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What is the History of Hellfire?

Luke 4:18-19: (NASB) *¹⁸The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed; ¹⁹To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord.*



Sometimes we as Christians just don't see eye to eye. We all (hopefully) take the doctrine of Christ seriously and want to abide by the word of God, so when we come to a subject that is widely interpreted we have a dilemma. The concept of a hell of torment is one such topic. There are many views on the matter - today we want to look at it through the eyes of history to see if we can find the threads of truth and separate them from the threads of error. This may be surprising so stay with us! Our main historical resource for this program is:

The Origin and History of the Doctrine of Endless Punishment, Thomas B. Thayer (1881)

SECTION I. DESCRIPTION OF THE HEATHEN HELL. Among the ancient pagans, the belief in a hell of some sort was very general, if not universal. It was known by various names, as *Orcus, Erebus, Tartarus, and Infernus or Inferna*, whence our expression "infernal regions," etc. The views current respecting it were different at different periods, and among different nations, according to the degree of civilization and the genius of the people. What I shall offer on this point will have respect mostly to the Romans, Greeks, and Egyptians. 1. *Its Location.* It was supposed to be as far below the earth (or as deep down in it), as the heavens are above it, Hesiod, the Greek poet, who lived in 850 BC (around the time of Elijah) is very precise in his statement, and says a mass of iron would be nine days falling from heaven to earth, and nine more in falling from earth to hell, so say also Apollodorus, Virgil, and others. *Of the Punishments.* Virgil gives us a brief account of these in *Aeneid*: "And now wild shouts, and wailings dire, and shrieking infants swell the dreadful choir. Here sits in bloody robes the Fury fell, By night and day to watch the gates of hell. Here you begin terrific groans to hear, And sounding lashes rise upon the ear, On every side the damned their fetters grate, And curse, 'mid clanking chains, their wretched fate."



Mayan belief, Gates of Hell, Documentary, History Channel

- The Mayan people believe that this cave was the entrance to an underworld known as Xibalba, or Place of Fear. Even today surviving Maya fear the hell's mouth. For the Maya, there is still an apprehension and so they will not enter in many cases, or if they do it will be only after conducting many rituals to appease the gods. Dr. Jamie Archway has spent several years in the jungles of Belize investigating the strange legend surrounding Xibalba. As a messiah, references to Xibalba describe black rituals of human sacrifice and the Mayan sacred text, the Popol Vuh, tells of claustrophobic chambers that await the souls who dare to venture into Xibalba.*

Does the Old Testament support the belief of torment, as it is also ancient history and runs parallel in time with these other cultural beliefs? Daniel lived 150 years after Hesiod. Daniel lived in Babylon, a mighty seat of idolatry and superstition with ties to many cultures. **What was Daniel's Jewish perspective on judgment?** **Daniel 12:1-2:** If this was referring to everlasting torment, Daniel had the opportunity to describe it here. Instead of "torment," he uses the word *contempt*, meaning "abhorrence." **Numbers 16:31-33:** The fault line opened up and the people fell in while they were alive. This catastrophic event killed them. Death was their judgment because of rebellion.

Was Job talking about the same thing? (This was written between 1600-1700 BC.) **Job 14:13:** (NASB) *Oh that You would hide me in Sheol, (the word also translated "pit") that You would conceal me until Your wrath returns to You, that You would set a limit for me and remember me!* Job is asking God to be hid in Sheol. Why would Job pray to go to a place of eternal torment to be hidden from the anguish he was going through in his life? He wanted to die and be buried until resurrection. He was not describing a dark, evil, torment-filled place.

