

Words Translated As Hell

Four different words are translated as hell in the King James Version, one in the Old Testament (Sheol) and three in the New Testament (Hades, Gehenna, and Tartarus). On careful examination it will be found that none of these four words has the meaning of our modern word "hell," which is a place of eternal torment.

I am not suggesting that the translators tried to deceive us, but that the word "hell" has changed meaning over time. The English word hell grew into its present meaning. Originally, it only meant a covered or hidden place.¹ It denoted only what was secret or concealed, but gradually came to have the meaning of a place of eternal torment.

All more recent English Bible translations testify to this by the fact that they use the English word "hell" less and less. Not because all translators have turned liberal, or don't believe the Bible, but merely because they realize the English word "hell" does not convey the correct meaning to modern readers.

In the King James Bible, the term "hell" is used 54 times, 31 times in the Old Testament, and 23 times in the New Testament.²

By contrast, not one of these newer translations mentions "hell" in the Old Testament:

American Standard Version

Amplified Bible

Complete Jewish Bible

English Standard Version

Holman Christian Standard Bible

Jewish Publication Society Bible

Jewish Publication Society Tanakh

New American Standard Bible

New English Translation

New International Version

New Living Translation

New Revised Standard Version

Revised English Bible

Revised Standard Version

A similar thing has happened with more recent translations of the New Testament. While the King James Version used the word hell 23 times in the New Testament, all the following translations use the word 14 times or less:

American Standard Version

Amplified Bible

New American Standard Bible

¹ A word example which helps understand this is "helmet" which is derived from the same word, and means a covering for the head.

² To see a "List Of All Bible Verses With Hell Words" go to www.WrongAboutHell.com.

New Century Version
New International Version
New King James Version
New Living Translation
New Revised Standard Version
Revised English Bible
Revised Standard Version

Here are a few of the English translations that do not use the word hell at all:

New American Bible
Rotherham's Emphasized Bible
Weymouth's New Testament in Modern Speech
World English Bible
Young's Literal Translation

Now let's look at each of the four words that have been translated as hell in the Bible.

Tartarus

Tartarus is only mentioned once in the Bible, 2 Peter 2:4, where a verb form of the word is translated as "cast down to hell" in the King James Version.

2 PETER 2:4 KJV

4 For if God spared not the angels that sinned, but cast them down to hell, and delivered them into chains of darkness, to be reserved unto judgment;

However you interpret this verse, it gives us no reason to think Tartarus has anything to do with humans or their judgment.

While this and the following verses in Second Peter chapter two warn people not to think they can escape judgment, the passage gives no indication what judgment will be. There is no reason but tradition to think Tartarus should be translated as "hell."

Sheol

The word Sheol is used in the Old Testament 65 times. The King James Version translates it as grave 31 times, hell 31 times, and pit 3 times. Can you imagine the same word being translated as both grave and hell?

Today, no widely used English version of the Bible ever translates Sheol as hell, except the King James Version and the New King James Version.

By its usage we see that Sheol was considered the place or state of all the dead -- whether they were good or bad. When used figuratively it could mean the consequences of wickedness in the present world, likened to death.

To the Hebrew mind Sheol was the unknown place all people go after death. To simply equate it with the grave is probably not sufficient. There is another Hebrew word for grave. Also, Jacob said he would go to Sheol where his son Joseph was (Genesis 37:35), yet he had just been told that Joseph was eaten by a wild animal, so he did not think Joseph was in a grave.

Jesus said in Matthew 8:11 that Jacob will feast in the Kingdom of Heaven, so Jacob did not end up in a place of torment or separation from God after his death. Therefore Sheol, as used for the first time in the Bible by Jacob, could not have our meaning of "hell."

Sheol is never spoken of in the Bible as a place of punishment after death. In fact, it is spoken of as a realm of unconsciousness in Psalm 6:5, Isaiah 38:18, and Ecclesiastes 9:10. Job even expressed a desire to go to Sheol in Job 14:13.

The word sheol cannot mean a place of punishment or torment as it is used to designate the place where the righteous dead are. Clearly, Sheol cannot have the modern meaning of "hell."

Hades

Hades is found 11 times in the Greek New Testament. The King James Version translates it ten times as hell and one time as grave.

Hades seems to have the same meaning as the Old Testament word Sheol.

The Septuagint is the Greek version of the Old Testament which was the commonly accepted Bible used during the ministry of Jesus and the early years of the Church. The Septuagint uses Hades to translate Sheol. This makes it very clear that in Jesus' day, the Hebrew word Sheol and the Greek word Hades had a very similar, if not the same meaning.

The New Testament follows the Septuagint in translating Sheol as Hades as can be seen by comparing Acts 2:27 with Psalm 16:10.

Hades comes from two words, the first word meaning "not" and the second one meaning "to see." So Hades originally meant the unseen, or what is concealed.

