

Heaven & Hell

What does the Holy Bible
really say?

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I want to turn again to the actual words used in the Holy Scripture, which are often translated into English in wholly misleading ways, such as to totally change the meaning of Scripture.

In the first place, let's be clear: Nowhere in the complete Bible, in its original languages, is the term "hell" used, and nowhere in those Scriptures is the idea of a God-created place of punishment for sinners contemplated. There is no such place as "hell".

"Hell" by the way is an Old English word - originally Helle - a netherworld.

When you examine in context the source words which are translated as "hell" in English language Bibles the original understanding becomes clear. You will find that "hell" is translated from four different Greek and Hebrew words. These words are not interchangeable in the original language, yet, incredibly, in English-language Bibles these words are translated differently in different places to fit the translators' theology rather than allow the words of Scripture to determine their own theology. Not only did English translators give these four very different words one meaning, they were not even consistent and chose to translate these same words with different meanings in different places.

If one examines what the early Church Fathers wrote about "hell" and the afterlife, it will be seen that they too understood that there is no place called hell, and that both paradise and torment came from being in God's presence and love in the afterlife.

Bishop Hilarion (Alfeyev) tells us that Saint Isaac the Syrian used the word "Gehenna" to signify those in Sheol who were discerning it in the "hell" context and he said: God cannot forget any of His creatures, and for everyone their proper place is prepared in the Kingdom of heaven. But for those who are unable to enter immediately into the Kingdom, the transitory period of Gehenna is established: 'No part belonging to any single one of all rational beings will be lost, as far as God is concerned. He has devised the establishment of the Kingdom of heaven for the entire community of

rational beings - even though an intervening time is reserved for the general raising of all to the same level' (II/40,7).

Isaac was quite resentful of the widespread opinion that the majority of people will be punished in hell, and only a small group of the chosen will delight in Paradise. He is convinced that, quite the contrary, the majority of people will find themselves in the Kingdom of heaven, and only a few sinners will go to Gehenna, and even they only for the period of time which is necessary for their repentance and remission of sins: 'By the device of grace the majority of humankind will enter the Kingdom of heaven without the experience of Gehenna. But this is apart from those who, because of their hardness of heart and utter abandonment to wickedness and the lusts, fail to show remorse in suffering for their faults and their sins, and because these people have not been disciplined at all. For God's holy Nature is so good and compassionate that it is always seeking to find some small means of putting us in the right, how He can forgive human beings their sins - like the case of the tax collector who was put in the right by the intensity of his prayer (Luke 18:14), or like the case of a woman with two small coins (Mark 12:42-43; Luke 21:2-3), or the man who received forgiveness on the Cross (Luke 23:40-43). For God wishes for our salvation, and not for reasons to torment us' (II/40,12).

While Saint Isaac's idea of the universal salvation is not the same as the Origenist 'restoration of all' - in Origen, universal restoration is not the end of the world, but a passing phase from one created world to another, which will come into existence after the present world has come to its end - which is alien to Christian tradition and unknown to Isaac.

Isaac's teaching on universal salvation evokes the following questions: What is the sense of the whole drama of human history, if both good and evil are ultimately to be found on an equal footing in the face of God's mercifulness? What is the sense of sufferings, ascetic labour and prayer, if sinners will be sooner or later be equated with the righteous? Besides, how far do Isaac's opinions correspond to the

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Christian tradition and to the teaching of the Gospel, in particular, to the Parable of the Last Judgment, where the question concerns the separation of the 'sheep' and the 'goats'? Isaac does not deny the reality of the separation of the sheep from the goats, and he even explicitly refers to it. But his attention is directed far beyond this separation, for he does not regard it as final and irreversible. As we saw, the Last Judgment is a reality which Isaac recommends one to ponder over every day, and the experience of the separation of a sinner from his fellow human beings is clearly depicted by Isaac when he speaks of the Judgment. However, his main point is that the present life is a time when the separation actually takes place, and the Last Judgment will only reveal that spiritual state which was reached by a person during this life. Thus, the Parable should not be understood as a dogmatic statement concerning the final destiny of the righteous and sinners, but as a prophetic warning against not having and manifesting love for one's fellow humans during one's earthly life. Isaac warns that the torment of Gehenna is terrible and unbearable, even though it is limited in time. This perception of Sheol is a reality that is in no way denied by Isaac. But he understands it in the context of the Gospel's message about God's unspeakable love and boundless mercy. For Isaac, God is primarily a householder making those who worked only one hour equal to those who have borne the burden of the whole day (Matt.20:1-15). A place in the Kingdom of heaven is given to a person not on the basis of his worthiness or unworthiness, but rather on the basis of God's mercy and love towards humankind. The Kingdom of heaven is not a reward, and Gehenna is not a requital: Both are gifts of the merciful God 'Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth' (1 Tim.2:4).