SECTION II. THE HEATHEN INVENTED THE DOCTRINE OF ENDLESS PUNISHMENT - SHOWN BY THEIR OWN CONFESSIONS. Anyone at all familiar with the writings of the ancient Greeks or Romans cannot fail to note how often it is admitted by them that the national religions were the inventions of the legislator and the priest for the purpose of governing and restraining the common people. Hence, all the early lawgivers claim to have had communications with the gods, who aided them in the preparation of their codes. Zoroaster claimed to have received his laws from a divine source; Lycurgus obtained his from Apollo; Minos of Crete from Jupiter; Numa of Rome from Egeria; Zaleucus from Minerva, etc. The object of this sacred fraud was to impress the minds of the multitude with religious awe, and command a more ready obedience on their part. Egypt has been called the "Mother of Superstitions," and her whole religious history shows the propriety of the appellation. Greeks and Romans, lawgivers and philosophers, acknowledge their indebtedness to her in this respect, and freely credit her with the original invention of the fables and terrors of the invisible world; though it must be allowed that they have improved

somewhat upon the hints given, and shown a wonderful inventive faculty of their own. In attempting to set out the Egyptian notions on the subject, it is difficult to choose between the conflicting accounts of the Greek writers, Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus, Plutarch, etc., as well as of the modern interpreters of the monumental hieroglyphics. Still, with regard to the main question, they are tolerably well agreed, though there is great diversity of opinion in respect to the details. It is plain enough, from their united testimony that the whole matter of judgment after death, the rewards of a good life, and the punishments of a bad life, with all the formal solemnities of trial and condemnation, originated and was perfected among the Egyptians, according to the peculiar character of their mythology. From them it was borrowed by the Greeks, who made such changes and additions as fitted the system to the genius and circumstances of that people. It would seem that each district of Egypt had what was called its "sacred lake," beyond which were the tombs and burial places of the dead. *Acherusia*, the lake near Memphis, was the model probably for the rest, and appears to have furnished a general name for them.

Isaiah 38:17-19: Again, there is no mention of torment as a warning. The only reference is to silence, *the pit of nothingness*.

...These records of the ancient Greeks, confirmed by the monuments as illustrated by modern scholars, open to us the origin of the doctrines of a judgment after death, and of future endless rewards and punishments, for the good or evil deeds of this life. From the Egyptians it passed, with suitable modifications, to the Greeks and Romans. Diodorus himself clearly shows that the fables of the *Acherusian lake*, of *Hecate*, *Cerberus*, *Charon*, and the *Styx*, have their origins in these Egyptian ceremonies and doctrines...

But, as I have remarked, though the Greeks borrowed, they altered and improved. And, true to that individualism which so marked a characteristic of that people, they are not satisfied with the Egyptian method of generalizing respecting the punishments of the wicked, but begin specifying particular sinners, and particular kinds of punishment adapted to particular offenses. Hence the fables of *Ixion*, *Tantalus*, *Tityrus*, etc., whose torments in the infernal regions are mentioned in the beginning of this chapter. Everything must be sharp, pointed, and dramatic to suit the lively genius of the Greek; and the terrors of the invisible world must be presented in a way to strike the imagination in the most powerful manner and produce some direct result on the individual and on society.

Did the Old Testament teach and feed this fear? **Jeremiah 19:2-6:** Jeremiah described what was happening in the Valley of Hinnom back in his day. This was a place of blatant idolatry where live, human child sacrifices were made.

Polybius, the historian, says: "Since the multitude is ever fickle, full of lawless desires, irrational passions and violence, there is no other way to keep them in order but by the fear and terror of the invisible world; on which account our ancestors seem to me to have acted judiciously, when they contrived to bring into the popular belief these notions of the gods, and of the infernal regions."

Back to Jeremiah: ...*which I commanded not, nor spake it, neither came it into my mind: therefore, behold, the days come, saith Jehovah, that this place shall no more be called Topheth, nor The Valley of the Son of Hinnom, but The Valley of Slaughtering.*

Biblical commentary by John Gill: That this place shall no more be called Tophet: as it had been, from the beating of drums in it, that the cries and shrieks of infants burnt in the fire might not be heard by their parents:

Strabo (64/63 BC-AD 24) was a Greek geographer, philosopher and historian.

Strabo, the geographer, says: "The multitude are restrained from vice by the punishments the gods are said to inflict upon offenders, and by those terrors and threatening which certain dreadful words and monstrous forms imprint upon their minds, For it is impossible to govern the crowd of women, and all the common rabble, by philosophical reasoning, and lead them to piety, holiness and virtue - but this must be done by superstition, or the fear of the gods, by means of fables and wonders; for the thunder, the aegis, the trident, the torches (of the Furies), the dragons. etc., are all fables, as is also all the ancient theology. These things the legislators used as scarecrows to terrify the childish multitude."

