

Exegesis of "Hell"

John Hick, which we discussed in class, as well as other Christian apologists assert "no theodicy without eschatology". We do not have class time to analyze Christian eschatology; however, I will present here an exegesis¹ of the concept of hell as it is central to some versions of Christian eschatology (not Hick's as was mentioned in class).

There are three words in the Authorized Version of the Bible that are translated as "hell". One is in Hebrew and the other two are Greek.

Hebrew: The word is "sheol." Now it is agreed by all the scholars who have studied the language that "sheol" specifically refers to the grave, to the state of death. There is nothing in that idea that implies the eternal torment of Hell. In Jewish belief, the dead simply lie in the earth, without life or awareness, inert, merely waiting for the resurrection at which they will be returned to life by the power of God. The word occurs a total of 65 times in the Hebrew scriptures. It is translated as "hell" 31 times, as "the grave" 31 times and as "the pit" 3 times. If you look at the individual verses in which "sheol" occurs you will notice an interesting pattern. Wherever the translators thought they could get away with it, they translate it as "hell". Wherever the mention of "sheol" says something that utterly contradicts the traditional myth of "hell," they translate it accurately as "the grave." And, I assume, when they weren't sure, they used "the pit," which seems to mean the same as "the grave."

For example, in 1 Kings 2: 6, King David, before his death, warns his son, Solomon, to beware of Joab, who will probably betray him and adds, "do not let his gray head go down to the grave (sheol) in peace." Why "the grave" here if sheol is a place of eternal torment that might well apply to a traitor? Because it would then be ridiculous to speak of letting someone go to "hell" in peace. Peace is not an attribute usually ascribed to the common Christian idea of hell. This is a typical example of selective translation to support predetermined dogma.

With the other two words, in Greek, the first is "hades". It appears a total of 11 times and is translated as "the grave" once only; the remaining ten times, it is translated as "hell". Yet obviously, "hades" is the name of the abode of the dead in Greek mythology. It is also the name of the Greek god of the dead. Does the God of Israel, therefore, endorse Greek mythology? Should we all be offering sacrifice to Zeus, Poseidon and Apollo on the recommendation of the Holy One of Israel? It is natural to suppose that a Greek writer would refer to the afterlife abode that was traditional in his own language. That hardly means we should assume he intended to refer to the literal existence of the mythological "Hades." To my mind, if we take this

¹ This exegesis is provided in whole by Robert S. Pendell.

literally we paint ourselves into a corner that can only leave us in a position that no true Christian could possibly approve. This is, in fact, what usually happens when we try to treat figurative language as though it were literal.

The third word (second one in Greek) is "Gehenna". It appears a total of twelve times and is translated nine times as "hell" and three times as "hell fire". This is the Greek form of Aramaic "ge hinnom", which means "the valley of Hinnom", the valley outside the old city walls of Jerusalem where they took the garbage out to be burnt. Surely, this too must be figurative language. Could God really be saying, "Repent or I will condemn you to the South Jerusalem Landfill." Again, I doubt it.

There is one final word that is translated as referring to hell. This is tartaroo, "to cast into Tartarus" which is used in 2Pet. 2:4 to refer to the punishment of the rebel angels that God "cast down into hell." The word appears only in this one verse and suffers from the same objection as the word, "hades" since Tartarus was a portion of Hades reserved for the most evil, most blasphemous sinners of Greek mythology. It would seem foolish to believe that God was once again, endorsing Greek mythology as a source of spiritual truth.

In interpreting the Bible, we need to look at the actual meanings of the individual words, not the meanings those words have acquired after two thousand years of corrupt, faulty, or ignorant teaching, but what they meant to the writers who first placed them on parchment and the readers to whom they were addressed. To do otherwise is to cast aside the actual meaning of the book in favor of what was taught in the churches our grandfathers attended.

With the need for a non-literal contextual analysis in mind, what then is hell? Hell is not the "South Jerusalem landfill" nor a literal place (Tartarus) in Hades nor a simple synonym for the Greek realm of Hades. "Hell" is a state—the absence of fellowship with the divine. Hell is the lacking of the state of grace.