Finally, the theological system of Isaac the Syrian is based on the direct experience of the mystical union of an ascetic with the love of God. This experience excludes any possibility of envy of other human beings, even to those who have reached a higher spiritual state and thus have a chance of receiving a higher place in the Kingdom of heaven. Moreover, the experience of unity with God as love is so full of delight in itself that it is not for the sake of any future reward that a

person prays, suffers and toils in ascetical labours: in this very suffering, in this very prayer and ascetical labour, the experience of encounter with God is concealed. The reason for prayer, bearing afflictions and keeping the commandments is, therefore, not one's striving to leave other human beings behind and to obtain a place in the age to come that is higher than theirs. The sole reason for all ascetical toils is the experience of the grace of God which a person acquires through them. An encounter with God, a direct mystical experience of the divine love which one receives during one's lifetime is, for Isaac, the only justification for all struggles and efforts.

In the the Hebrew Scriptures, Sheol is one word sometimes translated as "Hell" in the Old Testament. In Hebrew, this word is a proper noun, a name, so it should not have been translated but simply transliterated, as is done with other names. The literal meaning of this Hebrew word is simply "underground retreat". Sheol was not understood as a physical place, but is a spiritual "place" associated with the dead. When a person died, their body was buried, and their soul went to reside in Sheol. That is the fate for all people who die, both the righteous and the wicked. According to Hebrew scholars, anything more detailed is conjecture and speculation.

In English translations, Sheol was translated as "hell" in a number of places where it was indicating a place for the wicked. But it was also translated as "grave" and as "pit" in a number of other places where it was clearly not a place of the wicked. Yet there are other Hebrew words for grave and pit, so why did it not occur to the translators that if the author wanted to mean pit or grave they would have used those words? It can be seen that where Sheol fitted the translators' idea of hell as a place of torment, they interpreted it as hell, and simply translated it to a different word if it did not, thereby deliberately altering the Scriptures from their original meaning. In historic Jewish understanding, it is the perception of the individual in Sheol that makes the difference between "heaven" and "hell". This same "place" called Sheol is experienced by the righteous as "gen eiden", the Garden of Eden or Paradise, i.e. "heaven" whereas, Sheol is experienced by the wicked as the "fires of gehennom", i.e. punishment or "hell".

According to the Jews (and by inheritance, the Christians as well) it is the very presence of God that causes the differing perception. Since God fills all things and dwells everywhere, there is nowhere apart from Him. The enemies of God, experience His presence, His Shechinah - glory, as punishment while the righteous bask in that same glory, and experience it as the love and joy of God, as Paradise.

The ancient pagan Greek view, later adopted by the Romans, was that heaven was a physical place up in the sky. The word for heaven is used inter-changeably with the location of the objects of the sky, as in "heavenly bodies", and for the dwelling place of the gods. That is why the Greek word for heaven and sky is the same; there was no distinction made between them in the earliest writings, but eventually they were also understood to be more as a metaphor for the spiritual heaven.

For the ancient pagan Greeks, Hades was a place, but was sometimes also personified in folk mythology. The physical place was where all humans go when they die, a site located at the center of the earth. Like Sheol, it was the final abode of all humans, but unlike Sheol, it was taken to be a geographic site, the literal "underworld" in folk mythology. It was also taken as a metaphor for the place of final rest. Hades was also sometimes taken as the name of the ruler of this place, the pagan god Hades, also known as Pluton by the Romans.

The pre-Christian Greek language had thus developed in this kind of world view, both heaven and Hades as a physical and literal existence up in the sky, or down under the ground. Although these later became more metaphorical in more developed pagan writings, from this came the universal concept of "up" for heaven and "down" for hell. It is used metaphorically by both the Jews and pagans to describe mankind's relationship with God, and so became a universal cultural concept.

For the Jews and early Christians, even Sheol was not separated from God. Translating directly from the Greek of the Septuagint Psalms 139:7 and 8 "Where can I go away from your spirit? And away from your presence, where can I flee? If I go up into heaven, you are there.

