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### Is “Hell” a Mistranslation?

By Jim Myers

One of our basic linguistic principles is that “the meanings of words may change over time.”

When you hear the word “hell,” what does it mean to you? For many, the answer would be “a place of fire and eternal punishment after death.”

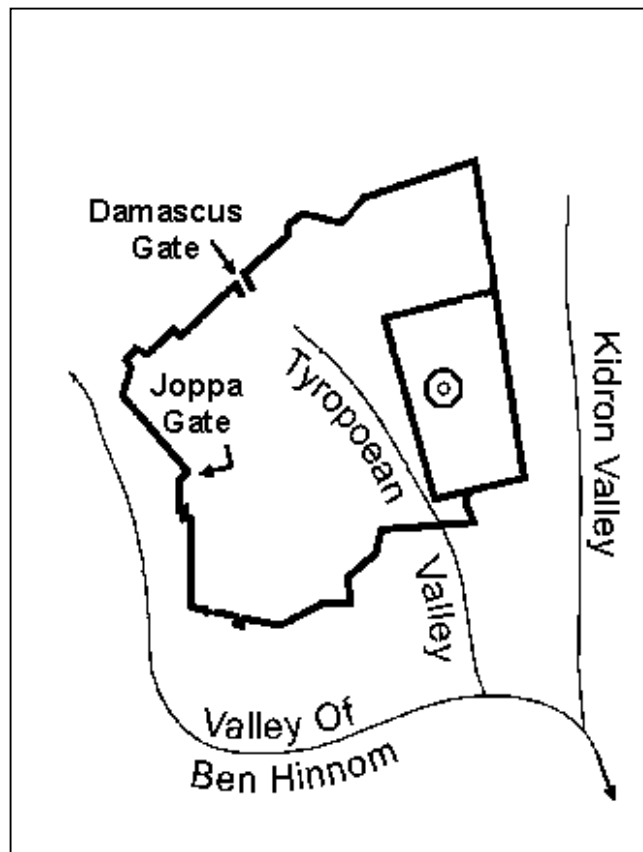
Webster's Third New International Dictionary, unabridged, defines “Hell” as: “from *helan* ‘to conceal.’ The word “hell” thus originally conveyed no thought of heat or torment but simply of a ‘covered over or concealed place.’ In the old English dialect the expression “helling potatoes” did not mean to roast them, but simply to place the potatoes in the ground or in a cellar.

The Greek word translated as ‘hell’ is “*geenna*”, which 12 times in the New Testament. This Greek word is a transliteration of the Aramaic word “*gehinnam*.” The Aramaic word is itself a transliteration of the Hebrew phrase -- *begei ben hinnom*. It would seem that the translators would have reflected the Hebrew meaning of the word in their work.

Translators have three choices when they are translating a word or phrase from one language into another – *translate*, *transliterate* or *ignore it*.

If they choose to translate it, they select the best possible meaning for the word they are translating and reproduce that meaning in the new language. If they choose to transliterate it, they simply select letters in the new language that have the equivalent sounds for the letters of the word or phrase they are translating. Sometimes, however, translators choose to simply ignore a word or phrase and just leave it out.

In this case, the translators decided to



transliterate instead of translate. As I stated earlier, the Greek word is a transliteration of the Aramaic word “*gehinnam*.” The Aramaic word is also a transliteration of the Hebrew phrase *gehinnom*. Let’s see what happens when we translate it. The translation of “ge-“ is “valley of.” “Hinnom” was the name of a person. Therefore the correct translation is “valley of

Hinnom.” With a little more work we learn that the ancient name of this valley is the “**Valley of the Son of Hinnom**.” The name probably reflects the original Jebusite owner of the property. In the Hebrew Bible this denotes the valley that divides ancient Jerusalem (Zion) from the hills to the south and west (see map).

The valley is now called **Wadi er Rababi**, which joins the **Wadi en Nar** (the **Kidron Valley**) at the southern extremity of the hill of Zion. The valley was a point on the boundary between Judah and Benjamin (Joshua 15:8, 18:16). This usage is also reflected in Nehemiah 11:30. In ancient Israel it was the site of

Tophet, a cultic shrine where human sacrifice was offered (2 Kings 23:10; 2 Chronicles 28:3, 33:6; Jeremiah 7:31, 19:2ff, 32:35).

