

From GeHinnom to Hell: An Etymological and Conceptual History

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Introduction

In every religion throughout history, there have always been disagreements over the proper and correct interpretation of passages from scripture, and from the words of the holy founders of each religion. Amongst many other long-running arguments, there has been one point of deep theological significance in the Christian tradition that has been discussed, studied, and explained in depth. Influenced by a variety of cultures and other religions, as well as unclear and seemingly contradictory Biblical passages on the matter, Christian tradition has always had problems with authoritatively defining the concept of what is now known as “Hell,” as well as even figuring out the proper way to translate the term from its roots in Judaism and other cultural traditions. In order to properly grasp the nuances of meaning, this paper will open with a brief survey of the Western Semitic cultures’ understandings of the afterlife, as these had clear influences on the redactors of the Old Testament. After performing a survey of Jewish understandings of the afterlife, the intertestamental¹ period and the Greek influences therein will be considered. Finally, the last section of this paper will consider the formation of the Greek Gehenna into Hell in the early Christian church. Through this historical and theological assessment, this paper will seek to show that all of these conceptions of the afterlife had interconnecting influences on the development of beliefs.

Western Semitic and Jewish conceptions of an afterlife for the wicked

Ancient Western Semitic Traditions

In order to truly appreciate the roots of what influenced the later Jewish subsequently, Christian traditions, it is first necessary to consider the portrayal of the

afterlife in the religions of the ancient Sumerians. As summed up by S.N. Kramer, the general Sumerian view of the afterlife is accurately summarized as “a dismal, wretched reflection of life on earth.”² First and foremost, an inclination towards needing material possessions in the Sumerian afterlife is seemingly evidenced by the various graves which have been excavated, many of which have contained various provisions, and in the case of royalty, even having other lower-ranked human beings buried with them.³ The literary remnants of Sumerian culture give a much more developed sense of how their people understood the Nether World, as it is translated. In the piece “*The Descent of Inanna to the Nether World*,” multiple facets of this afterlife locale become apparent: 1) there are 7 gates and a gatekeeper leading into the Nether World; 2) ritual items of one’s apparel are removed from people sent there; 3) the rules governing the Nether World are perfect; 4) the word of the judges therein has the power to turn the newly arrived into corpses and torture them; 5) the first mention of a river separating the land of the dead from the land of the living;⁴ and 6) the Nether World conjures up images of dust that covers the “good metal” of individuals traveling down into it.⁵ The *Epic of Gilgamesh*, a well-known piece, yields that the Nether World is like a “house of dust” filled with the “people who sit in darkness,” eating “dust as their food and clay [as] their meat.”⁶ The most consistent themes amongst these various written remnants of Sumerian beliefs hold that the afterlife is a place of darkness, dust, judgment by semi-divine figures, the abode of demons, and suffering for a prolonged period of time, bordering on eternity.

Basing many of their beliefs on those of their Sumerian forebears, the Semitic Assyrian and Babylonian peoples also had very influential views of the afterlife and

particularly of the underworld, many of which can be found mirrored (or perhaps even copied directly) in the words of the Old Testament. The aforementioned *Descent of Inanna to the Nether World* has a comparable reinterpretation and renewed scriptural life within the Semitic *Descent of Ishtar to the Nether World*, albeit one where the descending person seems to have much more of a fighting chance.⁷ In both of these surviving works, the tale is told of an individual who descends into the Nether World, but then is rescued by the use of “the water of life” upon their respective corpses on Earth.⁸ These parallel works also elucidate the fact that both Sumerian and Babylonian/Assyrian conceptions of the afterlife involve “descent,” and perhaps even going underground. Different than the Sumerian concept of the Anunnaki or judges, there exists the dreadful Nergal, co-ruler of the Nether World, with an appearance of “wrathful brilliance” and “flashing lightning,” all with the clear intention to kill the individual who reported this vision.⁹ All of this takes place within a locale that one scholar has argued to be a “pit,” with shades, demons, and ghosts; this pit is said to be representative of parallel beliefs about the underworld in other cultures.¹⁰ All of these motifs: 1) the Nether World as a pit; 2) the power of the “water of life” to negate the realities of the underworld; 3) the presence of demons and shades in the underworld; and 4) the presence of a terrible and awesome deity in the underworld are all themes that will turn up in various cultures explored in later portions of this paper.