If I go down into Hades, there is your presence."

When Jewish scholars translated their Scriptures into Greek in the third century BC, they used the Greek word Hades interchangeably for the Hebrew Sheol in the Septuagint. Strictly speaking, the pagan understanding was very different, but Jewish scholars adapted "Hades" for their use. It is one of many examples of changed, allegorical, or metaphorical non-Hebrew words used in the Bible borrowed from Greek pagan mythology. In the New Testament, Hades is used in a number of places as the Greek equivalent to Sheol as well.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, Sheol is translated 31 times as Hell in the King James Bible, and similarly in the Revised Standard and NRSV. In a number of other places it is translated as "grave" or "pit" and once even as "dust". It appears the translators did not have a very consistent understanding as to what Sheol means, translating the same word differently in different places. The idea of "Hell" as a physical place of torment, apart from the presence of God, had already taken root in the west, and the translation fitted the preconception rather than the original meaning of the word.

Gehennah is another word translated as "hell". It was known to the Jews as a physical place, a valley outside to the south of Jerusalem. It literally means in Hebrew "valley of the sons of Hennah". Here child sacrifices were once made to the pagan god Molech. Gehennah is mentioned in 2 Chronicles 28:3 and 33:6, and Jeremiah 7:31, 19:2-6. After it came under Jewish control a memorial fire was kept burning there. Later it became a dumping place for refuse, dead animals, and eventually prisoners' bodies. Trash fires were kept continually burning there for sanitary reasons. It was like many landfills: A smoky, foul-smelling place. By the time of Jesus this place became a well known metaphor for the fate of those condemned and judged by God. Expressions like "the fiery pit" or the "fires of Gehennah" were equivalent to the unrighteous' experience of God's presence. Gehennah was the place where evil sinful people ended up. In Jewish mystical writings it was believed that this place is where the final destruction of the wicked would occur at Messiah's arrival.

Therefore, usage of this word is interchangeable with "judgment", and quite different than Sheol. To be forgiven of your offences was to be rescued from "the fiery pit", or rescued from judgment. You would still go to Sheol until the resurrection, but in glory rather than in torment.

Notice however that in English, the translators rendered Gehennah as the "valley the sons of Henuh" in some places in the Scriptures and in other places as "hell," rather than just making a direct translation of the words wherever it appears. This confuses the reader, who could get a more consistent understanding of the meaning of the word if it was rendered accurately as "Gehennah".

There are numerous references to God's presence being like fire in the Hebrew Scriptures. In addition, before the invention of the electric light, any reference to "light" meant "fire" in one form or another. For example, "The Lord thy God is a consuming fire" (Numbers); God "...appeared to [Moses] in a flame of fire out of the midst of the bush," (Exodus); "The fire of the Lord burns among them" (Numbers); "the Lord descends upon it in fire" (Exodus); "You have refined us as silver in a fire" (Psalms); and "Who makes His angels spirits, His ministers a flame of fire" (Psalms). These are a few of the many Old Testament references to God being perceived as fire; it was how the Jews understood humans experience God's Shechinah glory. No human could bear to look at the blazing holy presence of God: Not Moses, who hid his face, not Abraham, not Adam or Eve after they fell from Grace. No human could look at the face of God and live to tell about it.

Ten different Hebrew words are translated as "punish" in the New Testament, yet *none* carries our meaning of punishment in English. The most common word "paqad" rendered 31 times as punish, simply means "to visit" or "to remember." The word "anash" [used 5 times] simply means "to urge" or "compel", "chasak" [occurs 3 times] means to restrain, "avown" [used 12 times] means sin. Apparently for the translators, every time God visits or remembers His people, He is "punishing" them, but that is not how Jews understand this word, nor

would they automatically assume that a visit from God was a bad thing.

This kind of translation seems attributable to a presupposition of what these words mean, and intrinsically changes the meanings of these words from the original intent. The translators' own incorrect ideas have clouded their objectivity, an all-too-frequent occurrence with virtually all English language Bibles.

Jesus and the Apostles were all Jews as were nearly all the members of the first Christian Church and they naturally understood the afterlife in the terms of the Old Testament. The Gospels and all of the Epistles affirm this understanding when read in the original Greek.