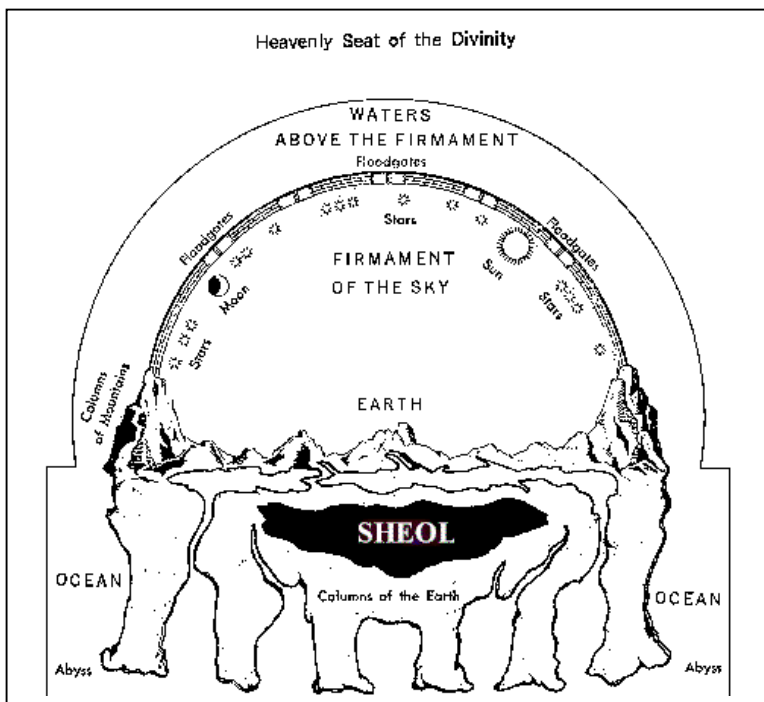
30 "For the children of Judah have done evil in My sight," says Yahweh. "They have set their abominations in the house which is called by My name, to pollute it. 31 "And they have built the high places of Tophet, which *is* in the **Valley of the Son of Hinnom**, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire, which I did not command, nor did it come into My heart. (Jeremiah 7)

It was the place where other pagan deities were worshiped, from the 5th until the 2nd century BCE. It then became a **garbage dump** that had fires which were continually burning the refuse and was a source of constant smoke and horrible odors. This was the state of the valley during the first century CE and during the life of Jesus.

When the translators of the King James Version and Catholic Douay Version (as well as most other older translations) encountered the Hebrew **sheol** or the Greek **hades**, they translated them as “**hell**.” King James translators are not consistent because they **sheol** as “**hell**” 31 times. They also translate it another 31 times as “**grave**” and 3

times “**pit**.” The Douay translators translate **sheol** as “**hell**” 64 times and as “**pit**” once, and “**death**” once. Don’t forget that the ancient meaning of the word hell is a covered over or concealed place.

The ancients believed a dome capped their world, above this dome they called heaven, and below the earth was the underworld or netherworld.



After a person died he was buried, it was believed that he soon disappeared into **Sheol** (Greek Hades).

The New Testament use of *geenna* reflects new changes. Matthew's Jesus suggests (13: 40-42) that sinners at the end of time will be cast into a **blazing furnace** and there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew 25: 41-46 says that sinners will join the devil and his angels in **eternal fire**. Luke 16: 19-31, speaks of a man who actually went to Hell. He **died and was buried** and went to Hell where he was tortured by fire. However, he could look up and see, in the distance, a poor man basking with Abraham in heaven. Mark 9: 43, confirms Hell as having an **unquenchable fire to torment sinners**. Hell as it is understood today simply did not exist in the Old Testament until after the Jews returned from exile. *The period between the Testaments witness the development of Hell, as we now know it.* Jesus spoke of it while Paul only hints at it.

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