

Appendix A

Gehenna. *Hell?* No!

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To say that the discussion of the topic of hell is a hotly (pun intended) debated subject would be an understatement of epic proportions. Books and articles abound, and anyone can “google” the topic and be overwhelmed with articles, chats/discussions from every view and vantage point. This topic seems to elicit great passion and sometimes gross vitriolic intensity. I think we need to turn down the heat. As God’s children and followers of Jesus, we are trying to understand the truth, and, maybe most importantly, trying to have an accurate understanding of God, His plan for the ages, and how He sees us. Yet we must humbly remember that we are finite, and He is infinite. Apart from His revelation to us on this subject, as well as any other divine topic, any understanding would be nearly impossible. This is why we keep on studying. We keep on discussing. We keep on writing. We can always find people we agree with and others with whom we do not. This process can be enjoyable. However, if we are ready to burn people at the stake, ostracize, or excommunicate them because they disagree with us or see things differently, we can know for sure that the way we are engaging in the process is not from God.

So onward we go...enjoying, searching, thinking, and loving.

What is present herein is my view and perspective. This is my understanding at this time (it could always change), an understanding I have derived from years of study on the topic. I personally refuse to rely on non-biblical writings or archeological studies, among other things; because I believe that if we are to understand the Bible, the Bible is the best interpreter of itself. This is not to say that other writings, or fields of study, are not worthy reading. I have read the extra-biblical materials myself. But I do not think we should use those materials to determine what the Bible says, especially in cases where the Bible itself provides all the adequate material for understanding what it means. Such is the case in the study of Gehenna.

You must decide for yourself what makes the most sense of the biblical passages and how that harmonizes with what you know about God.

Summary First

My understanding is that Jesus never once spoke about hell.¹

If hell is a place of eternal, unending punishment of the wicked (separated from God for all eternity), then I am very confident Jesus never spoke about such a place. I, like yourself I assume, have heard or read many people say things like “Jesus spoke on hell more than anyone in the Bible,” or “Jesus spoke about hell more than heaven.” I whole-heartedly disagree!

But this conclusion is, in my opinion, based on a very simple misunderstanding. Jesus spoke about Gehenna, He did not speak about hell.

So our task is to try to determine what Jesus meant by what He said.

What was Jesus’ understanding of Gehenna?

I do not think Jesus understood Gehenna to be a place of eternal, unending punishment separated from God.

Gehenna is NOT hell!

Jesus said Gehenna...

Jesus said...

“And whoever says, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the fiery hell (Gehenna)” (Matt. 5:22)

“...it is better to lose one of the parts of your body, than for you whole body to be thrown into hell (Gehenna).” (Matt. 5:29, 30; Mark 9:43, 45)

“...fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Gehenna).” (Matt. 10:28; Luke 12:5)

“It is better for you to enter into life with one eye, than to have two eyes and be cast into the fiery hell (Gehenna).” (Matt. 18:9; Mark 9:47)

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites,...you make him twice as much a son of hell (Gehenna) as yourselves.” (Matt. 23:15)

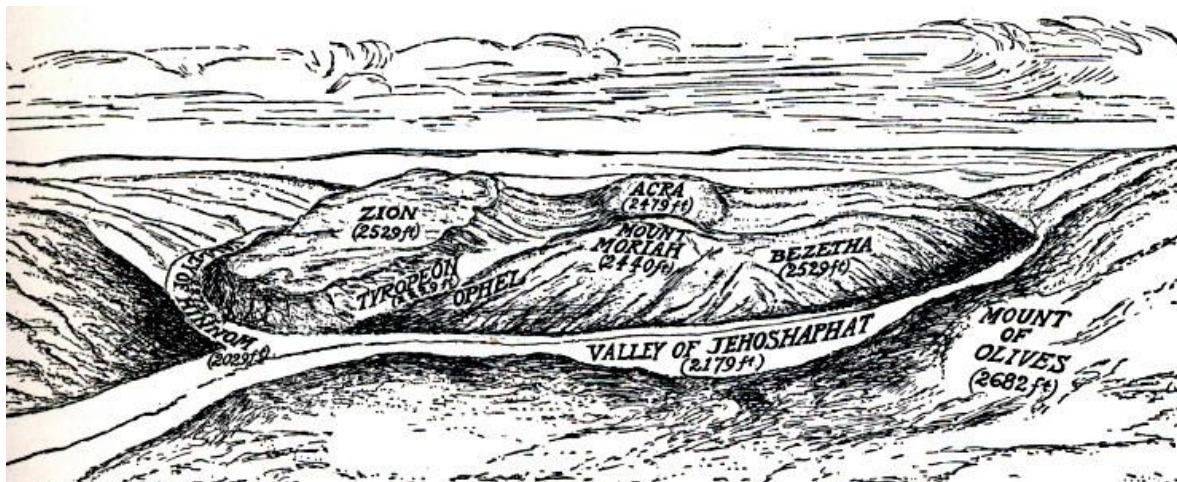
“You serpents, you brood of vipers, how will you escape the sentence of hell (Gehenna)?” (Matt. 23:33)