Having done a brief overview of the conceptions of the afterlife in the Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian cultures, we will now consider the properties and terms involved in discussing the afterlife of Judaism from before the Babylonian Exile of the

Jewish people. As Judaism developed in similar geographical locations to the preceding three cultures, this paper will also consider whether there are noticeable similarities and possibly even adoption of prior beliefs in the Old Testament. Immediately worth considering is the direct connection between one of the Sumerian area gods and the place-name Sheol in the Old Testament. As Richard Hess argues in favor of, there is the distinct possibility that the Hurrian goddess Shuwala of the city of Emar, near Ugarit, is etymologically linked to the usage of Sheol.¹¹ He argues that based on other instances of close Ugaritic language being the roots for proto-Hebrew, such as the early root word for the later development and use of “shalom,” it is entirely viable to understand the use of “Sheol” in the Old Testament as another instance of a god/goddess’ name being turned into a place name within Israelite cultural and cultural memory.¹²

Sheol

Having examined a possible direct bridge between afterlife concepts in Western Semitic cultures and Judaism, it is important to lay out the specific beliefs held by the Israelites regarding Sheol. The first consistent conception of an afterlife in pre-Second Temple Judaism, Sheol (Hebrew: שאול) is wrapped in multiple layers of historical, mythological, and even geographical meaning.¹³ Although not exclusive as a term for the underworld, “Sheol” is used 65 times in the Tanakh. The specific etymological origins of the word are not known for certain, but one of the more interesting claims is that it is based on the same root for “to ask” (Hebrew: לשאול) and the name of the Old Testament King Saul; *shl*.¹⁴ In order to better understand what this conception of the afterlife, it is important to first lay out a general concept of approximately where Sheol was located

geographically. There are multiple binary pairings in the Old Testament with the physical location of Sheol being given as the opposite of that of heaven; in Job for example, the presence of God is explained as extending beyond the heights of heaven and lower than the depths of Sheol.¹⁵ There is not any direct entranceway or given path to Sheol tying it clearly to a real world location beyond the implication of it being far underneath the ground, so this paper will now consider some of the characteristics given about the Jewish netherworld, Sheol.¹⁶

As Sheol is the place that “one does not come back up from,” there are clearly characteristics about it that prevent the dead from escaping.¹⁷ Strikingly similar to the preceding Semitic traditions, Sheol has multiple verses describing it as characterized by “dust, darkness, and silence.”¹⁸ As Dominic Rudman suggests, there is an additional vital component to the imagery surrounding a proper understanding; that of water and/or the sea. As best encapsulated in the prayer of Jonah 2:3-6,¹⁹ the figurative use of water imagery for Sheol is quite strong indeed. It possibly even suggests that Sheol might border the bottom of the seas.²⁰ Rudman goes on to suggest the fascinating possibility that Sheol is indeed representing the power of the unchecked oceans; as he explains using various Biblical references, the beliefs of the early Israelites regarding creation centered around the concept of Yahweh making order from chaos.²¹ Chaos was personified by any body of water, as Genesis 1:1 explains, the pre-creation universe involved the “Spirit of God hovering over the waters.” Worded in a different way, the Spirit of God was floating above chaos, and then the following verses describing creation are more precisely describing Yahweh’s ordering of preexisting chaos. Therefore, according to

Rudman, death can be seen as a “reversal of creation,” perhaps explaining referring to a real place (another scholar holds that the conception of Sheol is best represented by the Israelite experiences during the parting of the Red Sea by Moses),²² but more likely referring to a metaphorical understanding of the afterlife.²³ Taking this a step further, other sources actually personify Sheol using the pattern of the Canaanite god of aridity and death, “Mot” or other pagan deities.²⁴

