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MOTIFS OF DEATH AND HELL IN THE TEACHING OF JESUS. PART 2: AN EXAMINATION OF GEHENNA

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Abstract

The final punishment of the wicked has held a strange fascination for Christians. From medieval paintings of torment to a plethora of contemporary books, articles, and popular literature, it is a topic that is of interest to every believer. For most Christians, hell is a place of everlasting torment that will become a reality on the Day of Judgment. For others, hell exists already and receives the wicked at the time of their death. Hell as everlasting torment may be the majority view, but is by no means the only one. A vocal minority of mostly Protestants, the Conditionalists, views hell as the complete annihilation of a person on the Day of Judgment. For still others, the Universalists, the sufferings of hell serve to purge persons of all uncleanness making them fit to live with God for eternity. The Bible contains many motifs and references to eschatological judgment. This study will focus on one, Gehenna, which is the most prominent motif in the Gospels. A careful exegetical study demonstrates that Gehenna fits best into a Conditionalist outlook.

Keywords

Gehenna, hell, death, destruction, everlasting torment, day of judgement, eschatological judgement

INTRODUCTION

“Gehenna” is the most common New Testament (NT) toponym associated with hell. It appears twelve times, seven in Matthew, three in Mark, and once each in Luke and James. With the exception of James, all other appearances are in the words of Jesus. Some consider Gehenna, the valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem, to have been an ancient dump where rubbish was thrown and where a fire was kept burning to consume it, giving rise to concepts of everlasting fire. Others view Gehenna as a common Jewish

term that Jesus borrowed from his milieu, and maintain that its use in Jewish literature outside the Bible is important in understanding its meaning in the NT.

Beyond questions of the origin of the term, there is debate as to what Gehenna entails. Will God torment the wicked forever, as most Christians believe? Or is something else in view? This study will first explore the origins of Gehenna and trace its use in various ancient literature, beginning with the Old Testament (OT). It will endeavour to determine how this little valley outside Jerusalem became a byword for eschatological punishment. Then it will discuss the gospel texts in which Gehenna appears and attempt to determine the type of punishment envisaged. James will not be discussed as it offers little information on these issues.

BACKGROUND

1. OT

“Gehenna,” γέεννα, is a NT transliteration of the name of a valley outside Jerusalem variously designated in the OT as “valley,” נַחְלֵי, “of the sons of Hinnom,” (2 Kgs 23:10), “of the son of Hinnom” (Jer 19:2), or simply “of Hinnom” (Neh 11:30). For simplicity I will use “Ge-hinnom” when referring to the OT references and “Gehenna” for the NT. The valley located south southwest of Jerusalem, adjoins the Kidron valley to the south southeast of the city. It is usually associated with today’s Wadi er-Rababi. Gehinnom appears thirteen times in the OT.

Sometimes it is simply a geographical location (Josh 15:8, 18:16; Neh 11:30). Part of it was possibly a burial ground.¹ At other times, it appears in association with important religious events. In the later years of the monarchy the valley became a centre of idolatrous practices including human sacrifice (2 Chr 28:3; 33:6; Jer 32:35). In ancient worldviews the location of an altar was an entrance to the realm of the deity and it was thus common to build altars to chthonian (or underworld) deities in deep val-

¹ E.L. Sukenik, “Jewish Tombs in the Kidron Valley,” *Kedem* 2 (1945): 23 (23–32). M.R. Lehmann, “A New Interpretation of the Term Sedemot,” *Vetus Testamentum* 3 (1953): 365 (361–71); cf. L.R. Bailey, “Gehenna: The Topography of Hell.” *Biblical Archeologist* (Sep. 1986): 190 (187–91); see Jer 19:2, 6 (LXX).

leys.² Ge-hinnom was also a focus of Josiah's sweeping reforms (2 Kgs 23:1–25). He defiled the Topheth,³ burned vessels associated with Baal, scattered human bones to defile the place (2 Kgs 23:1–25), and thus cleansed “Judah and Jerusalem” (34:5).

Salmond has suggested that after the desecration by Josiah, the valley became an object of horror and a receptacle for refuse, bodies of animals, criminals, and all sorts of other impurities.⁴ It is believed that eventually it became a rubbish dump where fires burned perpetually to consume the rubbish, thus giving rise to such images as Isaiah 66:24 and Mark 9:43–48.⁵ There is little doubt that Josiah's acts left a deep impact, and may have influenced the language of Jeremiah. However, as Bailey points out,⁶ the lack of early literary references and the fact that there have been no relevant archaeological discoveries suggests that such a dump most probably did not exist either after Josiah or during the time of Jesus.

More importantly, Ge-hinnom also appears in three passages in the context of an eschatological war where God will destroy his enemies. In Jeremiah 7:29–34 Ge-hinnom would become the “Valley of Slaughter” and the slain would be so numerous that there would no space to bury them all (7:32). Their bodies would become food for birds of prey and wild beasts (7:33). This picture is replicated in Jeremiah 19:1–15. In Jeremiah 31:40 the “valley of the dead bodies and the ashes,” clearly the devastated Ge-hinnom, will become “sacred to the LORD” (31:40).

The language of the Ge-hinnom prophecies of doom in Jeremiah is very strong. At first sight, it envisions the literal destruction of Jerusalem and its environs at the hands of the Babylonians. But there is also a clear eschato-

² Bailey, 187–91. Bailey cites *b. Erub. 19a*; Isa 57:5–6, and J.B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (2nd ed.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1955), 107, and the above cited article by Lehmann, “A New Interpretation,” 366.

³ Etymologically “Topheth” probably means “heath,” “fireplace,” or “fire altar,” but eventually became a toponym in Ge-hinnom; see W. McKane, *Jeremiah* (International Critical Commentary 20.2; (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 179, and G.A. Barrois, “Tophet,” *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (ed. G.A. Buttrick; 4 vols; Nashville: Abington, 1962), 4:673.

⁴ S.P. Salmond, *The Christian Doctrine of the Immortality* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1987), 355.

⁵ The J.B. Phillips translation renders the Gehenna of Mark 9:43 as “rubbish heap”.

⁶ Bailey, “Gehenna,” 189.

logical dimension. The phrase “the days are coming” is used eight times, the completeness of destruction described, and the idealization of the restoration envisaged, indicate a future divine destruction of the sinful and an idealized reconstitution of God’s people.

Apart from Jeremiah, there are other OT texts that anticipate judgment in a valley. The most prominent is Isaiah 66:24 which portrays a battle around Jerusalem where God will destroy sinners and their bodies will remain unburied in the valleys outside the city. In Isaiah 30:33, the “Topheth,” a toponym in Ge-hinnom, has been prepared with a fire kindled by God for the king of Assyria. Fudge has suggested that this verse was inspired by the destruction of the Assyrian army outside Jerusalem (Isa 37:36)⁷ and it is possible that their bodies were burned in a massive pyre, providing the inspiration for the fiery “Topheth” of 30:33.

In Ezekiel 39:11–16 there is an eschatological battle between God and Gog in a valley named “Oberim” and “Ammon-Gog.” Both names appear to be symbolic and mean “travellers” and “multitudes of Gog” respectively. In this valley the enemies of God will meet their doom. The corpses will be left exposed for a long time. Eventually the earth will be cleansed of their pollution (39:16).

Finally, in Joel 3:1–21 God summons nations for judgment in the valley of Jehoshaphat, near Jerusalem (3:16). Multitudes gather (3:14). God destroys his enemies (3:11) in the battle of the “day of the LORD.” The prophecy includes apocalyptic images like the sun and the moon becoming dark (3:15). The valley of Jehoshaphat has been associated with the Kidron,⁸ Tyropoeon,⁹ or Ge-hinnom,¹⁰ or may simply symbolise the Day of Judgment since Jehoshaphat means “YHWH judges.”¹¹

⁷ E. Fudge, *The Fire that Consumes* (Houston: Providential Press, 1982), 160.

