵⁹
- *The word of the Lord through Jeremiah*: “Because my people have forgotten me, they have burned incense to vanity, and they have caused them to stumble in their ways from the ancient (*olam*) paths...”⁶⁰
- *Jonah describing his experience in the belly of the great fish*: “Thy waters compassed me about, even to the soul ... the earth with her bars was about me for ever (*olam*): yet has thou brought up my life from corruption, O Lord my God.”⁶¹

So, for a moment consider the implications of these wide ranging uses of the Hebrew term *olam*. Abram’s descendents would obtain forever a land that has been their possession only intermittently. Followers of Yahweh should keep the Passover in perpetuity. Does this apply to Christians in the wake of a New Covenant?

David's throne would last for ever? Hardly! God residing in Solomon's temple in perpetuity? Not unless that residence includes the current Dome of the Rock on Jerusalem's Temple Mount. Despite the wisdom of Solomon, what earthly king's throne has lasted for ever?

The "old places" referred to by Isaiah and the "ancient paths" of Jeremiah refer to times past, not to a perpetual future. And, while Jonah may have felt like he was in the belly of the whale for a long time, it was not a never-ending visit.

In effect, *olam* means "age-lasting" or of "indefinite duration". Sometimes that duration can be quite long – as from the time of Moses to the coming of Christ. Sometimes the age may mean the duration of a king's reign; in Jonah's case it was all of three days and three nights.

New Testament Usage. The earliest available (or extant) manuscripts of the Christian New Testament are in Greek. Three Greek terms are of note for this discussion:

- *Aion* – the form of the word that is a noun. The simplest meaning of the word is "age". This is the Greek word from which the English equivalent "eon" is derived – defined by Webster's as "an indefinitely long period of time."
- *Aionon* – the plural of the *aion*, meaning "ages."
- *Aionios* – the term as an adjective, meaning "age-lasting."

By one count, the different forms of the word occur in the New Testament one hundred and ninety-nine times – the noun 128 and the adjective 71 times.⁶² Consider a sampling of varied uses of both terms – again as presented in the King James Version (KJV) of the New Testament.

Aion: The noun is variously translated into English of the KJV as age, world, beginning of the world, course, and eternal. For example, Paul writes to the Colossians about the "mystery which hath been hidden from ages (*aion*) and from generations, but is now made manifest to the saints."⁶³ Definitely a period of limited duration and in the past.

In his teaching, Jesus talks disparagingly of the "cares of this world (*aion*), and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lusts of other things..." In this and other instances, the term *aion* gives a sense not only of the world normally defined as *kosmos*, but also a sense of time as in the current as opposed to future temporal age. Not infinite, but a finite time period with an intended end.

Yet another translation of the Greek term occurs as Paul writes to the Ephesians as those who "in times past ye walked according to the course (*aion*) of this world (*kosmos*)."⁶⁴ This *aion* is clearly a time that has come and gone for those who are now followers of Christ.

Yet another declaration of Paul's does drive toward a sense of endless duration, but note the way the passage is constructed. To Timothy, Paul writes: "Now unto the king eternal (*aion*), immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory for ever (*aionios*) and ever (*aionios*). Amen."⁶⁵

This one passage uses both the noun and adjective forms of the word – in triplicate – all in one sentence. On the surface, Paul's benediction passage would seem to offer support for the concept of the Greek (*aion*, *aionios*) as denoting endless direction. But note the sly twists of translation.

Jesus is “eternal and immortal.” Why the double affirmation if eternal and immortal both mean endless? Why say that Jesus is “eternal and eternal.” The statement makes for more sense if Jesus is both the king of the age and eternal.

Yet more clearly, if the adjective *aionios* means never ending, the best translation would be to offer God honor and glory “for the eternities of the eternities” A bit redundant. The statement makes more sense if translated as giving God glory for “the age of the ages.” This is the clear sense of one age replaced by another and then another. In effect, eternity is not one *aion*, but the multiplicity of eons placed end to end without end.

Aionios: Now consider a few more uses of the adjective. To his disciples, Jesus suggests that: “... if thy hand or thy foot offend thee, cut them off, and cast them from thee: it is better for thee to enter life halt or maimed, rather than having two hands or two feet to be cast into everlasting (*aionios*) fire.”⁶⁶ Interpreted as never-ending torment, this passage is used to bolster the case for an eternal hell.

