

The Difference between “Sheol”, “Hades”, and “Hell”

Someone, who won't be named, answered it, “What is the difference between “Sheol”, “Hades” and “Hell” by saying, “Hot, hotter, and hottest”! The question is important for the way we understand the statement in the Apostles Creed: “He descended into hell.” The early eastern creeds do not include this statement. The early creeds of the West understand Christ descending to the lower regions, the places under the earth. Some modern translations make no more of it than that “He descended into the realm of the dead” is synonymous with “He died.” In the Apostles Creed, in fact, it explains partly the meaning of Christ's redemption, as a triumph over Satan.

In the Old Testament the word “Sheol” was used, in two senses: 1) the condition of physical death, into which all people eventually pass, believers and unbelievers alike (As such it may be translated “grave.” For example, after Joseph saw Joseph's bloodstained coat, he refused to be comforted, and said, “No. In mourning I shall go down to Sheol to my son”); 2) the abode of the damned, the same as “hell”, the place below, where the wicked are tormented. “Abaddon” (“destruction, the abyss) is sometimes equivalent to the Hebrew Sheol.” For example, “Will anyone tell about Your mercy in Sheol, or about Your faithfulness in Abaddon? Will anyone know about Your miracles in that dark place or about Your righteousness in the place where forgotten people live?” (Ps 88:11-12) Each time the word “Sheol” appears, the context determines which meaning should be attached to it.

The Greek translation of the Old Testament called the *Septuagint* uses the word “Hades” to translate “Sheol.” “Hades had been the name of the Greek god of the underworld. “Hades” retains in the New Testament the two meanings that Sheol had in the Old Testament. There “Hades” appears ten times, again signifying either the underworld, the place of the dead, and the condition of death, as it does in Acts 2:27, 31 (“He would not be left in Hades”), or the second sense, as in Luke 16:23. The rich man was in Hades in torment, and asked for Lazarus to be sent to him there with a little water to cool his tongue. Even before the resurrection at the last day, while his five brothers were still alive on earth, the rich man was in the place where the disembodied spirits of the damned were kept before the final resurrection. Therefore, depending on the context, “Hades can be translated either as “grave” or as “hell.”

In Matthew 11:23, Luke 10:15 (compare Isa 14: 11,15), the meaning is “the depths”, contrasted with heaven. Capernaum will go down to Hades, the place of ultimate disgrace. People thought of Hades as a prison, accessible through gates, which had keys. Jesus said that the gates of Hades would not prevail against His church, built on the rock (Mt 16: 18). He said that He holds the keys of death and of Hades (Rv 1:18). In Acts 2 (before the reference to Ps 16:8-11) Peter says that the Jews killed Jesus, and adds, “But God set aside the pains of death and raised Him” (verse 24). Some manuscripts and some early fathers have the variant reading “pains of Hades.”

Sometimes “Hades” is personified, with “death” (Isa 28:15; “You boast, 'We have entered into a covenant with death, with Sheol we have made an agreement. ") Compare Jb 38:17; Rv. 6:8; Rv. 20:13-14.

In addition, the New Testament had another word, which always meant the abode of the damned in body and spirit after the resurrection and the judgment. The word was “Gehenna.” This word should always be translated “hell.” The origin of this word is interesting. In Hebrew “gē” means “valley of”. The Valley of Hinnom, or the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom”, to the south of Jerusalem, (Js 15:8a, 18:16a, 2 Chr 28:3; Jr 7:2; 2 Kng 23:10) became a place for the worship of the heathen god Molech, and child sacrifice. After a God-fearing king had desecrated the place, it was turned into the rubbish tip for Jerusalem. According to later Jewish popular belief, the last judgment will take place there. It was the place where worms wriggled ceaselessly in rotting carcasses and fires kept smouldering. Jesus compared eternal punishment to this “the Gehenna of fire.” “Anyone who calls him ‘a fool’ will have to answer for it in the Gehenna of fire” (Mt 5:22). “It is better for you to go into life with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into the Gehenna of fire” (Mt 18:9). “I shall point out the One whom you should fear. Fear Him who, after He has killed you, has the authority to cast you into Gehenna. Yes, I tell you, fear Him!” (Mt 12:5). Jesus linked the concepts. of ongoing suffering and fire with Isaiah 66:24 “They will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who have rebelled against Me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind.” in Mark 9:48: “. .into Gehenna, where their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched.” Matthew 23:23 links Gehenna with condemnation: “How can you escape being condemned to Gehenna?” A person who will be eternally condemned is called a “son of Gehenna” in Semitic idiom (Mt 23:15). When James discussed the sins of the tongue, he said that the tongue is “set on fire by Gehenna.”

Unlike the unscriptural idea of purgatory, which has no Scriptural support, there will never be any escape from Gehenna.

In addition, in 2 Peter 2:4 we find a verbal form using “Tartarus” for hell. It recalls some of the ideas that the pagan Greeks had for ongoing punishment, a man there having vultures endlessly picking at his liver, or Sisyphus, who had to roll a stone endlessly to the top of a hill, only to have it roll down again, or another man standing in water with boughs of fruit over his head, only to have the boughs move up whenever he stretched out his hand for the fruit! The Greeks used “Tartarus” for a place far deeper than even Hades itself, where the wicked are continually punished. Peter writes, “God did not spare angels who sinned, but handed them over into Tartarus to be kept in gloomy dungeons for judgment” Jewish apocalyptic literature also regarded Tartarus as a subterranean place where God will mete out punishment.

It is important to add that the New Testament does not picture those who have died in faith as living in some kind of cheerless existence, but they are in Abraham’s lap, in Paradise, .at home with the Lord. The expression “asleep in the Lord” also does not exclude “fullness of joy” at the Lord’s right hand.