⁸ W.H. Mare, “Jehosaphat, Valley of,” *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (ed. D.N. Freedman; 6 vols; Garden City: Doubleday, 1992), 3:668–69. The association of the valley of Jehoshaphat with the valley of Kidron is plausible inasmuch as the former is located outside Jerusalem. However, there is no evidence of any monument built in the Kidron by King Jehoshaphat.

⁹ Bailey, “Gehenna,” 186–92.

¹⁰ E. Klostermann, *Das Lukasevangelium* (Handbuch zum Neuen Testament; Tübingen: Mohr, 1919), 70.

¹¹ L. Koehler and W. Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (4 vols; rev. W. Baumgartner and J.J. Stamm; trans. under supervision of M.E.J. Richardson; Leiden: Brill, 1999), s.v. יהושפט.

2. Early Jewish Literature

It is commonly believed that the rudiments of a Gehenna tradition in the OT came to full bloom in intertestamental Jewish literature. We see no established Gehenna tradition in the OT. Now we will discover that in early Jewish literature there is also none.

The LXX renders Ge-hinnom in many different ways: φάραγμα Ονομ, Εννόμ or Εννώμ,¹² φάραγξ υίου Εννομ,¹³ πολυάνδριον υίου Εννόμ,¹⁴ Γαι Οννόμ,¹⁵ Γαιβενθόμ,¹⁶ Γαμβέ Εννόμ,¹⁷ Γεβανέ εννόμ,¹⁸ Γαιεννα,¹⁹ νάπηξ Σοννόμ,²⁰ γή Βεεννόμ,²¹ and νάπηξ Ονναμ.²² One of these, Γαιεννα, bears closest similarity to the γέενα of the NT and, importantly, it is used in a text without any religious or eschatological implications. The large number of variants in rendering the Hebrew strongly suggests that there was no popular Gehenna tradition.

In the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha there are several references, all rather late.²³ In 4 Ezra 2:29 Gehenna is the fate of the nations, after a general resurrection. 4 Ezra 7:36 mentions the “pit of torment that will appear

¹² Josh 15:8 Alexandrinus (A) and Vaticanus (B) respectively, and Neh. 11:30 (Sinaiticus [S]).

¹³ Jer 7:31, 32 (B).

¹⁴ Jer 19:6 (B).

¹⁵ Josh 18:16 (A).

¹⁶ 2 Chr 28:3 (B).

¹⁷ 2 Chr 28:3 (A).

¹⁸ 2 Chr 33:6 (B).

¹⁹ Josh 18:16.

²⁰ Josh 18:16 (B).

²¹ 2 Chr 33:6 (A).

²² Josh 18:16 (A).

²³ In looking at the references to Gehenna in the Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha, I have used the indexes of R.H. Charles, ed., *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament* (2 vols; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), henceforth *APOT*, and J.H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (2 vols; London: Danton, Longman and Todd, 1983 and 1985), henceforth *OTP*. In general, we should keep in mind that the extant texts for most of these writings are considerably later than the actual composition and often show evidence of later additions. It is thus difficult to determine whether the word “Gehenna,” even in the few instances it occurs, was part of the original or subsequently interpolated.

... the furnace of Gehenna²⁴ [that] will be made manifest.” 4 Ezra 2:29 is a late Christian interpolation, and 4 Ezra 7:36 dates from no earlier than 100 AD.²⁵

In 2 Baruch 59:10 God shows Moses “the mouth of Gehenna” where the wicked will be tormented in the coming judgment (54:21). Then God will blot them out (54:22). 2 Baruch 85:13 says that there is no repentance in Gehenna.²⁶ 2 Baruch is dated around or after AD 100.²⁷

The *Ascension of Isaiah* 1:3 makes a passing reference to the “torments of Gehenna.” In 4:14, after the return of the Messiah, the wicked will suffer the torments of Gehenna where they will be “consumed” and “will become as if they had not been created” (4:18). The *Ascension* is a rather late Christian composition.²⁸

In *3 Enoch* there are two references to Gehenna. The work is Jewish and is attributed to Rabbi Ishmael of Palestine who died in AD 132. However, as Alexander indicates,²⁹ it is a pseudepigraphon of much later composition, which might contain some early traditions. In 44:3 Enoch is shown the souls of the wicked carried by the angels Zaariel and Samkiel to be tormented in Gehenna, and in 48D:8 Gehenna has been in existence since the creation week.

In the *Apocalypse of Abraham* 15:6 the visionary sees a light in which “a fiery Gehenna was enkindled” where the wicked suffer in bodily form. The book is Christian, but derives from a Jewish work. It is dated around AD 100.³⁰

In the Greek *Apocalypse of Ezra* 1:9 there is a brief mention of Gehenna, though the writer envisages punishment as occurring in the valley of Jehoshaphat (3:5ff.). The wicked suffer in bodily form, and are eventually annihilated. This book is dated AD 150–850.³¹

²⁴ “Gehenna” in the Latin, Syriac, Ethiopic, and Georgian versions, but “fire” in the Arabic 1 and 2 and the Armenian versions: M.E. Stone, *Fourth Ezra* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990), 203.

²⁵ B.M. Metzger, “4 Ezra,” *OTP*, 1:520 (517–60); Stone, *Fourth Ezra*, 9–10.

²⁶ Charles, *APOT*, 1:470–526; cf. J. Klijn, “2 Baruch,” *OTP*, 1:652 (615–52).

²⁷ Klijn, 616–17.

²⁸ G. Carey, “The *Ascension of Isaiah*: An example of Early Christian Narrative Polemic,” *JSP* 17 (1998): 65–78.

²⁹ P. Alexander, “3 Enoch,” *OTP*, 1:226 (223–316).

³⁰ R. Rubinkiewicz, “*Apocalypse of Abraham*,” *OTP*, 1:681–705.

³¹ M.E. Stone, “*Greek Apocalypse of Ezra*,” *OTP*, 1:561–579.

In the *Sibylline Oracles* there are three references (1:104, 2:292, 4:186), all dated well after AD 100.³² 1:104 describes how the “Watchers” were noble but nevertheless “went to the dread house of Tartarus ... to Gehenna, of terrible, raging, undying fire.” In 2:292 angels throw the wicked into Gehenna, where they will “call death fair ... [but] it will evade them” (2:307). By contrast, in 4:186 Gehenna is mentioned in connection to a mound of earth that will cover the wicked, suggesting perhaps their death and burial.

Lastly, there is the testimony of *1 Enoch* 27:1–2 in which an unnamed accursed valley is mentioned in the environs of Jerusalem.³³ The fact that it is not named should preclude the suggestion that we have here a developed Gehenna tradition.

When looking at other Jewish documents, one is struck by the lack of references to Gehenna. The Dead Sea Scrolls are completely silent. The relevant texts of Jeremiah are absent from the biblical manuscripts. More conspicuous is the absence of the word in the War Rule. Since this document portrays an eschatological battle between the “sons of light” and the “sons of darkness” Ge-hinnom would be the natural locale for such a battle had there existed a developed Gehenna tradition. Philo and Josephus do not mention Gehenna, even though Josephus describes the environs of the valley without naming it.³⁴

The Mishnah has five references and the Talmud more than fifty. The earliest attribution would be to Akiba ben Joseph³⁵ towards the end of the

³² J.J. Collins, “Sibylline Oracles,” *OTP*, 1:331 (317–472). J. Geffcken, *Komposition und Entstehungszeit der Oracula Sibyllina* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1902), 49, has dated both Jewish and Christian Oracles in the 3rd century.