Having considered what Sheol is like, it is important to conclude this examination of Sheol with a brief summary of the list of individuals who could expect to go to Sheol. Multiple Biblical references as well as a variety of articles present evidence in favor of the fact that Sheol was the final destination of all the dead, as per the preceding Semitic traditions. Joseph Blenkinsopp makes the intriguing argument that “most of our information about mortuary practices and beliefs among the [Iron Age] population [of Palestine] derives from sources essentially hostile to it,” when referring to the book of Deuteronomy.²⁵ Explaining that the “deceased joined the ranks of the shades” in Sheol, he argues that the emerging need for state unity among the neighboring kingdoms of Israel and Judea required that the previous beliefs of ancestral kinship between living and dead be abolished in favor of adherence to the cult of Yahweh.²⁶ So, even though the dead descended into Sheol as per before, rules such as Deuteronomy 18:9-14 were a new innovation preventing individuals from attempting to communicate with those ancestors.²⁷ This is a strong claim, but the point stands that the Old Testament forbids any attempted contact with the dead (perhaps lending weight to the earlier argument that Sheol is related to “to ask”), thus codifying other Biblical and pre-Biblical Semitic

traditions about the unreachable nature of Sheol, the abode of all the dead. As per many of the concepts discussed in this paper, the specific nature of those who go to which part of Sheol and why is far from systematic or clear. The most straightforward qualification given, in Job, is that “both prosperous evildoers and righteous sufferers ‘lie down in alike in the dust and the worms cover them.’”²⁸ More selective explanations are easily found, such as the hierarchical and segregated Sheol of Ezekiel 32:17-32 where the uncircumcised are separated and are at the very lowest (and therefore worst) level of Sheol, as are the fallen warriors of the various nations. As Blenkinsopp wisely suggests, when considering anything approaching a systematic understanding of Sheol, it is vital to “take account of the developments over the course of time.”²⁹

In summary, then, the Israelite conception of Sheol is a place characterized by 1) being the lowest part of the universe; 2) dust, darkness, and silence; 3) the probable importance of water imagery in its description; 4) having the name “Sheol” itself possibly be derived directly from other cultures’ beliefs; and finally 5) varying opinions over time of membership, including anything from all the departed to a hierarchy based on life’s characteristics.

GeHinnom

Having laid out the basic framework of Western Semitic and Israelite beliefs regarding the afterlife pre-Babylonian Exile, this paper will now consider the appearance of resurrection theology and its attendant locales. In the Old Testament, the Valley of the Sons of Hinnom, or more commonly GeHinnom (Hebrew: גיהנום) is a real world location,

located between Mount Zion and the Jerusalem Cinema in Jerusalem, Israel. While the previously discussed conceptions of the afterlife were never pleasant, this valley has a positively ghastly history to it. As Milikowky explains, “during the course of the Judean monarchy, this valley became the center for pagan cultic activity, especially the sacrifice of children by fire.”³⁰ GeHinnom is referenced in several major verses from the Old Testament, some of which merit consideration here. Isaiah 30:33 refers to the burning sacrifices of GeHinnom with a slightly different name:

Tophet has long been prepared; it has been made ready for the king. Its fire pit has been made deep and wide, with an abundance of fire and wood; the breath of the LORD like a stream of burning sulfur, sets it ablaze.

This verse is referring to the figurative punishment of Assyria, the Israelites’ enemy, but it refers to the real historical events of prior mention in the Old Testament.³¹ In 2 Kings 23:10, we are told that Josiah “desecrated Tophet, which was in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, so no one could use it to sacrifice his son or daughter in the fire to Molech.” The explicit reason given several verses later for all of this defiling of shrines and other places was to placate the LORD, who was angered with the things occurring in the kingdom of Judah.³² Even more explicitly, the prophet Jeremiah is speaking for God when he warns the Israelites about having “built the high places of Tophet in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire – something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.”³³ So it would seem that the Old Testament is clearly referring to a real location near the ancient city of Jerusalem where child sacrifices to the pagan god of fire, Molech, took place causing direct and severe displeasure in the eyes of God.