¹ In the parable of the rich man and Lazarus (Luke 16:19-31) the word used is “Hades” and is not a reference to hell even though many have attempted to make the association.

Every instance here where the English word “hell” appears is a translation of the Greek word Gehenna. The only other place where Gehenna is found, and where it is likewise translated as “hell,” is in James 3:6. Here James writes that the tongue, which “is a fire” is “set on fire by hell.” Obviously this is not literal.

Don't know Much about Geography...

Gehenna is a Greek proper noun derived from the Hebrew proper noun *ge-Hinnom* which means valley of Hinnom, or the valley of the son of Hinnom. This valley is a ravine south of Jerusalem.² This ancient valley on the south side of Jerusalem was mentioned as a geographical boundary for division of the Promised Land between the twelve tribes (see Joshua 15:8; 18:16; see also Nehemiah 11:30). Here is an artistic rendition of the geography of ancient Jerusalem (Gehenna, or the valley of Hinnom, is the ravine on the left hand side of the picture).³



Many other maps and pictures are available online for further viewing and consideration.

What some say....

You can pick up any number of dictionaries and other works and find all sorts of ideas on the meaning of *ge-Hinnom* or *Gehenna*.

A standard Greek dictionary, for example, defines *Gehenna*:

² See BAGD, Vines, TDNT and more for information regarding this. But be warned that theological conclusions are offered in these resources which are not inherent in the words themselves.

³ http://www.bible-history.com/jerusalem/firstcenturyjerusalem_the_land_of_jerusalem.html

“Valley of the sons of Hinnom, a ravine south of Jerusalem. There according to later Jewish popular belief, the last judgment was to take place. In the gospels it is the place of punishment in the next life, *hell* (italics mine).”

The glossary of the NET Bible defines it this way:

“a Greek transliteration of the Hebrew words *ge hinnom* ("Valley of Hinnom"), the valley along the south side of Jerusalem which in Old Testament times was used for human sacrifices to the pagan god Molech (Jer 7:31; 19:5-6; 32:35), and came to be used as a place where human excrement and rubbish were disposed of and burned; in the inter-testamental period, it came to be used symbolically as the place of divine punishment, i.e., *hell*. (italics mine).”

The Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible says, “In later times the valley seems to have been used for burning refuse, and also the bodies of criminals.”⁴

Some have latched on to this idea that *Gehenna was the Jerusalem city garbage pit*, and, therefore, when Jesus used this word, He was referring to that idea.

For example, in his book *Love Wins*, Rob Bell argues that “Gehenna, in Jesus’ day, was a city dump.”⁵ Bell offers this elaborate description,

“People tossed their garbage and waste into this valley. There was fire there, burning constantly to consume the trash. Wild animals fought over scraps of food along the edges of the heap. When they fought, their teeth would make a gnashing sound. Gehenna was the place with the gnashing of teeth, where the fire never went out.”⁶

However, the view that *Gehenna* was a garbage dump during the days of Jesus, and was therefore His frame of reference when using the term has “fallen from favor in recent years primarily because there is no documentary evidence earlier than the thirteenth century testifying to the existence of such a dump.”⁷ While it is historically reasonable that at some time in history *Gehenna* was used to collect and burn waste, there is not sufficient evidence which would lead us to make that assumption of Jesus’ understanding and intended meaning.