³³ R.H. Charles, *The Book of Enoch* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1912), 57. Isaac’s translation of the Ethiopic text (*OTP*, 27 [5–90]), reads: “For what purpose does this blessed land ... (have) in its midst this accursed valley?” Extant Greek Manuscripts (primarily Panopolitanus) phrase the question slightly differently: “and why is this valley accursed?” In the Ethiopic, Enoch expresses surprise that the accursed valley is located in the midst of the blessed land. In the Greek, he expresses surprise at the very existence of an accursed valley. The Ethiopic would thus be more in harmony with the existence of developed traditions of punishment in a valley. The relevant Aramaic phrase is not extant in Qumran, ultimately leaving the issue of which version is more authentic, in the balance.

³⁴ Josephus, *Jewish War* 5.12.2; 5.12.3; 6.8.5.

³⁵ E.g., *b. B. Bat.* 10a; *b. Hag.* 15a.

first century AD. The remaining references come from the second century onwards.

3. Gehenna in the NT

There are twelve references to Gehenna in the NT. With the exception of James 3:6, all others are found in the synoptic gospels on the lips of Jesus. This suggests strongly that Gehenna was authentic to the preaching of Jesus. The synoptic gospels are dated before AD 70 or not long thereafter. As such, they are the earliest writings to mention Gehenna in an eschatological context after Jeremiah.

Additionally, the gospel references are thematically all bound together by two strong common elements. First, in all Gehenna follows a bodily resurrection implied in the repeated mention of the body. Second, the punishment of Gehenna always affects the person in full bodily form, not as disembodied souls. Furthermore, Mark 9:43–48 quotes and Luke 12:4–5 alludes to Isaiah 66:24, one of the judgment-in-a-valley texts of the OT. This suggests that the NT references are more coherent and closer to the OT sources than early Jewish writings.

4. Evaluation of the Development of the Tradition

Bringing the discussion together, we can conclude the following. First, the appellation Ge-hinnom is well attested in the OT. Second, the eschatological motif, in which God judges and destroys the wicked in an eschatological battle in a valley outside Jerusalem, is also well attested. Third, the direct association of such judgment/destruction with the name Ge-hinnom is poor and appears directly only in Jeremiah.

Fourth, the LXX with its variant transliterations of Ge-hinnom indicates there was no developed Gehenna tradition. Fifth, in other early Jewish works Gehenna appears only in late writings, from AD 100 onwards. Fifth, in contrast, the NT material dates in the first century, and can with certainty be traced back to Jesus. Sixth, whereas the NT material is theologically cohesive and shows OT influence, the Jewish material is not only late, but divergent and theologically far removed from the OT, suggesting a later development than the NT.

It appears fairly evident, therefore, that in referring to Gehenna Jesus was not drawing from contemporary Jewish usage, which as we have seen

was non-existent, but directly from the prophecies of the OT, especially Jeremiah. The Jewish views on Gehenna developed later, and probably as a response or development of the Gehenna of the NT.

THEOLOGY OF GEHENNA: EVERLASTING TORMENT OR ANNIHILATION

Having briefly explored the development of a Gehenna tradition we now will explore the theology of the term. Was Gehenna presented in the words of Jesus as a place where the wicked will be tormented forever without end? Or is something else in view? To answer such questions, we will discuss the eleven occurrences in the gospels.

1. Gehenna in Mark 9:43–48 – The most complete description

⁴³ And if your hand causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life maimed than with two hands to go to hell, to the unquenchable fire.

⁴⁴ [absent in the critical text; the Majority text replicates v. 48]

⁴⁵ And if your foot causes you to sin, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life lame than with two feet to be thrown into hell.

⁴⁶ [absent in the critical text; the Majority text replicates v. 48]

⁴⁷ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out; it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into Gehenna,

⁴⁸ where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.

Mark 9:43–48, as a detailed and well known text on Gehenna, is a good place to begin our study. Its language about the “worm” that “does not die” and the “fire” that cannot be quenched have exerted considerable influence on later Christian writings on hell.³⁶ It is commonly used in support of hell as never-ending torment. Sadler wrote back in 1887: “The triple declaration [vv. 44, 46, and 48 about Gehenna] ... is, doubtless, on account of the unwillingness of the human heart to accept the doctrine of Eternal Punishment.”³⁷ We will make five observations on Mark 9:43–48.

³⁶ See M. Himmelfarb, *Tours of Hell* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1983).

³⁷ M.F. Sadler, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (London: George Bell and Sons, 1887), 202.

First, judgment and punishment affect the person in full bodily form. Three times within this passage (9:43, 45, 47) it is said that it is better for a person to lose a part of the body, than for the whole body to go to Gehenna.³⁸ We meet similar language again in the two related Matthean texts, 5:29 and 18:8–9. Punishment of the body implies a resurrection of the body and a Day of Judgment. Mark 9:43–48, therefore, presupposes the sequence temporal death–bodily resurrection–judgment.

This language concerning the body is important in that it links the fate of a sinful limb that is cut and thrown away with the fate of the whole body of the sinner in Gehenna. When an offending body part is theoretically cut off and thrown away, it is not thrown away to be tormented. It is thrown away because it is no longer useful, and might pollute the rest of the body. The act of throwing away is not vengeful but precautionary. Perhaps, the destruction of the whole person in Gehenna should be seen in similar terms.

Second, the context of the quotation from Isaiah 66:24, “where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched,” needs to be examined. Isaiah 66:1–24, like the Ge-hinnom passages in Jeremiah, presents an eschatological battle. The Lord is in the holy temple about to recompense his enemies who appear to be outside Jerusalem (66:4, 24). He approaches with fire and chariots that are as fast as the whirlwind (66:15) to mete out justice by fire and the sword (66:16). The result is that all his enemies, “those who eat swine’s flesh and rats and other abominations” (66:17), are slain, they “come to an end together” (66:17). In 66:24 the slain are said to be an abhorrence because they are left unburied to be consumed by fire and maggots. Fudge³⁹ suggests that Isaiah 66:24 might well allude to the defeat of the large Assyrian army in the vicinity of Jerusalem in the reign of Hez-

³⁸ The idea of cutting off a hand or foot is clearly a hyperbole, not an injunction to be taken literally. See H. Scharen, “Gehenna in the Synoptics, Part 1” *Biblioteca Sacra* 149 (1992), 333 (324–37); C.A. Evans, *Mark 8:27–16:20* (Word Biblical Commentaries 34b; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 71, calls the statements “grotesque recommendations” that are not to be taken literally. B. Witherington, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 272, on the other hand, suggests that the cutting off of a hand or foot, or the plucking out of an eye, were punishments for such crimes as theft, runaway slaves, and voyeurism respectively. The point he sees in these sayings is that even such drastic remedies are better than sinning and going to hell. Cf. Mark 12:18–27.

³⁹ E. Fudge, “The Final End of the Wicked,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 27 (1984): 329 (325–34).

ekiah, with the dead possibly being burned in a massive pyre in a valley outside the city walls (see Isa 30:31–33).

Third, the Isaiah quotation mentions a worm that “does not die” (9:48). This is understood at times to mean that the worm will never die.⁴⁰ The grammatical structure however, does not bear this out. τελευτᾷ is present active indicative. If the writer wanted to indicate unending activity, a future tense would have made more sense—οὐ τελευτήσῃ for example, “it will not die.” The use of the present indicative puts the emphasis on quality rather than duration. The worm cannot die at this moment in time, because it has to complete its work.