That said, there are two diametrically opposed ways of looking at the intended meaning behind GeHinnom as it occurs in the Old Testament: a literal place referenced to impart metaphorical meaning, or a place where sinful individuals might perhaps end up instead of being resurrected, and there have been scholars who have argued for both. In terms of possible resurrection theology in Psalms, Job, Isaiah, and Daniel, one scholar of the Septuagint argues that as late as the first century BC, the editors “of the time who were responsible for the Greek version of the books concerned did not interpret the texts that way.”³⁴ This is a vital distinction – if van der Kooij is correct, and the translators of the Septuagint adhered more to “the standard view of ancient Israel, that the dead have a shadowy life in Sheol” and that “there is no beatific life after death,” this starts to clearly delineate Jewish views of the afterlife pre- and post-first century BC.³⁵ It highlights the point that later developments in the understanding of GeHinnom were just that; later additions and reinterpretations based perhaps on the religious and spiritual needs of Jewish communities at the time.

In spite of van der Kooij’s excellent arguments against resurrection and post-mortem existence affecting the translators and editors of the Septuagint, it is clear that other Jewish groups of a similar time period believed strongly in an apocalyptic tradition, which greatly influenced views of the meaning of GeHinnom. As argued by John J. Collins, Daniel 12:1-4 is a strong indication of belief an unclear resurrection of some, and even then only of a spiritual body or the spirit, and not the body.³⁶ Collins makes this point and then focuses on the beliefs of the Essenes regarding the afterlife, and references their texts on this matter, which he claims “leave no doubt about the importance of

reward and punishment in the ideology of the sect.”³⁷ Although the specific content of their beliefs are beyond the scope of this paper, the point remains the same; communities within the same lands as the mainstream Israelites had very different beliefs regarding the afterlife. This trend towards multiple interpretations based on similar texts is telling, as it will be the basis for the final section of this paper, examining Hell in early Christianity and how it made sense of GeHinnom.

Intertestamental period³⁸

Greek Influences

In order to have a better background against which to consider the meaning of Gehenna, it is also necessary to consider some of the probable Greek influences that first affected the theology of Hellenized Jews, and then that of the early Christians. Another area of lively debate amongst scholars, the existence or lack thereof of Orphism in the Greek world is important consider when discussing the migration of meanings about GeHinnom/Gehenna. This is particularly of interest, as scholarship regarding Orphism resembles scholarship on the subject of Gehenna; varied, with vitriolic arguments and exaggerations, and as one scholar puts it, “none [the varying views] of which are wholly coincident or can be definitely proved to be true.”³⁹ Simply put, Orphism was what some scholars hold to be an eventual set of religious practices, and what other scholars hold to be a series of mere poems that had no clear single author. To give a general sense of time to the religious developments discussed in this section, the earliest surviving piece of evidence clearly denoting an Orphic “religion” of sorts is from the first half of the 4th century BC.⁴⁰

Orpheus, a mythical Greek poet, was held to have descended into Hades to look for his wife, and then returned from his journey.⁴¹ Hades, or Haidou as it is more accurately anglicized from the Greek Ἅδου, is the eponym for Hades, the god of the Underworld in Greek mythology.⁴² In terms of this paper's examination, it is worth pointing out that various parts of the New Testament as well as the Septuagint translate Sheol to Hades, implying similarities in attributes for each culture's conceptions of the afterlife, as well as providing additional evidence for the Hellenistic influence on Jewish beliefs after 400 BC. The presence of some similarities mentioned, there are also very different innovations about the possibility of post-mortem existence: gone was the Homeric sentiment of heroic immortality for those whose whole beings descended into the Sheol-like Hades. Orphic religious tenets put forth entirely new ideas regarding the afterlife; sentiments that Sheol couldn't contain within its original meaning. Specifically,

In Orphism we find for the first time a conscious reflection about afterlife which situates death as the point of departure of the real life. [The afterlife] is not only the place where ethical problems are solved by punishment (or, in other variants, by reincarnation) of the impious and reward for the pious. It is also after death that the soul starts to live free from its bonds and can attain to its divine nature.⁴³

In terms of the effects of Orphism upon other beliefs, though, Jáuregui observes that "Plato himself acknowledges that he takes inspiration in sources whose affinities to Orphism are clear," and later concludes that

Plato is a main source of inspiration for the Hellenistic and Christian eschatology, and therefore he becomes the main vehicle for of spreading to the Hellenistic world of the Orphic traditions from which he draw, which were restricted to marginal circles in Classical times.⁴⁴

Although a strong claim, it is interesting to note that this change in beliefs occurred several hundred years prior to the change in Jewish beliefs at the end of the 1st century BC, and the Greek influence on Jewish views can therefore not be ruled out.