Francis Chan on the other hand, who sought to refute Bell’s claims, develops his perspective of *Gehenna* as a place of eternal torment from Jewish apocalyptic literature dating from somewhere between 100 B.C to as late as 100 A.D. (aka C.E.). In fact, much of the present

⁴ Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Zondervan, p.671

⁵ Rob Bell, *Love Wins*, p.68

⁶ Bell, p.68

⁷ Kim Gary Papaioannou (2004) *Places of punishment in the synoptic gospels*, Durham theses, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/3095/>

understanding of Gehenna as a place of final and eternal punishment of the enemies of God has come from ancient non-biblical literature such as the *Book of Enoch*,⁸ the *Book of 4 Esdras/4 Ezra* (c. 100 C.E.), *2 Baruch*, *Sibylline Oracles*, *The Ascension of Isaiah*, or the *Apocalypse of Abraham*. In his book, *Erasing Hell*, Chan spends the whole of chapter two quoting these Jewish apocalyptic writings in an attempt to establish the idea that these Jewish writings are an accurate representation of first century Jewish perspective on hell (**OR GEHENNA???**). In fact Chan boldly writes that these first century views were “nearly unanimously held. This is undeniable. This is the first-century Jewish view of hell.”⁹ That is an incredible statement. A statement that to me just seems incredibly difficult to establish or verify. The same as Chan’s following statement that “Jesus grew up in a world of beliefs described in the last chapter. He would be expected to believe the same stuff about hell that most Jews did.”¹⁰ Chan’s point is that Jesus grew up with a belief that Gehenna was a place of eternal torment since this was the common Jewish belief so we must, therefore, understand His use of the term to be consistent with this belief.

Many scholars, however, understand that these Jewish apocalyptic writings (which Chan uses to establish his premise) were written much later than the time of Jesus’ earthly ministry. As Dr. Kim Papaioannou found in his doctoral research:

“most of the non-biblical Jewish references are at times considerably late and do not, therefore, have a direct bearing on the use of Gehenna in the Synoptic gospels. An approach that interprets the Synoptic Gehenna in light of later Jewish usage may invest it with meanings that are not there.”¹¹

To make an assumption of Jesus’ held belief of Gehenna and therefore His intended meaning by looking at Jewish apocalyptic literature is “an endeavor... wrought with uncertainty owing first to the obvious divergences between them and the Synoptic Gehenna traditions and secondly to the likelihood that ...the references preserved in the Jewish sources represent later development of a Gehenna tradition. This is evident in that they entail more elaborate and

⁸ Dating this book or pieces (fragments) range from c. 200 BC to 100 BCE

⁹ Francis Chan, *Erasing Hell*, p56

¹⁰ Francis Chan, *Erasing Hell*, p73

¹¹ Kim Gary Papaioannou (2004) *Places of punishment in the synoptic gospels*, Durham theses, Durham University, p. 18. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/3095/>

embellished descriptions and that they are found in literary strata decidedly later than the Synoptic Gospels”¹²

Bell relies on information from late dated literature and archeological studies which indicate that a ravine on the southwest side of Jerusalem was used as a garbage dump in which fire burned. Chan relies on non-biblical early century Jewish apocalyptic literature to support his thesis that we can read these various pieces of literature and conclude what the commonly accepted view of **hell** was in the first century. Hence, the unsupportable assumption is made that we can know exactly what Jesus’ view of hell and Gehenna were and therefore His meaning of Gehenna.

It is my opinion – you must choose for yourself – neither strange, widely unaccepted, Jewish apocalyptic literature, nor late archeological, sociological or geographical studies are completely reliable or trustworthy. And once the biblical evidence is thoroughly considered, all other studies will prove unnecessary in an effort to ascertain the meaning of Gehenna.

So we turn to the Bible to uncover the evidence that helps us to understand *Gehenna*.

The Bible Interprets Gehenna

In the Old Testament this location, beyond the places where it is mentioned as a border reference, has a very dark and sordid history. If one was to go back and read 2 Kings 16:1-4 and 21:1-9 and the parallel passages in 2 Chronicles 28:1-3 and 33:6, one discovers in the original story what is considered the worst example of idolatry in the history of Israel.

This gross idolatry took place under the reigns of kings Ahaz and Manasseh. This idolatry involved building high places of Baal, burning sacrifices and incense to the foreign gods, shedding of innocent blood, and offering their own sons in fire as burnt offerings. Jeremiah reports that this idolatry was so bad that “neither they nor their forefathers nor the kings of Judah had ever known” such defilement (Jer. 19:4). All this took place in *ge-Hinnom*, the Valley of Hinnom (Greek: *Gehenna*).