This parallels similar passages earlier in Matthew (chapter 5) and Mark 9 suggesting it is better to remove an offending hand, foot or eye than be cast wholly into hell (*Gehenna* in Hebrew). However, the case for hell as a place of never-ending torment after earthly death founders if: a) the fire into which one might be cast is Jerusalem’s smoldering garbage dump, not the underworld; b) the disposition is of one’s body on this earth, not in an afterlife; and c) the duration of the fire is age-long, not necessarily unending.

One other passage serves to richly illustrate the heartburn over the application of *aionios* both to heaven and hell. To his disciples, Matthew’s gospel ends a discourse on the Mount of Olives with Jesus stating that serving the hungry, the thirst, stranger, naked, sick or those in prison is the same as serving or not serving Jesus himself. To drive the point home, Jesus concludes that those who do not serve the “least of these” will “go away into everlasting (*aionios*) punishment: but the righteous into life eternal (*aionios*).”⁶⁷

This is a sobering thought. By the terms of this statement, there is probably no person – Christian or otherwise – who could qualify for never ending life. Rather, all are bound for never ending torment.

The meaning changes substantially if *aionios* is translated true to its definition and usage in the Greek, essentially as the unkind “go away into age-long punishment: but the righteous (who do show charity toward the least of humanity) into age-long life.” Properly translated, Jesus clearly is clearly expecting an accounting for earthly actions. The punishment is meant not to torment but to chastise and teach – to reform all of us who at one time or another are unaware and/or condescending to those in need.

The Greek term translated by the KJV as “punishment” is *kolasis*, which most directly means “restraint,” but is also translated as chastisement, correction or as to prune or cut-off.⁶⁸ The duration is for an indefinite period of time – long enough to account for and learn from one’s mistakes but not of endless duration. In other words, the term that has been translated as “eternal punishment” by the KJV may more logically be rendered as “age-long correction.”

Better Terms for Forever. The question might reasonably be asked: if *aion* (and its variations) is only age-long and not really forever, are there other Hebrew and Greek terms that do better equate with conditions that are forever, never ending. The answer, happily, is yes – at least with the Christian New Testament.

Alternative Hebrew for Forever: If *olam* means age-long, is there a Hebrew equivalent for a condition that is continuous, perpetual, never ending? The answer is yes – several times over.

In fact, there are several terms that might appear to come close – *netsach* (meaning perpetuity), *tamid* (continually), *qedem* (what is before in time or place), *ad* (duration, continuity), *yamim* (length of days) and *alam* (hidden time). However, like *olam*, none ever get quite there. Usages of these varied terms often appear to be of indefinite duration. A few examples:

Netsach:

“Thou, O Lord, remainest for ever (*olam*); thy throne from generation to generation. Wherefore dost thou forget us for ever (*netsach*), and forsake us so long time?”⁶⁹

Job’s friend Zophar speaking of the wicked: “... he shall perish for ever (*netsach*) like his own dung ... He shall fly away as a dream, and shall not be found: yea, he shall be chased away as a vision of the night.”⁷⁰

Elihu another friend of Job speaking of God: “... he doth establish (kings) for ever (*netsach*), and they are exalted.

Tamid:

“Seek the lord, and his strength: seek his face evermore (*tamid*).”⁷¹

“All the days of the afflicted are evil: but he that is of a merry heart hath a continual (*tamid*) feast.”⁷²

Qedem:

“The eternal (*qedem*) God is thy refuge, and underneath are the everlasting (*olam*) arms...”⁷³

“O arm of the Lord; awake, as in the ancient (*qedem*) days, in the generations of old.”⁷⁴

Ad:

King David to son Solomon: “Know thou the God of thy father ... if thou seek him, he will be found of thee; but if thou forsake him, he will cast thee off for ever (*ad*).”⁷⁵

The Lord’s work “... is honorable and glorious: and his righteousness endureth for ever (*ad*).”⁷⁶

Yamim:

“Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever (*yamim*).”⁷⁷

“Thy testimonies are very sure: holiness becometh thine house, O Lord, forever (*yamim*).”⁷⁸

Alam:

Daniel to the king after escaping the den of lions: “O king, live for ever (*alam*)”⁷⁹

In response, the king to Daniel issues a decree: “That in every dominion of my kingdom men tremble and fear before the God of Daniel, for he is the living God, and stedfast for ever (*alam*), and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed, and his dominion shall be even unto the end.”⁸⁰

What is one to make of these six alternative terms that could connote for ever – or something less? Examples cited above serve to illustrate both extremes – the sense of unending duration counterbalanced by time of clearly finite time frame. The one term that is best associated with for ever (*yamim*), based on context of the scriptural reference, comes from a Hebrew word best translated as length of days.