Multiple New Testament conceptions of an afterlife for the wicked

Gehenna

The New Testament makes use of multiple different words which were or still are translated as “Hell,” but the most common one is that of Gehenna (Greek: γέεννα). There is some debate whether Gehenna is actually the Greek rendering of the aforementioned Hebrew GeHinnom versus a different locale entirely, but this paper will adhere to the common claim that Gehenna is indeed the Greek rendering of the Hebrew name.⁴⁵ Appearing a mere 11 times in the Gospels (7 times in Matthew, 3 times in Mark, once in Luke, and never appearing in John), Gehenna had an unusually strong influence over the evolution of Christian theology.⁴⁶ As such, this explication will start with some of the more prevalent characteristics given for Gehenna in the Gospels and other sources. Among other traits, Gehenna is generally seen as 1) a place of punishment; 2) said punishment involves fire in some way; 3) the fact that individuals are thrown into the aforementioned fire; 4) the presence of darkness; and 5) those wicked found within Gehenna are known to weep as well as gnash their teeth.⁴⁷ At the same time, however, these characteristics are drawn from a varied array of attributed statements by Jesus. For example, within the parable of Mark 9:42-48, Jesus gives two very different pairs of promises: that those who remove the sinful parts of themselves will be allowed to enter

the kingdom of God versus being thrown into Gehenna; and those who remove the sinful parts of themselves will be allowed to enter life versus going to Gehenna. Ignoring the difference in the positive afterlives, Jesus presented very different punishments for the same failure. In another instance, Mark 3:28-29, Jesus explains that those who sin will almost unanimously be forgiven save for those who blaspheme against the Spirit of God. The list of contradictory or seemingly irreconcilable verses goes on; trying to make sense of it is beyond the scope of this paper.

Having examined many of the different senses of Gehenna as attributed to Jesus; it becomes very clear that there is not a clearly-presented, systematic outline of the afterlife by Jesus in the Gospels. Hence, the wise words of William Strawson are worth repeating here:

It must be admitted at the outset that we are considering one of the most intractable problems of New Testament study, in trying to determine what Jesus himself said about Hell, and how his words are now to be interpreted.⁴⁸

This paper, however, is only seeking to present the aspects of the theology that ended up accepted as the “real” or at least most widely-accepted notion of the afterlife denoted by Gehenna in the early Christian church. One of the strongest influences on thought over this matter is the Gospel of Matthew, which is by far the most polemical in its use of Gehenna and Hell. As one author summarizes, Matthew portrays the end of time as the point when “the righteous enter eternal life in joy,” and “the godless end up in an everlasting torment.”⁴⁹ In John’s Gospel, the afterlife for the wicked is never labeled Gehenna, but it mentions that those who don’t believe will end up not experiencing eternal resurrection with God.⁵⁰ Luke describes that the soul is killed in Gehenna, as

opposed to simply the body on Earth.⁵¹ Another scholar does an excellent job of summarizing the entirety of “Hell” in the Christian tradition, based on clearly acknowledging the seemingly contradictory sources of the Gospels. Dale Allison argues that Jesus’ statements “add nothing new to the Jewish lore about Gehenna.”⁵² This bit of historical argument is quite surprising when compared with the Hell of the early church.

Varied reactions amongst the Early Church

So how, then, did Christianity come to a fairly-widely accepted understanding of the terrible realities of Hell from such a different set of source verses? The answer lies in the realities of Church politics. The organization and interpretation of the New Testament and Old Testament into doctrine took place at the hands of many different thinkers, and obviously they had many different opinions. In the period before the split between East and West, the early church had several major schools of theological thought.⁵³ Four of these schools, located in Alexandria, Antioch, Caesarea, and Edessa were the beginnings of the early Universalist tradition. As such, these influential centers of Christian life and teaching were of the understanding that the God of Jesus was a loving God, and therefore redeemed all human beings at their deaths, regardless of their conduct in life. This meant that many of their preeminent thinkers interpreted Hell and Gehenna as generally being an allegorical or metaphorical story. The fifth major theological school was at Ephesus and it preached conditional immortality, which is sometimes known as the annihilationist view.⁵⁴ This interpretation of the Bible holds that believers in Jesus would end up in paradise, whereas those individuals who did not

believe would instead have their souls completely destroyed, a fate which was held to be worse than Hell as portrayed in the New Testament.