What is important to consider is God’s reaction to this gross idolatry which took place in the valley of the son of Hinnom.

¹² Kim Gary Papaioannou (2004) Places of punishment in the synoptic gospels, Durham theses, Durham University, pp. 255-256. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/3095/>

You can read those on your own, but what I expect you will find is what I found and what has become critical in shaping my perspective of Gehenna as intended by Jesus.

Following Manasseh's reign, and a short two year reign of his son (Amon), Josiah (Manasseh's grandson) reigned. Josiah was a good king who "did right in the sight of the Lord" (2 Kings 22:2). Josiah initiated serious reforms in Judah. One of his acts of reformation was that he "defiled Topheth (lit. "place of burning"), which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, that no man might make his son or his daughter pass through the fire of Molech" (2 Kings 23:10). It was during this time that God raised up the prophet Jeremiah to assist Josiah and help spur the reformation efforts and urge the people to repent in order to avoid God's wrath.

Three different times Jeremiah returns to this theme of Israel's idolatry as the reason the nation would be punished and exiled (Jeremiah 7; 19; 32). God was so disgusted with their idolatry that the valley of the son of Hinnom, which they called Topheth, was going to be renamed the "valley of Slaughter" (Jer. 7:32; 19:6) because it would be the place where the dead would be slain and buried as a consequence of the nation's rebellion and disobedience. In Jeremiah 7:31-32 (cf. also Jeremiah 19:6) the prophet warned Israel this way,

"'behold, days are coming,' declares the Lord, 'when it will no more be called Topheth, or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of Slaughter; for they will bury in Topheth because there is no other place. And the dead bodies of this people will be food for the birds of the sky, and for the beasts of the earth; and no one will frighten them away. Then I will make to cease from the cities of Judah and from the streets of Jerusalem the voice of joy and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride; for the land will become a ruin.'" (Jer. 7:32-34)

In Jeremiah's prophecies, Topheth, the valley of the sons of Hinnom, became a very real and surreal picture of future punishment of God's chosen people. Jeremiah would again foretell of this coming judgment and distress and even stood in the valley of the son of Hinnom (Jer. 19:14) to prophesy of the coming calamity (19:15). This time Jeremiah breaks a clay vessel as a metaphor for how God will break the people of the city of Jerusalem and the city itself (19:11). There is no hint or clue of any sorts that the punishment or chastisement is eternal and unending. The forewarned punishment will be temporal discipline of God's chosen nation. This second such warning is followed by beautiful promises of future restoration and the establishment of the kingdom through the righteous branch of David (Jer. 23:5-6; 33:14-18) and a New Covenant (Jeremiah 30-31) for these people. Obviously the punishment of Topheth was loving discipline from the Father to bring the people to repentance. The punishment is not an

end, but a means to an end. Topheth, the valley of the sons of Hinnom, was a punishment that was reformatory and a punishment, or chastisements, which will precede restoration.

Another reference to this future punishment, although this time absent is the name Ge-hinnom, is found when Jeremiah refers to “the whole valley of the dead bodies and of the ashes, and all the fields as far as the brook of Kidron” (31:40). But this time the focus on this place of punishment is how it too will participate in restoration for it will be “holy to the Lord; it shall not be plucked or overthrown anymore forever” (31:40). The full picture of Jeremiah’s prophecy is of restoration for the people who had acted immorally in Ge-hinnom which led to exile. But this is again followed by a promise of restoration to the land (Jeremiah 32:26-44).

Jeremiah’s message was clear; he was calling the nation to repentance, otherwise they will experience destruction and a devastation comparable to that which was seen in historical idolatry performed in the valley of Hinnom. That destruction had historical prediction as well as eschatological (end times) predictions (which are yet to be fulfilled) The picture of this destruction was bigger and more severe than that which would come through the Babylonians because one day that punishment will come directly from God. But afterwards He would bring restoration and peace (31:31-40). Jeremiah warns the nation that wicked Jews will be punished in an end-time battle. Ge-hinnom will be a place of punishment of the wicked, but there is no indication that the intention is anything but for the purification of the nation of Israel as Daniel predicted (Dan. 9:24-25).

In the book of Isaiah there are two references which deserve consideration.