Like *olam*, the terms noted above can be viewed as representing in all cases indefinite duration, in many cases clearly a finite duration – with definite beginning or end.

Alternative Greek for Forever: The Greek provides a more distinct alternative to the *aionios* of age-long in the term *pantote* (used 42 times by the KJV and translated most often as “always”, less often as “ever” or “evermore”). Actually, the meaning of the word is best translated as “at all time” *pan* simply means “all.”

NT passages in which the word is used clearly give the sense of perpetual activity:

- In response to his disciples criticism of a woman pouring expensive ointment on Jesus, the master replies: “... ye have the poor always (*pantote*) with you: but me yet have not always (*pantote*).”⁸¹
- After Jesus describes himself as the bread of heaven, the crowd entreats: “Lord, evermore (*pantote*) give us this bread.”⁸²
- And writing to the Thessalonians, Paul instructs: “Rejoice evermore (*pantote*). Pray without ceasing. In everything give thanks...”⁸³

In both of these instances, *pantote* gives a clear understanding of never ending, but with a sense of exaggeration. For Jesus, yes there will always be those who are poor – at least to the end of this earthly age. The crowd addressing Jesus knows that bread can not be provided in perpetuity – but does want what it perceives as the food of life beyond death.

With Paul’s instructions to the Thessalonians, it is apparent that no one will ever meet the targets he sets – of never ending rejoicing, praying and giving of thanks. For Paul, *pantote* represents an

spiritual eternal ideal – an aspiration never achieved, at least not in any human, earthly realm. But in a heavenly or spiritualized realm – just maybe.

And for the ultimate combo effect of *pantote* and *aion*, consider the parting words of Jesus before ascending beyond this world: “I am with you alway (*pantote*), even unto the end of the world (*aion*).”⁸⁴ Any sense of perpetuity is ultimately confined – by the end of the world, the end of this age.

"You have seen Hell:
you are in sight of Heaven.
Will you, even now,
repent and believe?"

...
"All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice
there would be no Hell.
No soul that seriously desires joy will ever miss it.
Those who seek will find.
To those who knock it is opened."

- C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce*,
the somewhat fictional tale
of a journey betwixt
heaven and hell.

END NOTES

- ¹ Dr. R.C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Wheaton, Illinois: Tyndale House, 1992), pp 285-287.
- ² Unless noted otherwise, biblical citations used in this discussion are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Alternative translations widely cited (as noted) are the King James Version (KJV) and New International Version (NRSV).
- ³ The first Old Testament use of Sheol translated as “hell” (by the KJV) occurs in Deuteronomy: “For a fire is kindled by my anger, and burns to the depths of Sheol; it devours the earth and its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains.” (32:22, NRSV)
- Earlier KJV interpretations of Sheol as “grave” occur, the first in Genesis: “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” (37:35, NRSV). Among others, this particular OT use of Sheol is not translated by the KJV as “hell”.
- ⁴ The *Analytical Concordance to the Bible*, 22nd American edition, cites 65 uses of the term “Sheol” in the Old and New Testaments. Meanings are assigned in KJV translations as hell (31 times), grave (31 times) and pit (1 use).
- ⁵ For example, in addressing a king of Judah (Isaiah 7:11), the prophet Isaiah relays this message from the Lord: “Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be as deep as Sheol or as high as heaven”. But, illustrating the suitability of this place as at least a temporary abode for the righteous as well, the Psalmist notes (Psalms 139:8) that “if I make my bed in Sheol, thou art there.” Or Jonah (from Jonah 2:2), who “out of the belly of Sheol I cried, and you heard my voice.” In this case, Jonah is in a pit (the belly of hell), not even as yet in a place of the afterlife.
- ⁶ In one of numerous passages where the KJV does not translate Sheol to “hell” (as cited above at Genesis 37:35), Joseph’s father Jacob is disconsolate at the reported death of his son, proclaiming “No, I shall go down to Sheol to my son, mourning.” This is a case where the KJV is clearly unwilling to translate a great patriarch as descending into a “hell” or place of torment on behalf of another patriarch of the OT. Rather, the KJV in this instance translates Sheol as “the grave”, illustrating some arbitrariness in determining how Sheol is translated into the English by the KJV.
- ⁷ At Psalms 86:13, the psalmist writes: “For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.”
- ⁸ Prior to its use as Jerusalem’s garbage dump, Gehenna was a site notorious for pagan infanticide. During the reigns of Ahaz and Manasseh, human sacrifices were offered to the Ammonite god Molech, with pagan worship continuing up to the time of King Josiah. Gehenna subsequently became a dumping-place for the refuse of the city – including the dead bodies of animals and unburied criminals.
- ⁹ Mark 9:47. A similar more graphic OT/KJV description of what appears to be Gehenna is at Isaiah 66:24 where the prophet writes: “And they shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me: for their worm shall not die, neither shall their fire be quenched; and they shall be an abhorring unto all flesh.” The Valley of Hinnom is explicitly named in the OT books of Joshua, II Kings, II Chronicles, Nehemiah, and Jeremiah.
- ¹⁰ In Greek mythology, there were several sections of Hades – ranging from the Elysian Fields (as a version of Paradise) to Tartarus. In the Greek Septuagint translation of the OT, the Hebrew term Sheol was translated to Hades.
- ¹¹ Interestingly, the only NIV use of *hades* retained as “hell” is that of Luke 16:23 (the rich man in Hades); both the NKJV and NRSV also eliminate this translation as “hell”.
- ¹² Luke 16:25.
- ¹³ Luke 16:23-26.
- ¹⁴ Luke 16:31.