This means that only one of the original six schools of thought in Christianity believed in Gehenna as the place of “endless punishment for the wicked,” that being the theological school at Rome.⁵⁵ The various theologians of this tradition, including figures such as Irenaeus, Ignatius, Justin Martyr, Athenagoras, and Tertullian all wrote significant tracts of work explaining that Hell was a very real fate indeed, and that the people of God should fear this outcome.⁵⁶ These views were compounded and ended up creating a normative belief about the afterlife of the wicked in Catholicism:

There is a hell, i.e. all those who die in personal mortal sin, as enemies of God, and unworthy of eternal life, will be severely punished by God after death... The existence of hell is proved first of all from Holy Writ.... Also the Fathers, from the very earliest times, are unanimous in teaching that the wicked will be punished after death. And in proof of their doctrine they appeal both to Scripture and to reason.⁵⁷

This passage from the Original Catholic Encyclopedia describes a very particular series of developments in Christian theology, directly in the face of other Church Fathers acknowledged by the Catholic Church. Amongst other theologians, Clement of Alexandria, Origen,⁵⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, and Theodore of Mopsuestia were all highly influential Universalists in the Eastern Church but failed to have that portion of their theology influence Catholic theology. The specifics of the eventual primacy of the Catholic Church in Europe are beyond the bounds of this paper, but the political positioning of the Roman see over the other influential bishopric sees as well as historical events were all essential in the acceptance of Hell as a place of eternal punishment.⁵⁹

In summary then, Gehenna and Hell in the early Christian tradition of what ended up becoming the Catholic Church had several distinguishing features and characteristics. Among other traits, Hell was 1) a place said to be under the earth where 2) the wicked are eternally punished for their disbelief and sins; 3) a place of post-mortem ethical accounting for actions in life; 4) the locale of Hell is completely removed from the divine presence of God; and 5) the aforementioned pains, suffering, and punishments are tied to the actions of the damned individual in life.

Conclusion

Throughout history, religions with close geographical proximity and cultural ties have been known to have similar theologies on various aspects of life. One of the most interesting series of theological borrowing, changes and revisions can be traced through the development of Western Semitic traditions into Judaism, and then Christianity. This paper began with a brief survey of the main aspects of Sumerian, Babylonian, and Assyrian traditions of the netherworld. This examination showed that several main characteristics of the underworld existed across multiple cultures in a similar geographic area for thousands of years: the afterlife was a place of dust and darkness, where all people go after their deaths and are therein judged by a semi-divine presence. This netherworld is the abode of demons, is a sort of pit or other below-ground locale, and could be negated with the use of the “water of life.” Many of these traits found their way into the early beliefs of the Israelites, living in a similar geographical area. Sheol was characterized in the much the same way, as the further place from the heavens (denoting a sense of being beneath the ground), and a place also filled with dust darkness and

silence, and according to some readings, the imagery of suffocating and a frightening primeval sense of water as chaos and un-creation. There seems to be several other cultures involved in shaping the aspects and even naming of Sheol, as discussed above, and this helps explain the extent to which beliefs about Sheol changed so much over time and even within the scriptural references.

In much the same way, GeHinnom of the Old Testament has been interpreted in a wide variety of ways. From the seemingly-clear original references to a real location with a historical tendency of pagan child sacrifice to fire, later traditions reinterpreted this to also have the meaning of a fiery afterlife. Somehow, through changes in culture and outside influences, metaphorical references to actual events in Jeremiah and Isaiah began to reflect a stronger and wider belief in resurrection theology: the concept that the soul and perhaps even the body might live on past the ending of one's mortal death. This tendency can be at least partially explained by the Hellenistic influence on Jewish culture, with the spread of Orphic ideals and traditions about the immortality of the soul. In this transition, the old water and dust imagery of the same afterlife for all the dead begins to lose its strength, being replaced with a sense of fire and punishment of the wicked. Other ideas from previous traditions were still apparent, such as the presence of demons and an apparent sense of being far from God/underground.