In Isaiah 30 the prophet is warning Israel about relying on foreign powers to help resist the force of the Assyrians. Israel is not listening to God or to Isaiah God’s prophet, yet God is continuing to promise restoration even though His rebellious children refuse to listen. Within the promise of restoration is also a promise of future chastisement and punishment for those who oppose God and His people. In verse 33 it says that “Topheth has long been ready, indeed, it has been prepared for the king. He has made it deep and large, a pyre of fire with plenty of wood; the breath of the Lord, like a torrent of brimstone sets it afire.” The immediate and historical application would have been understood to refer to the king of Assyria, but there is also a bigger eschatological (end times) element to this prophecy.

What too many do when they read this and see words like “fire,” “brimstone,” and “punishment” is they rush to conclusions based on some previous presupposition or bias that this

must be hell since they have heard many preachers preach on hell using these terms. But there is nothing in this passage or context, nor in the whole book of Isaiah, which would lead anyone to naturally conclude that this is eternal punishment. A Jewish person who would have first heard or read these words would have had a historical understanding and would have immediately connected Topheth with ge-hinnom. Here God's chastisement (or punishment) of Assyria is temporal as are all other punishments in the Book of Isaiah.

Isaiah 66:24 is another reference to Gehenna although not specifically named. Here the mention of a place where "then they shall go and look on the corpses of men who have transgressed against Me. For their worm shall not die, and their fire shall not be quenched; and they shall be an abhorrence to all mankind." It is significantly important to see this warning, gruesome as it may be, in its immediate context, that of God's future promise of salvation for the house of Israel and the nations. The deliverance promised will come with a renewal of a "new heaven and earth" (66:22) which God said He would create (65:17). This is not eternity or the "new heaven and new earth" of Revelation 21 since there are noticeable differences between this "new heaven and new earth" and the "new heaven and new earth" that God will create after the reign of His Messiah on this earth (cf. Revelation 20-22). Yes, there are two "new heaven and new earths" mentioned in the Bible. The context in which each is mentioned proves this.

Gehenna was also prophesied to be more or do more than serve as a place of chastisement for those living during the age of the end times. Not only is Ge-hinnom, the valley of Slaughter, a place of physical death, it is also a prophetic picture of the consequences that continue after death.

"At that time," declares the Lord, "they will bring out the bones of the kings of Judah, and the bones of its princes, and the bones of its priests, and the bones of its prophets, and the bones of its inhabitants of Jerusalem from their graves. And they will spread them out to the sun, the moon, and to all the host of heaven, which they have loved and which they have served, and which they have gone after, and which they have sought, and which they have worshiped. They will not be gathered or buried; they will be as dung on the face of the ground"(Jeremiah 8:1-2).

Old Testament scholars, Keil and Delitzsch commenting on these very verses wrote, "But even then the judgment has not come to a height. Even sinners long dead must yet bear the shame of their sins. 'At that time' points back to 'days to come' in vii. 32. The worst dishonor

that could be done to the dead, a just return in kind for their worship of sun, moon, and stars.”¹³ Thus this judgment appears to have a connection to the dead as well. But there is no explanation given.

So according to the prophecies of Jeremiah, the valley of Slaughter, the valley of Hinnom, namely, *Gehenna*, will be a place of great temporal judgment on the nation of Israel. This judgment also seems to extend beyond physical death where even the dead will experience similar punishment and chastisement. This idea is also seen in Luke 12:5 where the sentence of *Gehenna* takes place after physical death. Thus it seems reasonable to conclude that *Gehenna* will be a place of punishment or chastisement after physical life. The duration of this punishment is not disclosed so to make any such conclusion would be conjecture. It is also important to recognize that this punishment is for God’s people. We find no such indication that this punishment is for unbelievers to suffer for all eternity.

What is significant – and extremely important – to notice is that in the context of each warning about this future chastisement each is followed with promises of restoration. This must tell us something about the intention and duration of such punishment. If restoration follows this chastisement then the chastisement must be limited in duration.

This promise of restoration is most wonderfully seen in Jeremiah 32:36ff where we read,

“Now therefore thus says the Lord God of Israel concerning this city of which you say, ‘It is given into the hand of the king of Babylon by sword, by famine, and by pestilence.’ Behold I will gather them out of all the lands to which I have driven them in My anger, in My wrath, and in great indignation; and I will bring them back to this place and make them dwell in safety. And they shall be My people, and I will be their God; and I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me always, for their own good, and for the good of their children after them.”