It is worth noting that in the Hebrew of Isaiah 66:24, the word for worm is תולעתם and refers to worms that spring from putrefaction.⁴¹ It appears again in Isaiah 50:9 where it is said that the dead will be eaten by the “worm.” The “worm” appears in 66:24 with פגרים, “corpses” or “dead bodies.”⁴² So there is no suggestion that worms torment the wicked. Rather, what we have is a battle image where the wicked are slain and the worms devour the dead bodies.

Fourth, the Isaiah quotation mentions a fire that “is not quenched,” οὐ σβέννυται. As with τελευτᾷ, the Greek verb is in the present indicative which, as noted, deals primarily with what is happening now. A future tense would have been preferable if unending duration was in view. Moreover, σβέννυται is passive from the root σβέννυμι, “to extinguish,” or “to quench.”⁴³ The force of the passive is that the fire “cannot be put out,” obviously by a third party, rather than “it will not go out itself.” The verb form thus has no bearing on how long the fire will burn, but rather on its intensity or nature at this moment in time.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ R. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1946), 187.

⁴¹ W. Gesenius, *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, trans. S.P. Tregelles (London: Samuel Bagster & Sons, 1859), s.v. תולעתם; cf. Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, s.v. תולעתם.

⁴² פגרים is used of both dead humans and dead animals. It also conveys the idea of absence of life, as in Lev 26:30 where it describes the lifelessness of the idols.

⁴³ H.K. Moulton, *The Analytical Greek Lexicon Revised* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing, 1977), 364.

⁴⁴ H.B. Swete, *Commentary on Mark* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977), 212.

The validity of this conclusion is further evidenced by our fifth observation, the presence of the cognate adjective ἄσβεστον in 9:43. Etymologically, it combines the negating prefix α- and the verb σβέννυμι noted above. It qualifies the nature of the fire, namely, that it cannot be put out by a third party.⁴⁵ Duration does not come into view. This adjective occurs only twice again in the NT, in two parallel texts, Matthew 3:12 and Luke 3:17, where in the context of divine judgment the fate of the wicked is compared to the burning of chaff in πυρὶ ἀσβέστῳ, “unquenchable fire.” The fire that burns chaff is characterised by its intensity and short duration, chaff lights very quickly but is also consumed very quickly and the fire dies out.⁴⁶

It becomes evident that there is nothing in Mark 9:43–48 that suggests everlasting torment of souls. The strong body language, the parallel between a part of the body that is cut and thrown away with the fate of the whole person in Gehenna, the background of the Isaiah 66:24 quotation, the present tenses οὐ σβέννυται and οὐ τελευτᾷ, as well as the “unquenchable fire” all underline the fact that Gehenna is not a place of torment, but a place of destruction where, as in the Ge-hinnom passages of Jeremiah, the wicked will be destroyed.

2. Gehenna in Matthew 5:29–30, 18:8–9 – The Eternal Fire

Matthew 5:29–30

²⁹ If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than that your whole body be thrown into Gehenna.

³⁰ “And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better that you lose one of your members than your whole body go into Gehenna.

⁴⁵ That ἄσβεστον does not deal with duration is even admitted by everlasting hell proponent R.A. Cole, *The Gospel According to St. Mark* (Tyndale New Testament Commentary 2; London: Tyndale Press, 1961), 153, who nonetheless proceeds to suggest that everlasting torment is implied here.

⁴⁶ In the LXX ἄσβεστον appears only once in Job 20:26 in A and S. It is used with reference to the temporal death of the wicked as 20:7–9, 11, 16, 24 indicate.

Matthew 18:8–9

⁸ And if your hand or foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.

⁹ And if your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes be thrown into the Gehenna of fire.

Matthew 5:29–30 and 18:8–9 parallel Mark 9:43–50 closely. The admonitions to spiritual vigilance appear in a similar format and the presence of the body in the judgment is a very prominent element, suggesting, as in Mark, judgment following a resurrection of the body.⁴⁷ There is however, a difference between the two gospels with respect to Gehenna. Matthew describes the fire of Gehenna as τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον, “the eternal fire” in 18:8. Does αἰώνιον suggest everlasting duration? Or is something else in view? In search for answers we will first look at the use of the cognate substantive αἰών with a special emphasis on the notion of two ages. Then we will look at the adjective αἰώνιος and its implications for Gehenna.

In the LXX αἰών most commonly renders the noun אָוֶן, which denotes an unspecified period of time, often quite short. Furthermore, αἰών is also connected to the idea of the two “ages” into which Jews divided history: “this age or αἰών” meaning the current corrupt state of human affairs; and “the age or αἰών to come” when God would establish his kingdom.

This two-age view is abundantly evident in the NT. In the Synoptic Gospels αἰών occurs nineteen times. In thirteen of these the theology of the two ages is either stated or implied.⁴⁸ For example, Matthew 12:32 reads: “but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”⁴⁹ It is noteworthy that of the three Synoptics, Matthew is the most familiar with the two-age concept. Of the

⁴⁷ R.H. Gundry, *Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 89.

⁴⁸ Matt 12:32; 13:22, 39–40, 49; 24:3; 28:20; Mark 4:19; 10:30; Luke 16:8; 18:30; 20:34–35. In six cases (Matt 21:19; Mark 3:29; 11:14; Luke 1:33, 55, 70) αἰών is used as in the LXX to denote a long period of time either past or future.

⁴⁹ The use of αἰών with μέλλονται probably reflects the Greek of Isa 9:5, the only instance in the LXX where there is a direct reference to the “coming age.”

eight occurrences of αἰών, seven can best be understood within this framework.⁵⁰ The Pauline literature shows an equally strong familiarity.⁵¹

With regards to αἰώνιος, in the LXX it corresponds in meaning to the substantive αἰών. When used in the context of the two-age theology, it denotes that which belongs to the age to come. Turner holds that most NT usages fall under this category.⁵² But is he right?

Perhaps the clearest qualitative use of the adjective αἰώνιος is found in Jude 7 where the fire that destroyed Sodom and Gomorra is described as πυρὸς αἰωνίου, “aionian fire,” which is semantically nearly identical to Matthew’s τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον. The fire that destroyed Sodom and Gomorra barely lasted a few hours. Lot and his family escaped late at night and, shortly after the sun rose the only thing left was the smoke (Gen 19:1–27).⁵³ The aionian fire, therefore, was aionian not in duration, but in quality, a fire that came directly from God, a punishment characteristic in its thoroughness of the quality of the age to come.

Beyond this clear use, we have some that are rather more ambiguous, but still congruent with the understanding of αἰώνιος proposed. In Mark 3:29 we read of an αἰώνιον ἁμάρτημα, “an aionian sin.” It is hardly possible to translate it as “everlasting sin” in a quantitative sense, for the sin in question is blasphemy against the Holy Spirit, which certainly does not last for eternity. We also have “aionian salvation” (Mark 16:8; Heb 5:9), “aionian redemption” (Heb 9:12), “aionian destruction” (2 Thess 1:9), “aionian

⁵⁰ Matt 12:32; 13:22, 39–40, 49; 21:19; 24:3; 28:20. The only instance where Matthew uses αἰών without denoting one of the two ages is in 21:19 (the curse on a barren fig tree). In contrast to Matthew, Mark uses αἰών four times (3:29; 4:19; 10:30; 11:14), of which only two are references to the two ages (4:19; 10:30). In Luke the comparative usages are seven (Luke 1:33, 55, 70; 16:8; 18:30; 20:34–35) and four references (Luke 16:8; 18:30; 20:34–35) respectively.

