

sheol & Hades

BY HAL LANE

hELL, ACCORDING TO BIBLICAL REVELATION, is the final destination of fallen angels and sinful people who suffer the eternal wrath of a holy God (Matt. 25:41). The purpose of this article is to explain the background of the words translated and/or transliterated “hell” and “Hades” in the New Testament. The background of the Old Testament Hebrew word transliterated “Sheol” will serve as the basis for understanding the New Testament’s use of the Greek word “Hades,” as is in Jesus’ story of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31).

The word “hell” comes from a Germanic root meaning “to hide or conceal.”¹ “Hell” has become familiar to Bible readers because of its use by early English translations such as Wycliffe (1382), Coverdale (1535), and the *King James Version* (1611), which translate the Hebrew noun “Sheol” as “hell” in the Old Testament. Early English translations also used “hell” to translate the Greek nouns for “Hades,” “Gehenna,” and the Greek verb *tartaroo* (see 2 Pet. 2:4) in the New Testament.

A correct understanding of the use of the Greek word “Hades” in the New Testament begins with a study of the Hebrew word “Sheol” in the Old Testament. The Hebrew noun “Sheol,” which occurs 65 times in the Old



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Left: The Lar familiaris, a spirit associated with the dead, was worshiped in private homes along with the di Penates, guardians of the household larder. Both were closely associated with Vesta, goddess of the hearth. This statuette, probably a modern replica, represents a common Roman Lar type.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/DAVID ROGERS/BRITISH MUSEUM (7123/1)

Above: Papyrus of Nu, from 18th Dynasty. Nu was steward of the chief treasurer. The text is a standard edition of Theban “Book of the Dead.” The vignette describes the deceased standing in the bowels of a boat under a sail and is in a chapter entitled “Of Sailing a Boat in the Next World.”

Testament,² was translated “grave” 31 times, “hell” 31 times, and “pit” 3 times in the *King James Version*. Complicating the modern English reader’s task of interpretation is the fact that most people primarily think of “hell” as referring solely to the final place of torment for lost angels and persons. The Hebrew word “Sheol” did not uniquely identify the place of eternal punishment indicated by the current meaning of “hell.”

LESSON REFERENCE

ETBS: Luke 16:1-31

“Sheol” was a place where the dead descended (Job 11:8; Ezek. 31:15-17). It referred to the realm of all the dead, righteous and unrighteous, as indicated in David’s statement, “For thou wilt not leave my soul in hell [Sheol]; neither wilt thou suffer thine Holy One to see corruption” (Ps. 16:10, KJV). Peter quoted this verse in referring to Jesus’ resurrection (see Acts 2:27) as did Luke, in quoting Paul (see 13:35). These passages clearly indicate that “Sheol” was the equivalent of “death” or “the grave.” The Old Testament does use “Sheol” to point toward a place of punishment for the wicked after death (Job 24:19; Ps. 9:17). However, a more complete revelation of a specific place assigned for the wicked awaited the revelation given through Jesus Christ and the writing of the New Testament canon. For this reason many newer translations, such as the

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New International Version, do not use “hell” to translate “Sheol” or any other Hebrew word in the Old Testament.

The Old Testament use of “Sheol” provides the proper background for understanding the New Testament writers’ use of the Greek word for “Hades.” “Hades” came directly into English as a transliteration of the Greek word. Although “Hades” has a rich association with Greek mythology, the New Testament reflects a different understanding. Greek thought and literature do not define “Hades” in the New Testament, but Hebrew thought and the use of “Sheol” in Old Testament Scriptures do. “Hades” translates “Sheol” most frequently in the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament in the second century A.D.).³ The Greek “Hades” occurs 11 times in the New Testament. The *King James Version* translates it “hell” 10 times and “grave” 1 time. As in the Old Testament use of “Sheol,” it refers most often to the grave or death. For the same reasons that modern translators have chosen not to translate “Sheol” with “hell,” many have chosen not to translate “Hades” as “hell.” The preference of modern translations, such as the *New International Version*, is to transliterate the Greek word as “Hades” or to translate it as “grave” (Acts 2:27, NIV) or “depths” (Matt. 11:23). Luke 16:23 is the one exception where NIV translators chose to translate “Hades” as “hell.” We will examine that exception later in our study.

Before considering Jesus’ use of “Hades” in Luke 16:23, we should first understand the New Testament use of the Greek word *geenna* (Gehenna). This word occurs 12 times (11 by Jesus Himself, with James 3:6 as the one exception).



Above: Painted ossuary, with rosettes and feet. Designed as a permanent storage for skeletal remains, ossuary usage began in the first century B.C. and continued for about 150-200 years.

Right: The Hinnom Valley, just south of Old Jerusalem. After the Jews returned from Babylonian exile, a fire constantly burned in the Hinnom Valley—as the site was the city dump. This practice continued into Jesus’ day. The Hebrew name Hinnom, translated into Greek is *gehenna*.