Or in Jeremiah 33:16,

“In those days Judah shall be saved, and Jerusalem shall dwell in safety...”

Israel committed great wickedness in *Gehenna*.

God will, ironically, use the very same place, *Gehenna*, to chastise and punish the rebellious and wicked, whether they are alive or dead.

All such punishment precedes and or leads to restoration.

We must choose what makes the most sense from what we read and know about the character of God. God will punish His rebellious children, whom He loves, but His wrath and

¹³ Keil & Delitzsch, Commentary of the Old Testament: Jeremiah, p. 170

anger will not burn forever. Does God punish for purely punitive purposes or for the purpose of purification? In light of the emphasis on future restoration in Messiah's kingdom, it seems the loving punishment of the Father is to purify and restore so that the promises can be fulfilled. So either Gehenna is a place of punishment to rid the earth of the rebellious, or it is to purge the rebellious of their earthly pursuits and prepare them for what God has in store for them next. What makes the most sense with the evidence from Scripture? What makes the most sense with what we know of the nature and character of God?

Interestingly, if you were to do a bit of reading and research into the modern Jewish perspective of Gehenna, you would likely find that the predominant belief is that Gehenna is a future place of temporal punishment or chastisement. In fact these descriptions find a lot of similarities with Catholicism's purgatory where sinners confront their sins and are ultimately purified. But the bottom line is that it is understood to be a place of limited punishment (even after death) where remorse is experienced for a wasted life, but not for a despairing soul who is without hope.

Taking what the Old Testament provides, let's look again at Jesus' words.

What Jesus meant...

The understanding gained from Old Testament historical and prophetic studies is a paradigm which fits the teaching of Jesus. He would have understood the term *Gehenna* in the first century in terms of the Old Testament teaching on it. Since no further explanation is given when it was used by Jesus, it is safe to assume that the mere mention of the name Gehenna was adequately understood by those to whom He spoke.

The word *Gehenna* is used twelve (12) times in the New Testament in eight different passages. Since this word is not used in the Septuagint (LXX) we must allow the contexts of each usage in the New Testament to show us the breadth of meaning. If there is any clear and apparent expansion on the Old Testament teaching then we may rightly alter or expand our understanding of Gehenna. If no such clear or apparent expansion or change takes place, then we should not read into this word anything more.

The first recording of Jesus speaking about Gehenna was in Matthew 5:22. Here Jesus' immediate audience to whom He was speaking was His chosen disciples. The context says that

“His disciples came to Him. And opening His mouth, He began to teach them.”¹⁴ The “sermon on the mount” is not an evangelistic message; it is a message to His disciples on following Him. He is teaching them about the practical righteousness they need in order to enter the kingdom (when it comes).¹⁵ This practical righteousness, or right living, must exceed the righteousness (“practical righteousness,” see Matthew 6:1) of the Pharisees. One of the ways the disciples’ righteous living must surpass the righteousness of the Pharisees is that it must come as a response from the heart, which is the true intent behind the teaching of the Law Moses gave.¹⁶ It is in this context that we read:

“But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother shall be guilty before the court; and whoever shall say to his brother, ‘Raca,’ shall be guilty before the supreme court; and whoever shall say, ‘You fool,’ shall be guilty enough to go into the *fiery hell* (lit., Gehenna of fire).” (5:22)

The issue here being addressed is anger in the heart towards a brother. There are initially two levels or degrees of punishment mentioned: the Court and Supreme Court. Both are temporal and there is no mention of duration of guilt or punishment. If the Court and the Supreme Court hand out punishments that are temporal (i.e., take place within time, are of a limited duration though not specified), what indicates that Jesus changed from *temporal* to eternal punishments when He referred to the third and final place of punishment (Gehenna of fire)? If such a change did exist, then we ought to expect there to be some clear indication of it. The most natural way to read this is to simply follow the progression given. This progression should lead one to conclude that the punishment of Gehenna is temporal (taking place in time, and being of limited duration) just like the court and supreme court,.

This natural interpretation fits exactly in line with the Old Testament paradigm and understanding. The temporal punishment is for calling a brother a fool so if this was about eternal torment, the punishment would certainly, at least in my opinion, far outweigh the “crime.” Eternal torment in hell certainly seems a significant stretch in these words of instruction from Jesus to His disciples. The inclusion of the adjective “fire” is not uncommon in discussions of God’s temporally manifested wrath (e.g., Deut. 4:24; 32:22; Jer. 4:4; Heb. 10:27;

¹⁴ Matthew 5:1-2. The Law of Nearest Antecedent requires that we interpret the personal pronoun “them” consistent with the noun “disciples.”