So, in the ancient world they not only adopted this thought of an afterlife of torture and torment, but many in power realized this was made up and used the fear of the unknown as a tool to keep people in line. The Old Testament teachings do not agree with what was going on in the heathen nations around Israel. If torment in the afterlife was true, why would God have hidden such a basic, formative truth from His chosen people? Were they left in the dark on such an important factor of their lives?

 **Egyptian post-death judgment, *The Devil's Domain*, History Channel**

- The Egyptians were the first to believe that souls would be judged after death. Those who traversed the underworld came before King Osiris for final judgment. The just were granted eternal life; the unworthy savagely devoured by the hideous monster Ammut, one of the first depictions of a "hell mouth," a gruesome creature who devours the damned. One of the oldest and most pervasive images of hell is the "hell mouth."*

Chapter IV. The Jews Borrowed the Doctrine from the Heathen: It is allowed on all hands that the Jews in our Savior's time believed the doctrine of future endless punishment; that it was a part of the common faith. Of course, as the doctrine is nowhere to be found in their Scriptures, the question arises, where did they find it? At the close of the Old Testament Scriptures, they did not believe it; at the beginning of the New, they did.

Here is part of the prophecy of Malachi: Malachi 4:4-6: At the close of the Old Testament, the people were warned.

Between these two points of time there was an interval of some four hundred years, during which there was no prophet in Israel. *Malachi* was the last of the Hebrew prophets, and from him to Christ there stretches this waste period of four centuries, when the Jews were without any divine teacher or revelation from heaven. And all this while they were in constant and close intercourse with the heathen, especially the Egyptians, the Greeks and Romans, who held the doctrine in review as part of the national faith. From these, therefore, they must have borrowed it, for it is certain that they could not have obtained it from any inspired source, since none was open to them during this period.



Tool of fear, *Understanding the Origins of Christian Hellfire*, youtube.com

- *Relatively few religions tell us to do as much good on earth while we still can. The vast majority of religions terrify us with threats of a horrible afterlife if we don't obey authority now. So, very clearly, the concept of hell lends itself to manipulating trusting yet uninformed people. That is certainly a political opportunity for the educated. Whether or not they exploit that opportunity introduces ethical criteria for critique of religion.*

...The process is easily understood. About three hundred and thirty years before Christ, Alexander the Great had subjected to his rule the whole of Western Asia, including Judea, and also the kingdom of Egypt. Soon after he founded Alexandria, which speedily became a great commercial metropolis and drew into itself a large multitude of Jews, who were always eager to improve the opportunities of traffic and trade. A few years later, Ptolemy Soter took Jerusalem and carried off one hundred thousand of them into Egypt. Here, of course, they were in daily contact with Egyptians and Greeks, and gradually began to adopt their philosophical and religious opinions, or to modify their own in harmony with them.

"To what side soever they turned," says a careful writer, "the Jews came in contact with Greeks and with Greek philosophy, under one modification or another. It was around them and among them; for small bodies of that people were scattered through their own territories, as well as through the surrounding provinces. It insinuated itself very slowly at first; but stealing upon them from every quarter, and operating from age to age, it mingled at length in all their views, and by the year 150 before Christ, had wrought a visible change in their notions and habits of thought." (Universalist Expositor, vol. for 1834, p. 423.)

The last verse of Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the Temple: 1 Kings 8:53: Truth was within the people of God; error was on the outside. There was a great focus on their separation throughout the Old Testament. Amos 3:1-2: The *iniquities* were idolatry influenced by other cultures. The clear-cut Jewish thinking was a non-torment afterlife. By the time of the New Testament, they brought in the thinking of the nations around them, which corrupted what was true. So, what is the conclusion regarding the Old Testament? What did the Old Testament focus on?