Far right: From the Roman period, a marble statue of Hades sitting on a throne with the dog Cerberus beside him. Hades was the Greek god of the underworld who punished wrongdoers. The statue was found in Kapisuyu near Samandagi, Turkey.



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Each occurrence refers to a place of punishment and torment after death. The *King James* and *New International Versions* translate the word as “hell.” “Gehenna” was the Greek designation of the Valley of the sons of Hinnom located south of Jerusalem (Josh. 15:8). It was a place associated with evil, idolatrous practices in the Old Testament including child sacrifice during the reigns of Ahaz (2 Chron. 28:3) and Manasseh (33:6). Gehenna later became a place where people threw bodies of dead animals and criminals to be burned.⁴ In rabbinic literature written during the intertestamental period (ca. 400 B.C. to A.D. 1), Gehenna became a designation for the place of eternal

punishment and torment of the wicked. The Mishna, reflecting rabbinic thought in the first century A.D., says “How do the disciples of Abraham our father differ from the disciples of Balaam the wicked? The disciples of Abraham our father enjoy this world and inherit the world to come ... The disciples of Balaam the wicked inherit Gehenna and go down to the pit of destruction” (Mishnah, Aboth 5.19).⁵ Jesus’ use of the word “Gehenna” assures us of the reality of a place called hell where the wicked will spend eternity. It is a place of unquenchable (Mark 9:43) and eternal fire (Matt. 18:8). Although many people currently question the reality of hell, its reality, based on biblical revelation, is undeniable. We cannot understand God’s mercy and love without also understanding His holiness and wrath toward sin and sinners.

“Gehenna” and “Hades” account for all of the New Testament occurrences of “hell” with one exception. The *New International Version* translates the Greek verb *tartaroo* in 2 Peter 2:4 as “sent them to hell”; the *King James Version*, as “cast them down to hell.” The reference is to fallen angels whom God judged and who are in chains until a future judgment. The Greek verb literally means “to be sent to Tartarus.” “Tartarus” was in Greek mythology a place of

punishment lower than Hades.⁶ Peter used this vocabulary to warn of a place of punishment for fallen angels and, by implication, sinful people after death.

In considering the use of “Hades” in the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16:23, we see that the earthly fortunes and the eternal destinies of these two men were complete opposites. In life the poor man, Lazarus, had few possessions and the rich man (sometimes mistakenly called “Dives” because of the Latin word for “wealth”) had great riches. At death they were transported to two distinct realms. The poor man went to “the side” (NIV, Greek *kolpos*, literally “chest”) of Abraham indicating that he was saved and in the kingdom of God (Rom. 4:11; Matt. 8:11). The rich man went to “hell (literally “Hades”), where he was in torment” (NIV).



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Above: Burial caves carved out of bedrock along the south slope of the Hinnom Valley.

Right: The seal of Adoni-Hur, a minister of

Amminadab of Ammon. The "abomination of the children of Ammon" was human sacrifices made to the pagan deity Molech (see 1 Kings 11:7, KJV).



As Jesus told this story, His listeners likely would have been familiar with rabbinic literature from the intertestamental period that spoke of two compartments in Sheol, one for the righteous and another for the wicked (for instance, Enoch 22:1-14). The question is whether Jesus' use of "Hades" referred to hell (Gehenna) or a temporary place of confinement for the wicked until the great white throne judgment (Rev. 20:11-15).

Some Bible interpreters believe that "Hades" in Luke 16:23 refers to an intermediate state of punishment until a final, future judgment.⁷ According to this interpretation the wicked dead go to Hades and the righteous to Paradise at death (23:43; 2 Cor. 12:4; Rev. 2:7). Those who adopt this view stress two important aspects of Hades. First, the punishment is irreversible and no escape is possible (Luke 16:26). Second, it is a place of consciousness, regret, and punishment (vv. 23-24). This interpretation states that Christ will return and rule for 1,000 years on earth. Following that reign there will be a final judgment of the wicked dead before the great white throne when they will

then be cast into hell (Rev. 20:14, "the lake of fire"). Other Bible interpreters equate "Hades" in Luke 16:23 with "Gehenna."

Regardless of the interpretation though, the important facts revealed about heaven and hell are clear. Those who put their faith in Jesus as Lord and Savior immediately come into the presence of the Lord at death (23:43). Jesus brings the believer at death to a place prepared for them in the Father's house (John 14:1-6). The lost are transported at death to a place of torment that is eternal. Greek vocabulary words referring to hell in the New Testament are warnings to all people to be saved before it is eternally too late. **B**

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2. Blue Letter Bible. "Dictionary and Word Search for 'sh@owl (Strong's 07585)'"'. Blue Letter Bible. 1996-2002. 5 Apr 2004. Available from Internet: http://www.blueletterbible.org/tmp_dir/words/7/1081170627-2626.html

3. D.K. Innes, "Hell" in *The New Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977), 518-519.

4. Steven Barabas, "Hinnom, Valley of" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 3:160-161.

5. Herbert Danby, *The Mishnah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 458.

6. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 813.

7. Harry Buis "Hades" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 3:7-9.

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