⁵¹ E.g., Rom 12:2; 1 Cor 2:6, 8; Eph 1:21; 2:7; 1 Tim 6:17.

⁵² N. Turner, *Christian Words* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1980), 456; c.f. D. Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 187–88.

⁵³ R. Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter* (Word Biblical Commentaries 50; Milton Keynes: Word Publishing, 1983), 55, maintains that the “still burning fire” that destroyed Sodom and the surrounding cities was for Jude an example of the eternal fires of hell. Cf. E.M. Sidebottom, *James, Jude and 2 Peter* (New Century Bible 30; ed. R. Clements and M. Black; London: Nelson, 1967), 87, who argues that there was a belief that the cities continued to burn underground. Contrary to Bauckham and Sidebottom, Jewish sources upheld the short duration of the destroying fires (*Wisdom* 10:7; Josephus, *Jewish War*, 4.8.3; *Tg. Neof.* Gen 19:25–6, 29; *Tg.Ps.-Jon.* Gen 19:25–9; *Jubilees* 16:5–6).

consolation” (2 Thess 2:16), “aionian judgment” (Heb 6:2), “aionian inheritance” (Heb 9:15), and “aionian gospel” (Rev 14:6). At first glance all of these references appear to be quantitative, but when they are subjected to deeper analysis the qualitative meaning seems to take precedence. Any quantitative dimension appears to derive more from *the permanence of the age to come* than from any inherent semantic meaning in the adjective αἰώνιος. For example, salvation and redemption are based on an historical fact, the death and resurrection of Jesus, and in the life of the believer, on a decision to become a follower of Jesus.⁵⁴ The “aionian destruction” of 2 Thessalonians is “a destruction of the coming age,” a complete destruction, rather than an ongoing destruction since it is a reference to the final death of the wicked in the judgement. The “aionian consolation” is a consolation of coming-age quality, rather than everlasting duration, since it appears in the believer’s temporal life. The “aionian judgement” likewise conveys quality over quantity. The Greek for “judgement,” κρίμα, highlights as much the pronouncement of a court as it does the process. The κρίμα, therefore, takes place at a specific moment in time and by definition cannot be of prolonged duration. It is aionian because it is a pronouncement that comes directly from God, i.e., a qualitative use. The κρίμα does have prolonged consequences, and as such has a quantitative dimension, but this quantitative dimension lies in the very fact that this is the judgment of the coming age, a judgment directly from God. Quality takes precedence over quantity. The “aionian gospel” of Revelation 14:6 is not a gospel proclaimed throughout eternity;⁵⁵ rather it is proclaimed at a specific point in time to prepare people for the coming judgment. The “aionian inheritance” of Hebrews 9:15 is the inheritance of the age to come. It is of divine origin and permanent only because the age to come is permanent.⁵⁶

The use of the phrase ζωὴ αἰώνιος, “aionian life,” also fits this context. In many instances “aionian life” refers to a present reality in the be-

⁵⁴ E.g., Mark 16:16; Heb 2:1–4, 9, 14–15; 3:6–8.

⁵⁵ D.E. Aune, *Revelation* (Word Biblical Commentaries 52a–c; Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishing, 1997–98), 826 comments: εὐαγγέλιον αἰώνιον in Rev 14:6 “refers to the permanent validity of its proclamation.” H.B. Swete, *The Apocalypse of St. John* (London: Macmillan, 1909), 182: “a gospel belonging to, stretching forward to, the eternal order.”

⁵⁶ G.W. Buchanan, *To the Hebrews* (The Anchor Bible 36; Garden City: Doubleday, 1978), 150, renders 9:15 as “the inheritance of the age.” Cf. Heb 3:1.

liever's life.⁵⁷ It is much easier to assume that the quality of the life of the age to come has dawned in the life of the believer than to argue that the believer has begun to live everlastingly. Furthermore, John 17:3 explains that eternal life is knowledge of the only true God and of Jesus Christ. In 1 John 1:2 and 5:20 Jesus becomes a personification of everything that eternal life stands for. These occurrences seem to favour a qualitative meaning, for knowledge of God or Jesus Christ brings a quality of life not found in this age. Finally, in Mark 10:30 (cf. Luke 18:30) Jesus directly links the concepts of "eternal life" and the "age to come."

Therefore, in the NT αἰώνιος denotes primarily quality rather than quantity and aionian fire of Gehenna is the fire that comes directly from God, one of coming age quality, rather than one that will last for a prolonged, let alone everlasting time. More and more commentators are recognizing this. Barclay for example, writes that a "punishment which is αἰώνιος is [a] punishment which it befits God to give," rather than an everlasting one.⁵⁸ Tasker notes that αἰώνιος is a "qualitative rather than a quantitative word" and its use is "no indication as to how long that punishment will last." Likewise, Green writes that the thought behind the phrase "aionian fire" is "of irrevocable condemnation rather than continuous torment."⁵⁹ In light of this, we could say that τὸ πῦρ τὸ αἰώνιον of Matthew 18:8 carries the same force as Mark's "unquenchable" fire discussed above, unstoppable not everlasting.

3. Gehenna in Matthew 10:28 – Destruction of Body and Soul

And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul, rather fear him who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.

Matthew 10:28 appears within the context of a prolonged discourse by Jesus to his disciples. He is about to send them out in pairs to preach in the towns and villages of the "house of Israel". He warns them that since they will likely face persecution, they should not fear human enemies because they cannot cause real harm (10:26, 28). They may kill the body, but be-

⁵⁷ John 3:36; 5:24; 5:39; 6:47; 6:54; 17:3; 1 John 3:15; 5:11, 13.

⁵⁸ W. Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew* (The Daily Study Bible 1–2; Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1956), 201.

⁵⁹ B.H. Green, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (The New Clarendon Bible (New Testament) 1; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 207.

lievers have the hope of the resurrection. The disciples should rather fear “him who can destroy both soul and body in Gehenna.”

Several observations can be made on Matthew 10:28. First, the “one” who is able to destroy “both soul and body” is God, not Satan as some have tried to argue.⁶⁰ Nowhere in Scripture are believers to fear the devil. Rather they are to resist him and he will flee.⁶¹ On the contrary, in many cases they are called to fear God.⁶²

A second observation is that the judgment where “body and soul are destroyed” presupposes a resurrection of the wicked as well as of the righteous. This parallels the other Gehenna passages where, as noted, the body plays a prominent role.

A third point is that not much emphasis should be placed on the apparent distinction between body and soul expressed in the phrase “do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul.” While it is beyond the scope of this study to examine the usage of the ψυχή, the word in the NT does not reflect a dichotomic anthropological understanding.⁶³ McNeile explains that it refers to (a) the principle of life, (b) the seat of thoughts and feelings or (c) what comprises all that makes up the real self.⁶⁴ France notes that the purpose of Matthew is not to separate body from soul, but to show that being human involves more than an animal existence. Body and soul comprise the whole person; thus, the saying emphasizes the totality of the final destruction.⁶⁵ Schweizer maintains that ψυχή should, as a rule, be

⁶⁰ K. Stendahl, “Matthew,” in *Peake’s Commentary on the Bible* (ed. M. Black; London and New York: Thomas Nelson, 1962), 783 (769–98); G.W.H. Lampe, “Luke,” in *Peake’s Commentary*, 834 (820–43); W. Grundmann, *Das Evangelium nach Matthäus* (Berlin: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 1968), 297.

⁶¹ E.g., Zech 3:1; Matt 4:10; 16:23; Luke 4:13; Eph 4:27; 6:11, Amos 4:7; 1 Pet 5:8.