- God's promise to Abraham *in thee and thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed*: Repeated several times through many generations
- The Law and its importance: Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy all focused around the Law
- Being separate from other nations: Different government, rituals, beliefs, marriage, etc.
- Punishment in this life for sins and transgressions: Many times to the third and fourth generations

If eternal torment was a God-sanctioned punishment, is it not reasonable to assume that it would have been disclosed and explained repeatedly during the 4,000 years of the Old Testament just as these other important principles of life were? What is the final Old Testament testimony on hell as a place of eternal torment??

... Evidently transmigration (like reincarnation; transferring of one soul into another body) in the time of Christ was regarded by some as a method of punishment. Hence, in the account of the blind man restored to sight by Jesus, we have the question: "Master, who did sin, this man, or his parents, that he was born blind?" John 9. This shows plainly that the people thought the man might have been sent into a blind body as a punishment for some sin in a preexistent state; which is an exact copy of the Egyptian and Oriental doctrine.

John 9:1-5: So, how does Jesus deal with this question that is so far off base from truth? He doesn't ridicule or condemn - he simply states what is true.

In Matthew 16:14, we have another trace of the doctrine among the people. In answer to the question of Jesus, "Whom do men say that I, the son of man, am?" the disciples reply, "Some say that thou art John the Baptist; some say Elias; and others Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." They seemed to think the soul of some one of these ancient men of God had returned again to the earth in the body of Jesus, which to them was a satisfactory explanation of the miracles he wrought. Many of the Jewish doctors have believed that the souls of Adam, Abraham, and others, have at different times animated the bodies of the great men of their nation.

Another example of contaminated Jewish thinking: Matthew 16:13-17 **So, how does Jesus deal with this answer that is so far off base from truth?** ¹⁵*He said to them, But who do you say that I am?* ¹⁶*Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.* ¹⁷*And Jesus said to him, Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. He simply moved past it. Jesus' way was just to teach truth. There was a definite sense of paganism permeating Judaism at the time of Jesus.*

Romans 6:23: Just as it said in Genesis! 4,000 years later, what God said is what He meant!
Titus 2:11-14: Notice, we are not redeemed from a future torment, but from a present evil.
What does Jesus rescue us from? Galatians 1:3-5: Now, is not this a most marvelous thing, if Jesus really came to deliver us from a future evil world - from the endless torments of a hell which begins only after death - plainly; if it be so, this statement of the Apostle is a deliberate deception; for it not only conceals the main fact, but it substitutes something else in the place of it, as if to draw attention away from the substantial truth in the case.

Now our theme text: Luke 4:18-21: Again, this is the very core of what Jesus came to do and no mention of hell or torment. More than that, Jesus STOPS SHORT the part of Isaiah 61:2 that says, *And the day of vengeance of our God.*

But there is another fact, of great weight in this inquiry, and one worthy of all remembrance. The original words translated "save" and "salvation," if I have counted rightly, occur one hundred and fifty-seven times in the New Testament. Of these, nineteen refer to the healing of bodily infirmities; as when Jairus besought Christ to lay hands upon his daughter, "that she might be *healed*" [Mark 5:23] - literally, "saved" - thirty-five of these refer to deliverance from danger or death, as when the mocking Jews said of Jesus, "He saved others; let him save himself." [Luke 23:35] The remaining one hundred and three examples refer to spiritual or Gospel salvation. And yet in not one of these texts is it said that Christ came to save the world, or any part of it, from endless punishment, or even from "hell." But it is said repeatedly, and emphatically, that he came expressly to save us from something quite different from this. How shall we explain this, if the doctrine be true? What shall we say of those, who, speaking by the Spirit of God in exposition of Gospel salvation, never state the case as it really is, but spend all their words on matters of comparatively trifling importance?

Ancient world history shows much evidence of many cultures believing in some sort of torment-filled afterlife because of fear. Historical writings point to the fact in many of these cultures, these things were admittedly made up so that the people could be controlled.

In the Old Testament there is no such evidence. You would think God would tell Israel - His chosen people - what would come in the afterlife. The fact that He did not tells us those things were not true. They were pagan stories that crept into Christianity and contaminated what we are and what we believe. Remove the pagan thinking from our Christian doctrine and replace it with just scriptural thoughts.

**So, what is the history of hellfire?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions...
Think about it...!**