¹⁵ Matthew 5:20

¹⁶ Matthew 5:21-48

12:29) and especially in reference to His eschatological judgments in the last days. The connection can be clearly seen to Isaiah 66:24 “and their fire shall not be quenched.”

If the punishment for anger is eternity in hell to suffer under God’s wrath...then we will all have lots of company. Does such an idea fit your God concept? It doesn’t jive with my concept and understanding of God. Even a just and holy God couldn’t condemn a person to an eternity in punishment for calling his brother a fool.

Moving on...

The next recorded usage is in the same context, Matthew 5:29-30 where we read:

“And if your right eye makes you stumble, tear it out, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand makes you stumble, cut it off, and throw it from you; for it is better for you that one of the parts of your body perish, than your whole body go into *hell*.”

Here, as in the first use (Matthew 5:22), the same principles of interpretation apply and the same conclusions. Jesus is talking to His disciples. Temporal judgment fits better in the context than any forced idea of eternal judgment. This example is cased in very hyperbolic language...at least so it seems, for it doesn’t seem reasonable that Jesus wants His disciples to self-mutilate because they have lustful thoughts. Neither does it seem reasonable that eternal torment is the just recompense for such sins if they are committed. Here again temporal judgment is consistent with the paradigm of the Old Testament understanding of Gehenna. Thus we may safely conclude that the punishment is for the purpose of purification.

The next example is found in Matthew 10:28 where we read:

“and do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul, but rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in Hell.”

First, it is one thing to say that God *is able* to destroy a soul and body in hell, but another thing to say that He *will* destroy a soul and body in hell. Secondly, the understanding of the word destroy (Grk: *apollumi*) does not mean annihilate or torment in hell. This passage is once again about discipleship, following Jesus, and He is once again instructing His disciples. This time Jesus taught them to fear God and not man. The destruction of the body and soul does not mean eternal destruction but chastisement. Paul and others such as Peter use the same idea to indicate temporal chastisement in terms of destruction (e.g., Rom. 9:22; 2 Peter 2:1; 3:7, 16). If we carry forward the understanding of Gehenna provided for us by the Old Testament it would

be natural to understand this passage in Matthew in terms of temporal discipline or punishment. (Luke 12:5 is a parallel passage to this passage in Matthew and should be handled in the same way that this one is.)

The next use of the term Gehenna is in Matthew 18:8-9 where we read:

“...and if your hand or foot causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it from you; for it is better for you to enter life crippled or lame, than having two hands or two feet, to be cast into eternal fire. And if your eye causes you to stumble, pluck it out, and throw it from you; it is better for you to enter life with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into the fiery *hell*.”

Once again the hyperbolic language is obvious so we must be careful not to push this too far. Jesus is talking to His disciples who were debating who was going to be greatest in the coming kingdom (Matthew 18:1). It follows that Jesus’ warning about missing life and being cast into Gehenna must be real prospects for His disciples. To insert a new idea that Gehenna means eternal punishment is unwarranted and unnecessary. The context of this warning is an admonishment to His disciples about the pathway of greatness (humility as that of a child, 18:4). The consequence of Gehenna results for any of these disciples who might cause one child who believes in Jesus to stumble. Certainly eternal torment for being a bad parent or messing up as a mentor would be extremely disproportionate. If you compare the Matthew 18:9 reference with Mark 9:47, it becomes even clearer that “enter into life” is synonymous with “enter the kingdom of God.” Hence, the timing of the *fiery hell* seems to correspond with the time or duration of the kingdom of Messiah.

In this passage *fire* is modified by the word *aiōnios* which literally means *age*. Eternal is not the best translation of this Greek word *aiōnios*. The debate among the disciples is about being great during the kingdom, so the age referred to here is the age of the coming kingdom of Messiah. What is contrasted here is the coming kingdom of Messiah and Gehenna. The kingdom is life; life is a synonym for the kingdom in the gospel of Matthew as it was in the Old Testament (see Daniel 12:1-2). So Gehenna must be contemporaneous with the life it is contrasted with; Gehenna is a place of punishment which takes place during the age of the kingdom of Messiah. As God had warned in the past that sin and disobedience was punishable by Topheth, so here we see the same idea with the use of the word Gehenna. Gehenna is a place

of future and temporal (taking place within time and limited in duration) punishment which takes place during the age to come.