⁶² Ps 19:9; 111:5; Prov 9:10; Eccl 12:13; Rev 14:7; 15:4.

⁶³ W.D. Davies and D.C. Allison, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (International Critical Commentary 26; 3 vols; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988–2000), 2:206, emphatically state that ψυχή here refers to “the disembodied ‘soul’ which can survive the bodily death” (cf. Scharen, “Gehenna,” 458–59). F. Godet, *A Commentary on the Gospel of St. Luke* (2 vols; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889), 2:91, stated more than a century ago: “This saying of Jesus distinguishes soul from body as emphatically as modern spiritualism.” These suggestions are negated by Matt 10:28b, which states that the “soul” can be killed, and Matt 10:39 within the same pericope, where ψυχή has the meaning “life” (as there is a reference to losing and gaining it in the context of persecution).

⁶⁴ A.H. McNeile, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew* (London: Macmillan, 1928), 145.

⁶⁵ R.T. France, *Matthew* (Tyndale Commentaries 1; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 186.

translated “life” and the phrase here would thus be “body and life,” indicating two aspects of a person rather than two distinct parts. The meaning would then be that humans cannot kill “life itself, real life, but God can.”⁶⁶

The point in Matthew 10:28 meriting most focus is the light it sheds on Gehenna. In Gehenna God can destroy both body and soul. The Greek word for “destroy” is ἀπολέσαι, aorist infinitive of the verb ἀπόλλυμι. This verb frequently occurs in both the NT (90 times), and also in the LXX. The related noun ἀπώλεια is rarer.⁶⁷ ἀπόλλυμι is a stronger form of ὄλλυμι and has the meaning “to destroy utterly,” “to kill,” “to bring to naught,” “to make void,” “to lose,” “to be deprived off.”⁶⁸ Kretzer points out that in classical Greek ὄλλυμι is found only in epic poetry, frequently in relation to violence; but both verbs express loss, destruction, and annihilation, which can extend to the final destruction of a person in death.⁶⁹ According to Liddell and Scott, at least one occurrence in Homer, ὄλλυμι, refers mostly to death in battle.⁷⁰ It is used in relation to the destruction of individuals, cities, groups of people or whole tribes and nations without eschatological connotations.

In the NT, when ἀπόλλυμι appears in its active form, and both the subject and the object of the action are a person (as in Matthew 10:28), the meaning is “to destroy” or “to kill.” Thus, in Mark 3:6 the Pharisees decide that αὐτὸν ἀπολέσωσιν, “that they will kill him (Jesus).”⁷¹ In Matthew 2:13 the wise men are instructed in a dream not to tell Herod about the child Jesus because he would want to “destroy” (ἀπολέσαι) the child. Likewise, the priests and elders convince the crowds to ask for Barabbas’ release and for the death of Jesus (ἀπολέσωσιν; Matt 27:20). While in Mark 9:22 an evil spirit tries to kill a demon-possessed boy (ἀπολέσαι) by throwing him in fire or water.⁷²

⁶⁶ E. Schweizer, *The Good News According to Matthew* (London: SPCK, 1976), 246.

⁶⁷ It appears 18 times in the NT and 108 in the LXX.

⁶⁸ Moulton, *Lexicon*, s.v.

⁶⁹ A. Kretzer, “ἀπόλλυμι,” *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament* (eds. H. Balz and G. Schneider; 3 vols; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1990–93), 1:135–36.

⁷⁰ H.G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon*, rev. by H.J. Jones (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), s.v. ὄλλυμι (henceforth *LSJ*).

⁷¹ Cf. Matt 12:14; 27:20; Mark 11:28; Luke 19:47.

⁷² An exception to such usage of derivatives of ἀπόλλυμι could be John 18:9; but here ἀπώλεσα is used metaphorically to indicate that Jesus had not “failed to save” anyone

Even more conclusive is the use of ἀπόλλυμι to describe acts of judgment by God. In addition to Matthew 10:28, there are nine other references in the NT. Four are in parables, three in the Evil Tenants (Matt 21:41; Mark 12:9; Luke 20:16) and one in the Wedding of the King's Son (Matt 22:7). In the former, the owner will “destroy” the evil tenants who refused to give him his due from the harvest, mistreated his representatives, and killed his son. In the latter parable, the king sent his armies and destroyed (ἀπόλωσεν) the guests who not only had refused to attend the wedding, but had also murdered the king's representatives.⁷³ A destruction resulting in death is the sense conveyed in these parables.

Similar observations apply to the other usages of ἀπόλλυμι in relation to divine judgment. Luke 17:27 describes the Flood that killed everybody (ἀπόλωσεν πάντας). In Luke 17:29 fire killed the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah. Similarly, for their disobedience the Israelites perished in the desert by the hand of the “destroyer,” God's avenging angel (1 Cor 10:10).⁷⁴ In Jude 5 and 11 some Israelites died because of their unbelief (v. 5) and during Korah's rebellion (v. 11). Thus, in all the NT instances that ἀπόλλυμι is used of divine judgment, a destruction leading to death is always involved. The same is true in the LXX where the number of texts is too large to be discussed here in detail.⁷⁵

In light of the above usages of ἀπόλλυμι, it is reasonable to conclude that the ἀπολέσαι of Matthew 10:28 should be understood in its most natural and consistently used form—as destruction that involves the death of the object of the action.

but Judas. A possible exception is also found in Rom 14:15 where Paul warns believers not to “ruin” or “destroy” another believer over matters of food. However, here again the idea is that by being led to stumble a believer will lose his faith and suffer the fate of “destruction.” The fact that here the meaning of ἀπόλλυμι is death/destruction is understood by the contrast Paul makes: Christ died for him so that he should not die. Paul is saying, Why then by making him stumble are you willing to lead him to death?

⁷³ The mention here of armies that bring destruction agrees perfectly with the Kretzer's point (see above) that in classical Greek ἀπόλλυμι is usually found in epic writings, frequently denoting violence. This is also true of the use of ἀπόλλυμι in the LXX (see below for a sample of texts). Perhaps here it is an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem.

⁷⁴ See Exod 12:23.

⁷⁵ E.g., Gen 18:24; 19:13; 20:4; Exod 19:24; Lev 7:10, 15; 20:3, 5–6; Num 14:12; Num 16:33; Deut 2:21; 7:23; Josh 23:5; Job 12:15.

4. Matthew 5:21–22 – Gehenna and Capital Punishment

²¹ You have heard that it was said to the men of old, “You shall not kill; and whoever kills shall be liable to judgment.”

^{22a} But I say unto you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment;

^{22b} whoever insults [ῥακά] his brother shall be liable to the council [συνεδρίῳ]

^{22c} and whoever says, ‘You fool’ [μωρέ] shall be liable to the Gehenna of fire.

A note on the terms used in this verse is appropriate. ῥακά comes from the Aramaic and means “emptyhead,” “empty one,” or simply “fool.”⁷⁶ μωρέ is the Greek equivalent⁷⁷ and could be translated, “you fool.”⁷⁸ συνεδρίον (22b) usually refers to the Jewish high court in Jerusalem, the Sanhedrin.⁷⁹

Beyond these points on which there is agreement among commentators, 5:22 poses some exegetical problems. The saying mentions three offences: (a) anger; (b) calling someone “emptyhead;” and (c) calling someone a “fool.” It also mentions three punishments. The offender will be liable to: (a) judgment; (b) the Sanhedrin; (c) Gehenna of fire. The problem is that, while the offences appear to be very similar, there is differentiation in the punishment. There have been numerous attempts to explain these verses and no consensus has been reached.⁸⁰

The saying begins with the sin of murder and the ensuing sentence (5:21). The punishment for murder was death (Exod 21:12–14; Lev 24:17, 21).⁸¹ The death sentence would be passed by an earthly court, yet “judgment” is not so much a reference to the local court itself, as it is to the sentencing decreed by God. Jesus then declares that anger is an offence in the

⁷⁶ W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian Literature* (trans. W.F. Arndt and F.W. Gingrich; rev. and exp. F.W. Danker; 3rd ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. ῥακά (henceforth, BDAG); Koehler and Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon*, 1227–28.