Originally the English word "hell" also only meant something that was secret or concealed. So in 1611 when the King James Version was translated, "hell" may have been a good translation for the Greek word Hades and its Hebrew equivalent Sheol. But as we all know, the meaning of hell today is very different.

It would seem that Hades means more than death or the grave in the New Testament, because there are other Greek words used for those terms. Of course a language can have more than one word with the same meaning. We call them synonyms.

Whatever Hades means, it will not last forever. For Revelation 20:13 shows both death and Hades will give up their occupants.

Revelation 20:14 seems to indicate Hades will be destroyed. It says that death and Hades will be cast into the lake of fire, which is the second death. The verse seems to be saying this will be the end of both death and Hades (which is what Hosea 13:14 prophesied: the destruction of Sheol/Hades and death). First Corinthians 15:55 also quotes from the Septuagint translation of Hosea 13:14, where Hades' destruction is prophesied. Therefore Hades is temporary.

So the rich man of Luke 16, being in Hades, was in a place of only temporary detention. Whether this is a literal story or a parable, his confinement is not an endless one, based on these Scriptures.

Jesus said in Revelation 1:18 that He now has the keys of Hades and death. So no one who calls on Jesus must remain imprisoned by either of them.

Gehenna

The Greek word Gehenna (also spelled Geenna) occurs 12 times in the New Testament, and is always translated "hell" in the King James Version. The word is used only one time in the New Testament outside the first three Gospels, in James 3:6 where it is used metaphorically about the harm caused by a vile human tongue.

Whether Gehenna was used by Jesus to typify what a true Hell is like may be debated. What is beyond debate is that Gehenna was a known place on the south side of Jerusalem familiar to all who heard Jesus speak.

The word Gehenna is the Greek spelling of the Hebrew words *ge hinnom*, meaning "valley of Hinnom." A quick search of a concordance for the word Hinnom will find the 11 verses referring to this location in the Old Testament. From these verses you will readily see the evils that happened in this valley, and understand how it became thought of as a horrible place by Jews.

The valley of Hinnom, south of Jerusalem, was the place in ancient times where idolatrous Israelites burned their children alive as sacrifices to Molech and Baal. (Molech is sometimes spelled Moloch). It was also referred to as Tophet, which means a place of fire. Gehenna is never used in the Old Testament to mean anything other than the place outside Jerusalem with which every Jew was familiar.

After they returned from exile in Babylon, the Jews reportedly turned the Hinnom valley into their city dump where garbage and anything considered unclean was burned. This included the

bodies of executed criminals and dead animals. Fires continually burned there consuming the garbage frequently being cast into it. And there were always worms feeding on any unburned remains. (Today the valley of Hinnom is nothing like this. In modern times it was transformed into a garden.)

The worst sentence a Jewish court could give a criminal included discarding his unburied corpse amid the fires and worms of this polluted valley. Being thrown into the trash of Gehenna, instead of having a proper burial, would have been a most abhorrent thing for a Jew of that day. It would mean that his life and his works were completely worthless, fit only for the dump.

In Matthew 5:29-30 Jesus clearly refers to the physical body being cast into Gehenna, and not just the soul. This indicates that the meaning of Gehenna, as used by Jesus in these verses, was not a place of punishment after a person had left their body.

When the Jewish nation was destroyed in 70 A.D. by the Roman army, many thousands of Jews literally experienced Gehenna, as their dead bodies were discarded there, fulfilling warnings given by Jesus to the Jews who rejected Him.

Gehenna is never mentioned by Peter, Paul, or John. Surely this fact is worthy of note that not one time did any of these apostles of Jesus even mention the subject. Would they not have warned sinners concerning it, if there were a Gehenna of torment after death? Paul even says, "I have not shunned to declare unto you all the counsel of God," yet his writings never mention Gehenna (or any word meaning hell). If Gehenna were the final home of unhappy billions surely he would have warned us to avoid it.

If Jesus did use Gehenna to refer symbolically to a place of future eternal torment, would not His disciples have understood that is what Jesus meant? After all, they were the closest to Him and were entrusted with spreading His message to the entire world. Yet they never spoke of it.

Doesn't it seem absurd that only Jesus and James would ever mention something so vital for humans to know, if indeed Gehenna does refer to hell? And clearly, James only used the word Gehenna one time in a figurative sense, having nothing to do with punishment.

No letters to the church even mention Gehenna as a place. If Gehenna is indeed the place of future eternal torment in fire for all the unsaved, should this not be a major topic? If Gehenna really reveals the terrible fact of endless woe, how can we account for this strange silence?

After reading this, can you believe that Gehenna was used by Jesus to mean a place of endless punishment in fire after death, and that this is a part of His divine revelation that was to be given to the entire world? Or does it not make more sense to take the Bible literally and realize that Gehenna was a valley outside Jerusalem, and not Hell.

Unless the context requires us to attach some other meaning to Gehenna, why not accept that Jesus used it referring to a literal valley outside Jerusalem?