In the Gospel story of Lazarus and the Rich Man, Jesus clearly states that they both end up in the same place, in Hades. Hades of course is used to mean the same thing as Hebrew "Sheol," it simply means the place everyone goes when they die. In Hades they can see each other and talk to each other, although they are far off from each other. "And in Hades, he lifts up his eyes, being in torment, and sees Abraham far off, and Lazarus in his bosom." [Luke 16:23]. All of them are in Hades, in life Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted, and you are in pain". It doesn't it says that God is punishing him, he is simply "in pain" while there. They were separated by a large gulf that was not placed there by God, but rather created by the choices and actions of the sinner.

Hades is translated as hell ten times in the New Testament, but it is also translated as "grave" in 1 Cor 15:55, another point of inconsistency.

In Revelation Chapter 20, it states that Death and Hades gave up their dead, and Death and Hades are placed in the lake of fire when God reclaims the world. If the ones in Hades were judged and will be in torment for eternity "far from the Lord" as so many think, why would these same ones be released from Hades when God returns? It is because all who have died reside in "Death and Hades" until that moment, when Death and Hades can no longer exist because God is

present. The "lake of fire and brimstone" into which Death and Hades is placed, in Greek would be grammatically correctly translated as the "the lake of divine fire". When Death and Hades is placed in the fiery presence of God, in the "lake of divine fire", it is destroyed, because it is in the very presence of God, death can not exist when God is present.

It is interesting to examine the Greek word for "divine", it is from the Greek "theion", which could also mean "divine being", but also means "sulfur", or in Old English "brimstone". Yet the word 'theion' is translated as "brimstone" or "sulphur" in Luke 17:29, Rev. 9:17, 14:10, 20:10, 21:8, which is where 'fire and brimstone' comes out of heaven, but it is equally interchanged with the words "divine fire". Since this did not fit the translators' preconceived ideas, it is rendered always as brimstone in this context.

Elsewhere in Revelation it states that the "heat comes out of heaven" and burns the enemies of God, yet does not harm the ones with God's seal on their foreheads. So the same heat, the heat that is the very life and light that comes from God, burns the sinners, and doesn't harm the ones that love God.

Everyone experiences this fire caused by the presence of God. The Bible tells us there is no place apart from God, that he is everywhere and fills all things, so there is no place apart from Him. Moreover, why would He create a place just to punish the ones He says He loves unconditionally? That is not the nature of a loving God. Translating 2 Thess 1:7-8 from the Greek literally, St. Paul tells the persecuted Thessalonians that they will "get relief at the revelation of the Lord Jesus coming out from heaven with His powerful angels in flames of fire". Yet this same presence of Jesus causes the ones persecuting them to "...be punished with everlasting destruction BECAUSE OF [Gr. "apo"] the presence of the Lord, and BECAUSE OF his mighty glory" (2 Thess 1:9). Further on Paul writes in 2 Thess 2:8 that "the lawless one, whom the Lord Jesus will destroy by the breath [spirit] of his mouth and make ineffective by the fantastic appearance of his presence". So the mere presence of Jesus makes the "lawless one" ineffective, yet He

gives relief and comfort to the Thessalonians.

Unfortunately many English translations insert a word that is not there in the Greek in verse 1:9, adding the idea that the wicked will be "separated" or "cut off" from the Lord's presence. This is a totally different meaning, and if Paul had wanted to say this he would have used the word "schizo". The Greek word "apo" that Paul actually uses here is a preposition that indicates cause or direction: "because of," "out of," "caused by," "from," etc. The word "apo" appears 442 times in the New Testament, and it is NEVER used to indicate separation, location or position. It is tragic that modern translators have inserted the word "far from" or "cut off from" into 2 Thess 1:9, apparently because they had a preconception about what Paul was trying to say so they altered the text to fit. They added this little "clarifying" word that is not in the Greek text at all, changing the meaning and inserting their own ideas. If your preconceived idea is that Hell is a "place" that an angry God sends people away from his presence, in order to punish and hurt them, you would expect and look for ways that Scripture would support your idea. Clearly, when you read the Bible in the original languages you learn that there is no place apart from God, and there is no place that God puts you to punish you. What scripture reveals is that all eventually will be in the light-filled love and presence of the Lord, and this love and presence will be either "torment" or "comfort and glory". Judgment and paradise both come from being in God's presence.