⁷⁷ This is not a transliteration of the Hebrew מוֹרֵה. See Gundry, *Matthew*, 84.

⁷⁸ BDAG, s.v. μωρέ.

⁷⁹ BDAG, s.v. συνεδρίον. For a fuller discussion of these words and other possible derivations, see Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 1:513–14.

⁸⁰ For discussion and evaluation see K. Papaioannou, *The Geography of Hell in the Teaching of Jesus* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2013), 57–63.

⁸¹ Cf. Exod 21:12; Lev 24:17; Num 35:16–34; Deut 17:6–7.

same category and calls for a similar sentence (5:22a). By way of comparison, then, 5:22a must also refer to the death sentence, this time as the judgment of God. This is the point that Jesus was trying to make after all, that anger is in the same category as murder and, therefore, deserves a similar punishment. Furthermore, it becomes obvious that ῥακά and μωρέ are outward expressions of anger and should therefore call forth the same sentence, if not from humans, then certainly from God. This is specifically stated in 5:22c where the one calling his brother μωρέ will face God's judgment in Gehenna. It is obvious that we have an interesting interplay between the death sentence of 5:21 and the sentence God will pronounce in the Day of Judgment in 5:22a and 22c. Once again, we see that the sentence of Gehenna is not everlasting torment, but death/destruction.

5. Matthew 23:15, 33

¹⁵ Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you traverse sea and land to make a single proselyte, and when he becomes a proselyte, you make him twice as much a child of hell [Gehenna] as yourselves.

³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to Gehenna?

We now come to the last two Gehenna texts in Matthew which form part of a pericope that may be called “the woes” against the Pharisees (23:13–33). In 23:15 Jesus condemns the Pharisees, not for their missionary zeal, but for the result of their efforts—converts who are more hypocritical than the Pharisees themselves. The phrase “son of Gehenna” is a Semitism that means “destined for” or “worthy of” Gehenna.⁸² The phrase does not appear elsewhere. Constructions that come closest are probably τέκνα ἀπωλείας (“children of destruction,” Isa 57:4) and υἱὸς ἀπωλείας (“son of destruction,” Prov 24:23; John 17:12; 2 Thess 2:3).⁸³ ἀπόλεια is the substantive of ἀπόλλυμι discussed already in relation to Matthew 10:28. It appears only three times in the Synoptics, but is common in the

⁸² W. Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew* (New Testament Commentary 1; Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1973), 829.

⁸³ Cf. ἔθνος ἀπωλείας, “a nation destined for destruction,” and λαὸν τῆς ἀπωλείας, “a people destined for destruction,” in Sir 16:9 and Isa 34:5 respectively.

rest of the NT and in the LXX. When used in relation to divine judgment, it conveys the meaning of destruction.⁸⁴

Matthew 23:33 offers us a bit more information regarding Gehenna. The term “offspring of vipers,” with which the verse begins, recalls Jesus’ words in 12:34, and even more the words of John the Baptist in 3:7. Indeed, we can speak of an intentional parallel.⁸⁵

You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee [φυγεῖν] from the wrath to come? (Matt 3:7).

You brood of vipers, how are you to escape [φύγητε] being sentenced to Gehenna? (Matt 23:33).

The “wrath to come” in the words of John the Baptist corresponds to Gehenna in the words of Jesus. We can draw conclusions on the nature of Gehenna by looking at the words of John the Baptist and their context. In Matthew 3:7–12 John uses two pictures to describe what will happen to those who do not repent. In 3:10 he says that like a tree that does not bear fruit they will be felled and thrown into the fire.⁸⁶ In 3:12 judgment is compared to a farmer who clears his threshing floor, collects the wheat, and puts it in a barn, while the chaff he burns with “unquenchable fire.” “Unquenchable fire” is not a fire that burns forever, as was seen above, but a fire of such intensity that it cannot be put out.⁸⁷ The use of the verb κατακαίω, which means “to consume by fire,” underscores this.⁸⁸

⁸⁴ For a detailed analysis, see Papaioannou, *Geography*, 49–56.

⁸⁵ Davies and Allison, *Matthew*, 2:306; Gundry, *Matthew*, 469. According to Matthew, Jesus identifies closely with the preaching and ministry of John the Baptist (cf. Matt 3:2 with 4:17, and also 11:2–19). Thus, there is no reason why Jesus should not have said something similar to John the Baptist. Actually, it is not unlikely that Jesus deliberately used the words of the Baptist in order to forge a link between his and the Baptist’s ministry in the minds of his hearers. E. Kinniburgh, “Hard Sayings,” *Theology* 66 (1963), 414–16, is probably correct when he says that while John warns the Jewish leaders to repent and escape from the coming wrath, Jesus seems to imply that their refusal to repent of their sins and accept him has already sealed their fate (cf. 23:32).

⁸⁶ The verb “to throw,” βάλλω, figures prominently in the synoptic Gehenna texts.

⁸⁷ See discussion on Mark 9:43–48.

⁸⁸ Κατακαίω means not only to burn, but “to consume” by fire (cf. BDAG, s.v.). It is used in relation to burning the gates of the Jerusalem temple (1 Macc 4:38), books (Acts 19:19), trees and grass of the earth (Rev 8:7), weeds (Matt 13:40), and here chaff. In Moses’ encounter with God on mount Choreb (Exod 3:2), it is stated that the bush was on fire

Therefore, Matthew 23:15 and 33 concur with the picture of Gehenna as the annihilation of the wicked. In 23:15 this is vaguely evident through the semantic parallels between “sons of Gehenna” and “sons of perdition.” In 23:33 it is much clearer through the intentional parallel between the words of Jesus and the words of John the Baptist in Matthew 3:7–10 where the destruction of the unrepentant is clearly in view.

6. Gehenna in Luke 12:4–5

I tell you my friends, do not fear those who kill the body, and after that have no more that they can do. But I will warn you whom to fear: fear him who, after he has killed, has power to cast into Gehenna; yes, I tell you, fear him.

We have looked at Gehenna in Mark and in Matthew. Here we consider the only Gehenna text in Luke, 12:4–5, which parallels Matthew 10:28. Luke and Matthew have the saying in a similar context but have differences in the wording. While in Matthew 10:28 God destroys both body and soul in Gehenna, in Luke 12:4–5 sinners are first killed and then thrown into Gehenna.

One of the more interesting attempts to explain the difference has been made by Milikowsky, who argues that, in contrast to Matthew, Luke did not believe in a resurrection for the wicked or in a final judgment. Judgment instead takes place at death and for Luke Gehenna is “a post-mortem, incorporeal hell of souls.”⁸⁹ Such scepticism is not tenable. Luke clearly believed both in a resurrection for the wicked and in final judgment, as

(καίεται πυρί) but *not* consumed (οὐ κατεκαίετο). In contrast to the burning bush, the chaff of Matt 3:12 *will be* consumed.