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- ¹⁵ Revelation 20:13-15. The two other direct references to Hell as termed by the KJV in Revelation are found at 1:18 and 6:8; both of these references are rendered by recent Bible translations (including the NIV and NRSV) as Hades rather than hell. A footnote to the NIV indicates that the term Hades is “equivalent to Hebrew *Sheol*.”
- ¹⁶ The authorship and canonicity of Revelation has been questioned by Christian leaders from Eusebius the 4th century historian to Martin Luther the reformationist. In his book *The Formation of the New Testament*, Robert M. Grant notes that early Christian leaders were “often suspicious not only of Gnostic writings but also of the more esoteric New Testament writings such as Revelation (in the East) and Hebrews (in the West).”
- ¹⁷ II Peter 2:4. The word Tartaros is a variation on the Greek (Tartaroo) which is translated as to cast down into hell.
- ¹⁸ Mark 9:47-48.
- ¹⁹ The KJV uses the expression of the worm three times in this passage; the NRSV consolidates this to one reference. The Old Testament passage cited by Jesus in Mark is from Isaiah 66:24 and reads as follows: “And they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who 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.” For Isaiah, this same valley (of Hinnom) was a place for human as well as household remains.
- Centuries after Isaiah, Augustine would use the worm as part of his proof that life can exist through perpetual fire. From Augustine’s *The City of God*, 21:9.
- ²⁰ This view of the soul being co-existent and dependent on the body is consistent with OT Jewish views including those expressed by the Psalmist. Similar pre-Christian views were held by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, but opposed by Plato. In modern times, theologian Frederick Buechner has written in *Whistling in the Dark* (1973) that “we go to our graves as dead as a doornail and are given our lives back again by God (i.e.resurrected) just as we were given them by God in the first place.”
- ²¹ James 2:4.
- ²² Modern interpretations often suggest that Gehenna “became a perpetually burning city dump and later a figure for the place of final punishment,” a view that is expressed, for example by *The NIV Study Bible*. However, while the transition of Gehenna from a literal to figurative place may make for interesting theology, as there is no passage in the NT to directly corroborate this viewpoint.
- ²³ John 3:17.
- ²⁴ James 1:8.
- ²⁵ 2 Peter 2:1.
- ²⁶ 2 Peter 2:9.
- ²⁷ Hebrews 2:2-3.
- ²⁸ Hebrews 6:1-2.
- ²⁹ Hebrews 12:11-13.
- ³⁰ The parallel Greek term *aionon* can be translated to yet other words in the NT, such as “world” or “ages” as in the passage from I Corinthians 2:7, translated by the KJV as “which God ordained before the world” (*aionon*) or as is translated by the NRSV as “which God ordained before the ages”. Note that *aionon* is the plural of *aion*, meaning ages or dispensations. While related to this topic, the more precise meaning of words such as forever, everlasting and eternal as translated from the Hebrew and Greek is a topic for another much more extended discussion, provided as Appendix B to this monograph.
- ³¹ Passages are from Jude 1:4, 1:7, and 1:23.
- ³² Matthew 7:21-23. A similar passage (though with different details) is found at Luke 13:25-28. Luke’s passage refers to “weeping and gnashing of teeth when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and you yourselves are thrown out.”