It is not God's intention that His love will torment us, but that will be the inevitable result of pursuing our own selfish desires instead of seeking God. When we are in harmony with God, we will bask in that presence. Yet, if we desire our own will and are in disharmony with God, we suffer in His presence. Satan is evil not just because he harms others, but because he is an angel of light who stands in the presence of God yet chooses to pursue his own selfish desires, which causes him to tremble in fear. Satan and his fallen angels, the demons, were thrown to the earth and he became the 'god of this world'. It can be speculated that Satan and his demons are on the earth because it is the

only place they can escape God's presence, if only temporarily. This is why they will suffer after God reclaims the world at the end of this age, filling It with His presence. Then there will be nowhere to escape God, for both demons and evildoers.

So "hell" is not a "place" but rather a condition we allow ourselves to be in, not because of God's "justice" but because of our own selfish and sinful disobedience. In other words, we put ourselves in "hell" when we do anything other than seeking God's will. It is not that God wants to harm us; He loves us unconditionally, but torment is the result of coming into His pure presence when we are in a totally impure condition.

The understanding of Sheol in historic Christianity is inextricably linked to the Biblical concept of the Uncreated Light of God. This is the "consuming fire", the Shechinah glory, the fire that burns gold to purify it, as St. Paul writes. It is the fire that burns the weeds left in the field, the fire that burns the pruned branches, it is the lake of divine fire, and the thirst and burning that torments the Rich Man is this same Uncreated Light. Yet, the same fire that torments the impure gives warmth and comfort to the pure of heart.

The Greek word "energeia", and its various forms, appears over 30 times in the new Testament, yet it is not translated as "energy" even once in most popular English translations. It is variously rendered as operation, strong, do, in-working, effectual, be mighty in, shew forth self, and even simply dropped out of the sentence; everything except what it means. Yet, this word was well established in the Greek language in the first century. It was first used by Aristotle, some three centuries before Christ, as a noun, as "energy" in the metaphysical sense - which was borrowed in recent years in English as an engineering term. But even in a modern metaphysical sense, it is exactly as the ancient Greeks use the word, because it is the same word. Yet the translators insisted on ignoring how this word is actually used by Greek speakers and distorted it into a number of verbs and adjectives (or simply drop it from the verse), which leaves only confusion and misunderstanding for English readers.

When we are energized by the Divine Energies, we will radiate the pure Light of God. Translating directly from the Greek, Saint Paul writes to the Philippians [2:13] "For it is God who is energizing in you, according to His will and to energize for the sake of His being well-pleased." In verse 3:21 he further writes "[Christ] who will change the appearance of our humble bodies to take on the form of the body of His glory, through the energization of his Power..." And to the Ephesians in verse 1:19 "and what exceeding greatness of his power, in us who believe, through the energization of His mighty strength, energized in Christ, raising Him from the dead and seating Him in the right hand of Him in the heavens" So this energy in us changes our bodies to glory, and was the same energy that raised Christ from the dead. This energy is in fact, the Grace of God, in Eph 3:7 St. Paul writes "That I was made an attendant through the gift of the Grace of God, granted to me by the energization of his Power". This same Energy also has the power to heal, as St. James writes [5:16] "Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed, prayers energized by a righteous one are very powerful". This same energy comes from the "one" that restrains evil, in II Thess 2:7 St. Paul writes "For already the mysterious lawless one is only restrained now by the Energies, until he comes out of the midst of it"

Receiving this Divine Energy is the results of faith in the true God, as St. Paul tells the Thessalonians in I Thess 2:12" [you received] the true Logos of God, which also energizes in you believers". Moreover, to the Galatians he asks a rhetorical question with an obvious answer [3:5] "Indeed, would it not be in vain, if the One providing you the Spirit and the powerful Energies in you, were by works of the law, or rather by hearing in faith?"

Experiencing God's presence and His in-filling transforming Energies in glory or in torment, as Paradise or as Punishment, is the heaven and hell of the Bible. Not something God did to us, but rather something we did to ourselves. God unconditionally pours out His love on all, whether we want it or not, whether we are ready for it or not, when we

enter the afterlife. . To misrepresent the nature of a loving God would cause one to conclude that it was God's intention to punish His creation. Indeed, one blasphemes the reputation of the God of the Bible when one make Him into an angry vengeful God that punishes His creation. The cause of the torment is the poor choices that we make, not God. It is all in the perception. Such is the nature of a loving God. For God is God.

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