⁸⁹ C. Milikowsky, “Which Gehenna?” *New Testament Studies* 34 (1988): 242 (238–49). Milikowsky also refers to a similar differentiation in rabbinical writings between a post-mortem Gehenna and an eschatological Gehenna into which the wicked are cast after a Day of Judgment. The comparison of Luke 12:4–5 with later rabbinical writings is used not so much as proof to support his exegesis as a case to illustrate a point. He thus holds that Luke 12:4–5 is the first attestation of a Gehenna that follows death, an idea that matured in later rabbinical writings and that “as the Jewish texts ... help shed light on the passages in Matthew and Luke, so too these passages in the Gospels help us understand the historical context of the Jewish text” (248–49).

several texts indicate.⁹⁰ In both Matthew 10:28 and Luke 12:4–5, therefore, the same sequence is in view, bodily resurrection followed by a final judgment. The difference in wording does not betray a differentiation in eschatological understanding, but represents a difference in emphasis, as I shall proceed to explain.

Luke 12:4 warns believers not to fear those who “kill the body.” Persecutors can kill, but then there is nothing more they can do. Their authority is terminated at that point in time. Believers should instead fear him, God, “who, after he has killed,⁹¹ has power to cast into Gehenna.” Since the implied subject of ἀποκτεῖναι is God, then the death in view can only be that of the Day of Judgment. According to Luke, in this temporal life it is not God who takes away life but a variety of other powers: the ones who persecute the believers (Luke 12:4); an angry synagogue crowd (Luke 4:28); disease (Luke 8:41–49); Herod (Luke 9:9); a fall from a window (Acts 20:9); and many other natural or human causes. That in 12:5 God is specifically said to be the one who kills verifies the view that what we have here is a killing beyond temporal death, a killing that happens at the eschatological judgment when all natural and human factors that cause death cease to have authority and God himself has the prerogative to remove life.⁹²

In contrast to Matthew where Gehenna is the place where the wicked are destroyed, here God first destroys the wicked and then casts them into Gehenna. So what goes into Gehenna is that which God has already killed,

⁹⁰ For the resurrection of the wicked see: Luke 11:29–32; Acts 24:15; cf. 17:18, 31. For eschatological judgment see: Luke 11:29–32; 10:10–15; (cf. Luke 3:7, 9, 17; 9:26; 12:4–5).

⁹¹ The Greek phrase μετὰ τὸ ἀποκτεῖναι lacks a subject. Most English translations assume it is God. H.K. Moulton, “Luke 12:5,” *Bible Translator* 25 (1974): 246–47, disagrees and argues that it is the persecutors who kill and then God throws into Gehenna. But why would God throw into Gehenna the disciples the persecutors have killed? C.W. Votaw, *The Use of the Infinitive in Biblical Greek* (Chicago: Published by author, 1896), who has done a detailed study of the use of the infinitive in the Greek Bible, explains that the subject is omitted among other reasons when it is clear from the context, as is the case here.

⁹² Though he accepts that God is the one who kills, C.F. Evans, *Saint Luke* (London: SCM, 1990), 515, thinks that the casting into Gehenna happens at death. Such a view not only contradicts other Lukan evidence, but also and more importantly is negated by the fact that what is envisaged here is not a normal death, but divine punishment on the Day of Judgment.

lifeless bodies.⁹³ This is the exact sequence in Isaiah 66:24 where God first destroys the disobedient and then casts their corpses outside Jerusalem to be consumed by fire and maggots. Fudge pointedly suggests that, much more clearly than in Matthew 10:28, the influence of Isaiah 66:24 stands behind Luke 12:4–5.⁹⁴ We already saw that Isaiah 66:24 stands behind Mark 9:43–49. Isaiah is the most commonly used OT book in Luke, followed by Psalms and Genesis.⁹⁵ So it should not surprise us that we see here clearly the imagery of Isaiah. In light of this, what God casts into Gehenna is not souls—the word soul does not enter at all into the picture. God casts the dead corpses of the unbelievers to be consumed by fire.

CONCLUSION

This study was divided into two parts. In the first part we traced the development of a Gehenna tradition. Contrary to popular conceptions,

⁹³ Luke does not clarify whether it is bodies, souls, or whole persons. Nonetheless, since in Luke 12:4 ἀποθνήσκω is used with reference to persecutors killing whole persons, the disciples, it follows that the same may be the case in 12:5—divine judgment on whole persons. This is verified by the thematic connection with Isa 66:24 where again it is whole persons that are destroyed. What is pictured in Luke 12:4–5, therefore, is resurrection and judgment of human beings, not disembodied souls.

⁹⁴ Fudge, *Fire*, 177.

⁹⁵ Isaiah is the most commonly alluded to book in Luke (84 allusions) followed by the Psalms and Genesis (81 and 54 allusions respectively). The three NT books containing most allusions to Isaiah are Revelation, Matthew, and Luke. T. Holtz, “αἰών,” in Balz and Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, 1:44–46, has observed that Isaiah, together with the twelve minor prophets and the Psalms are the OT writings that exerted the most influence on Luke. C. Kimball, *Jesus' Exposition of the Old Testament in Luke's Gospel* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), who has made a study of OT exposition in Luke, gives a list of quotations from and allusions to Isaiah. He cites seven direct quotations from Isaiah out of a total of 33 from the entire OT, and 84 allusions to Isaiah out of a total of 525 (46–50, 204–12). Kimball draws his information from the 26th edition of the Nestlé Aland *Novum Testamentum Graece*, which lists a total of 31 quotations and 494 allusions to the OT and the 3rd edition of United Bible Societies *Greek New Testament*, which lists 24 quotations but does not include allusions. Naturally there is an element of subjectivity as to what exactly constitutes an allusion or even a quotation. Thus, other scholars' estimates vary from as few as 15 by H. Ringgren, “Luke's Use of the Old Testament,” *Harvard Theological Review* 79 (1986), 227–36, to 30 by G.L. Archer and G. Chirichigno, *Old Testament Quotations in the New Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983). The prominent position of Isaiah in Lukan quotations and allusions is, however, widely recognized.

Gehenna was not a rubbish dump outside Jerusalem. Neither was it a common word to denote hell. Rather, its origin lies in the prophecies of the OT prophets who depicted the final judgment in terms of a final eschatological war in which God would destroy the wicked in a valley outside Jerusalem. While in most of the prophets this valley is not specifically identified, in Jeremiah it was connected with the valley of Hinnom, Ge-hinnom. This rather obscure association lay dormant for centuries. Jesus is the first to resurrect it and creates a direct association between the toponym Ge-hinnom/Gehenna and the final judgment. In other words, he is encouraging his audience, if they want to know what will happen to the wicked, to see how Jeremiah describes it in his Ge-hinnom passages. From Jesus the usage found its way into the gospels, into other Christian writings, and eventually into later Jewish and Christian literature.

In the second part we explored what judgment in Gehenna entails. We did so by looking at the eleven texts in the gospels in which the word is used. The picture was coherent and clear. At no point is there any reference to torment of any kind, let alone everlasting torment, nor of immortal souls. Rather, Gehenna is the place where God will totally destroy the wicked. This becomes clear from: the OT background discussed in the first part of the study, especially of the Jeremiah passages and Isaiah 66:24 which is quoted in Mark 9:48; the different expressions to describe the intensity of the destroying fire; the use of ἀπὸλλυμι in Matthew 10:28; the parallel to capital punishment in Matthew 5:22–23; the intentional parallel to the words of John the Baptist that the wicked will be consumed like chaff is consumed by fire; and the affirmation that all that will be in Gehenna is lifeless corpses.

The picture is not pretty by any means. Hell is a painful topic. However, the destruction and final death of the wicked appears to be a much more palatable, fair, and realistic option than the terrible idea that God will torment human beings throughout the ages of eternity.