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- ³³ Matthew 13:40-42.
- ³⁴ Matthew 25:26-30. A parallel passage is found at Luke 19:12-27; however in Luke Jesus ends the parable by saying that “as for those enemies of mine who did not want me to be king over them – bring them here and slaughter them in my presence.” Luke’s passage has no weeping and gnashing of teeth.
- ³⁵ Luke 13:24-30.
- ³⁶ Psalms 112:10.
- ³⁷ Matthew 25:46. Jesus begins this discussion of the end of the age by talking of how the shepherd will separate the sheep from the goats. There are no parallels to this passage or to Matthew 13:40-42 found in either Mark or Luke.
- ³⁸ There are other Greek terms used in the NT that more clearly convey a never ending condition. These include *akataluton* (imperishable), *amarantos / amarantinos* (unfading), *aphtharto* (immortal or incorruptible), *athanasian* (immortality), and *pantote* (always or at all times).
- ³⁹ John 5:25-29.
- ⁴⁰ Romans 14:10-12.
- ⁴¹ II Corinthians 5:10.
- ⁴² Galatians 1:9. The NIV uses the stronger statement of “let him be eternally condemned,” potentially strong words considering those to whom the words were directed. However, footnotes to the NIV indicate that the Greek word (anathema) originally referred to a pagan temple offering in payment for a vow, which later came to represent a curse.
- ⁴³ See Galatians 2:4-9 for the gradual unfolding of to whom Paul is directing his criticism.
- ⁴⁴ Lest one think that God’s mercy is available only to those who have already believed, consider what is written a bit later at Romans 11:32, when Paul states that “God has imprisoned all in disobedience so that he may be merciful to all.”
- ⁴⁵ John 3:19-21 (NKJV).
- ⁴⁶ John 3:19 (NKJV).
- ⁴⁷ I Thessalonians 5:8-9.
- ⁴⁸ Titus 2:11.
- ⁴⁹ Galatians 3:29 thru 4:1-6.
- ⁵⁰ Ephesians 2:4-9.
- ⁵¹ Romans 7:24.
- ⁵² Much of this material is drawn from <http://unsettledchristianity.com/2010/03/jewish-views-of-gehennagehinnom/>.
- ⁵³ Shabbat 33b.
- ⁵⁴ Genesis 13:15.
- ⁵⁵ Genesis 12:14.
- ⁵⁶ I Chronicles 17:12.
- ⁵⁷ II Chronicles 7: 16.
- ⁵⁸ Proverbs 29:14. The NIV translation dodges the difficulty of the term “for ever” by stating that “his throne will always be secure.”
- ⁵⁹ Isaiah 58:11-12.

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- ⁶⁰ Jeremiah 18:15.
- ⁶¹ Jonah 2:5-6.
- ⁶² Rev. John Wesley Hanson, A.M., Editor of “The New Covenant,” *The Greek Word Aion – Aionios, Translated Everlasting – Eternal in the Holy Bible, Shown to Denote Limited Duration*, Chicago: Northwestern Universalist Publishing House, 1875.
- ⁶³ Colossians 1:26.
- ⁶⁴ Ephesians 2:2.
- ⁶⁵ I Timothy 1:17.
- ⁶⁶ Matthew 18:8.
- ⁶⁷ Matthew 25:46.
- ⁶⁸ The Greek term *kolasis* is used only twice in the New Testament, once at Matthew 25:46 (noted above). The other use is at I John 4:18. Speaking of the “perfection of love”, the epistle writer goes on to say that: “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment (*kolasis* – translated by the NIV as ‘punishment’). He that feareth is not made perfect in love.” The fear is of punishment not as never-ending torment, but fear of judgment or chastisement for purposes of corrective action.
- ⁶⁹ Lamentations 5:19-20.
- ⁷⁰ Job 20:7-8.
- ⁷¹ Psalms 105:4.
- ⁷² Proverbs 15:15.
- ⁷³ Deuteronomy 33:27.
- ⁷⁴ Isaiah 51:9.
- ⁷⁵ II Chronicles 28:9.
- ⁷⁶ Psalms 111:3.
- ⁷⁷ Psalms 23:6.
- ⁷⁸ Psalms 93:5.
- ⁷⁹ Daniel 9:21.
- ⁸⁰ Daniel 9:26.
- ⁸¹ Mathew 26:11.
- ⁸² John 6:34.
- ⁸³ I Thessalonians 5:16.
- ⁸⁴ Matthew 28:10.