From this background, the new tradition attributed to Jesus could begin to further alter and shift perceptions of the afterlife for the new body of Christian followers. Gehenna, the Greek rendering of GeHinnom, has a very wide and difficult to reconcile

set of scriptural sources from the New Testament and apocryphal sources, as well as having many similar phrasings such as Revelation's "lake of fire" motif which was later associated with it. This sort of standardization of verses purported to deal with the afterlife made a serious impact on many theologians of the early church. Although the majority of theological schools of thought interpreted the whole of the Bible to be indicating some sort of Universalism, or salvation for all people, the bishopric see of Rome developed differing, minority theological interpretations. At the same time, history developed and political maneuvering took place to the extent that the Roman Catholic Church became the preeminent force in the Christian world, overshadowing the Eastern Orthodox churches and their previously influential schools of thought at Alexandria and Antioch.

By claiming to be the proper apostolic succession from Peter, The Roman Catholic Church was able to "properly" interpret scripture and therefore determine doctrine. In this manner, then, the influences on statements about Gehenna and Hell from the preceding civilizations and religions which affected the contents of the Bible were deemed as true by the Roman Catholic Church, thus cementing the remains of prior beliefs into the beliefs of the early Christian church. This appears indicative of the fact that religions do tend to draw on inspiration from nearby cultures and religions, especially when it comes to determining beliefs regarding the afterlife. This is specifically true in the development of the early Christian church's views on Gehenna and Hell, as drawn from a tradition going back thousands of years.

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¹ Note: all Biblical references in this paper are drawn from the New International Version of the Bible unless indicated otherwise.

² Piers Crocker, "Heaven and Hell, Hades and Sheol: Comparing Afterlives in the Ancient World (Part 1)," *Buried History: Quarterly Journal of the Australian Institute of Archaeology* 34, no. 4 (1998): 119.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.: 123.

⁵ Ibid.: 120-21.

⁶ Ibid.: 122.

⁷ Ibid.: 123.

⁸ Ibid.: 121, 24.

⁹ Ibid.: 124.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Richard S. Hess, "Going Down to Sheol: A Place Name and Its West Semitic Background," in *Reading the Law*, ed. J.G. McConville and Karl Möller (New York: T&T Clark, 2007), 252-53.

¹² Ibid., 249-50.

¹³ Bernard F. Batto, "The Reed Sea: *Requiescat in Pace*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102, no. 1 (1983): 35.

¹⁴ Aron Pinker, "Sheol," *The Jewish Bible Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (1995): 168, 71.

¹⁵ Job 11:8, Amos 9:2, Isaiah 7:11, others

¹⁶ Daniel Cohn-Sherbok, "The Jewish Doctrine of Hell," *Religion* 8, no. 2 (1978): 197-98.

¹⁷ Samuel E. Loewenstamm Jesper Høgenhaven, M. O'Connor, William H. Propp, "Sheol and the Sons of Belial," *Vetus Testamentum* 37, no. 1 (1987): 214.

¹⁸ Dominic Rudman, "The Use of Watery Imagery in Descriptions of Sheol," *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 113, no. 2 (2001): 241.

¹⁹ Jonah 2:3-6 – ²In my distress I called to the LORD, and he answered me. From the depths of *Sheol*, I called for help, and you listened to my cry. ³You hurled me into the deep, into the very heart of the seas, and the currents swirled about me; all your waves and breakers swept over me. ⁴I said, 'I have been banished from your holy sight; yet I will look again toward your holy temple. ⁵The engulfing waters threatened me, the deep surrounded me; seaweed was wrapped around my head. ⁶To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath me barred me in forever. But you brought me up out of the pit, O LORD my God.

²⁰ Rudman, "The Use of Watery Imagery in Descriptions of Sheol," 242-43.