The next two uses are in Matthew 23:15, 33, where we read:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, because you travel about on sea and land to make one proselyte, and when he becomes one you make him twice as much a son of hell as yourselves... You serpents, you brood of vipers, how shall you escape the sentence of hell.”

Here the Scribes and Pharisees have an adverse controlling influence on those they deceive into being their proselytes and following their hypocritical standard of righteousness (which is in fact unrighteousness). There is absolutely nothing here in these verses which would enlighten us to a different understanding of Gehenna than that which is provided by other clear Scriptural evidence from the Old Testament and previous usage in Matthew’s gospel. Thus it is natural to conclude here, as elsewhere, that the punishment of Gehenna is once again temporal punishment (that is, one of limited duration).

The last three uses in the gospels are Mark 9:43, 45, 47, which are seated in a parallel passage to Matthew 5:29-30. They should be handled in the same fashion as its parallel passage was. The passages read as follows:

“and if your hand causes you to stumble, cut it off; it is better for you to enter life crippled, than having your two hands, to go into hell, into unquenchable fire, WHERE WORM DOES NOT DIE, AND THE FIRE IS NOT QUENCHED. And if your foot...it is better for you to enter life lame, than having two feet, to be cast into hell...and if your eye cause you to stumble...for it is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye, than having two eyes, to be cast into hell.”

Here the kingdom entrance is the obvious reward for those who respond righteously. The parallel between “life” and the “kingdom” is even more obvious. The quotation is taken from Isaiah 66:24 which is a prophecy about the age and conditions of the coming kingdom when this heaven and earth are renewed (Isa. 66:22). The unquenchable fire is an implement of future temporal judgment and punishment.

The only other place the word Gehenna is used is in James 3:6 where it is obviously used in a metaphorical way as a source of evil. The connections to the historical understanding of Topheth, the valley of the sons of Hinnom, are once again a natural way to understand this passage.

Also, it is interesting to note that in the New Testament the only people who use the word Gehenna are Jesus and James. In both examples the audiences were Jewish. This should only reinforce the idea that Gehenna was connected to Jewish history and understanding while Gentiles would have no familiarity of the history, the geography, or the prophecies concerning this place.

And maybe this is just me, but the lack of the usage of this word, and any explanations or teaching on the subject, in the book of Acts or Pauline literature makes me very suspicious of the suggestion that it means being saved from an eternal destiny of torment. I would expect that something that significant would be found elsewhere.

Where I land....

I think it is perfectly reasonable to maintain the paradigm for Gehenna found in the Old Testament, and therefore for understanding Jesus' usage of the word. How Jesus spoke about Gehenna fits perfectly within the paradigm of temporal judgment. This is no small thing; it certainly should not be handled flippantly. God's future judgment upon all has serious ramifications...albeit not for eternity.

I like the way Old Testament scholars Keil and Delitzsch get to the heart of the issue when they wrote, "God will make the place of their sins the scene of judgment on the sinners."¹⁷ Gehenna was a place of the fire of idolatry, yet it will also be used by God as a place of fiery judgment upon His disobedient and rebellious children. This judgment is temporal and limited in duration. This judgment may be the end of physical life and continued even after life until the completion of the kingdom of Messiah upon this earth. J. Nolland writes, "...the three horizons of judgment (in the unfolding of national history, after death, and at the time of the coming of the Son of Man) are seen in close relationship to one another, though the nature of this interrelationship is nowhere clearly specified."¹⁸ How long each person must spend in Gehenna is not disclosed...only God knows.

What is important to me is that Gehenna is not hell.

I have no reason to assume anything but the best of God and that the purpose of Gehenna is reformative and remedial and is done out of love. If God is love, then nothing He could or would do can be anything but loving. Gehenna is not hell. But its existence is a serious

¹⁷ Keil & Delitzsch, Commentary on the Old Testament: Jeremiah, p. 169

¹⁸ John Nolland, Word Biblical Commentary; volume 35b – Luke 9:21-18:34, page 768

indication of the extent that some will suffer for a life wasted in rebellion to God. Yet we must maintain that its function and purpose are for good and is used in love.