²¹ Ibid.: 243-44.

²² Batto, "The Reed Sea: *Requiescat in Pace*," 34.

²³ Rudman, "The Use of Watery Imagery in Descriptions of Sheol," 244.

²⁴ Joseph Blenkinsopp, "Post-Mortem Existence in the Old Testament," in *Lebendige Hoffnung - Ewiger Tod?! Jenseitsvorstellungen Im Hellenismus, Judentum Und Christentum*, ed. Michael Labahn and Manfred Lang (Leipzig, Germany: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2007), 39.

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- ²⁵ Ibid., 38.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 36, 38.
- ²⁷ Ibid., 38.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 40.
- ²⁹ Ibid.
- ³⁰ Chaim Milikowsky, "Which Gehenna? Retribution and Eschatology in the Synoptic Gospels and in Early Jewish Texts," in *New Testament Studies* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University, 1988), 238.
- ³¹ Ibid., 238-39.
- ³² 2 Kings 23:19
- ³³ Jeremiah 7:31
- ³⁴ Arie van der Kooij, "Ideas About Afterlife in the Septuagint," in *Lebendige Hoffnung - Ewiger Tod?! Jenseitsvorstellungen Im Hellenismus, Judentum Und Christentum*, ed. Michael Labahn and Manfred Lang (Leipzig, Germany: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2007), 101.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ John J. Collins, "Conceptions of Afterlife in the Dead Sea Scrolls," in *Lebendige Hoffnung - Ewiger Tod?! Jenseitsvorstellungen Im Hellenismus, Judentum Und Christentum*, ed. Michael Labahn and Manfred Lang (Leipzig, Germany: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2007), 105-06.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 109.
- ³⁸ Hans Scharen, "Gehenna in the Synoptics 1," *Bibliotheca sacra* 324-337, no. 149 (1992): 329.
- ³⁹ Migeul Herrero de Jáuregui, "Orphic Ideas of Immortality: Traditional Greek Images and a New Eschatological Thought," in *Lebendige Hoffnung - Ewiger Tod?! Jenseitsvorstellungen Im Hellenismus, Judentum Und Christentum*, ed. Michael Labahn and Manfred Lang (Leipzig, Germany: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2007), 292.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid., 291.
- ⁴¹ Ibid., 297.
- ⁴² Ibid.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 306.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 304.
- ⁴⁵ Scharen, "Gehenna in the Synoptics 1," 328.
- ⁴⁶ Dale C. Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters* (New York: T&T Clark, 2005), 68.
- ⁴⁷ Ibid., 82.
- ⁴⁸ William Strawson, *Jesus and the Future Life: A Study in the Synoptic Gospels* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1953), 143.
- ⁴⁹ Outi Lehtipuu, ">>the Narrow Gate and the Hard Road<<. On the Concept of the Afterlife in the Gospel of Matthew," in *Lebendige Hoffnung - Ewiger Tod?! Jenseitsvorstellungen Im Hellenismus, Judentum Und Christentum*, ed. Michael Labahn and Manfred Lang (Leipzig, Germany: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2007), 157.
- ⁵⁰ Mary L. Coloe, ""The End Is Where We Start From". Afterlife in the Fourth Gospel," in *Lebendige Hoffnung - Ewiger Tod?! Jenseitsvorstellungen Im Hellenismus, Judentum Und Christentum*, ed. Michael Labahn and Manfred Lang (Leipzig, Germany: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2007), 198-99.
- ⁵¹ Milikowsky, "Which Gehenna? Retribution and Eschatology in the Synoptic Gospels and in Early Jewish Texts," 242.
- ⁵² Allison, *Resurrecting Jesus: The Earliest Christian Tradition and Its Interpreters*, 82.
- ⁵³ Philip Schaff, "Universalists," in *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1953 [reprint]), 96.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Ibid.
- ⁵⁶ Joseph Hontheim, "Hell," in *Original Catholic Encyclopedia* (Encyclopedia Press, 1913).
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (England: Clays Ltd, St Ives plc, 1993), 105-06.
- ⁵⁹ For an excellent overview on this topic, see Henry Chadwick's [The Early Church](#)